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LOT 10 : THE HUMAN FACTOR IN CHANGE FROM OILWORKER TO FARMER

- by -

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Lot 10 is one of several villages which together comprise the administrative unit of Point Fortin in the ward of La Brea in South Trinidad. Quite commonly throughout Trinidad, Point Fortin is qualified as the "Oil Town" in allusion to the almost complete domination of the fortunes of this area by activities connected with the oil industry of the country. Yet it is within living memory that the sites now occupied by roads, buildings and oil installations comprised three distinct and separately owned coconut and cacao estates called La Fortunee, Clifton Hill and Adventure, altogether embracing 1,091 acres. The processes through which the transition took place from the former condition to the present growing township, have produced some social characteristics which provide an understanding of the approach and response to an agricultural activity recently initiated in the area.

The initial incident which was subsequently to develop into such profound change took place in 1907 when the Trinidad Oilfields Limited moved to Point Fortin to search for oil and spudded its first well on the La Fortunee estate on May 1st. This was followed by the gradual purchasing of estates by oil companies in order to acquire the mineral rights. Refinery operations, first introduced in 1912, had to be expanded as crude oil production increased, thus bringing accelerated pressure upon the rate of conversion of land from agriculture to industry. The final acquisition of two estates in 1931 placed all the lands in Point Fortin in the control of oil interests, and all boundary and demarcation lines lost their past significance. Cacao, coconut and forest trees were cut down to make way for industrial plants, roads and housing settlements. Within two to three years of the latest acquisition all evidence of an organized agricultural activity had disappeared, giving way to an urbanized type of community.

In the meantime, various changes had been taking place in the corporate structure of the operating oil companies, resulting ultimately in the formation of Shell Trinidad Limited in 1956. Although other oil companies are engaged in oil production activities in the Point Fortin region, Shell Trinidad is the only one to have established its main centre of operations there. The rapid growth of a single, industrial presence, in an area devoid of other occupational activity, soon caused the responsibility to

devolve upon the Company to provide certain minimum facilities for the increasing number of persons who had begun to take up residence in Point Fortin. All the roads, market, water supply, electricity, medical facilities, and sports grounds which are to be found in the town today, were originally laid out by the Company. With the increased awareness of nationalism in Trinidad, and the subsequent assumption of independence, some of these facilities together with Trade School and community recreation centres have been handed over to the state ; but there has never been any real diminution of identification of the progress and fortunes of Point Fortin with the presence of Shell Trinidad. A very diffuse paternalism had been established between the Company and the community. It was therefore quite consistent with tradition when in 1964, the Company offered to embark upon a small farm establishment project in the Point Fortin area, in response to a Trinidad Government request to try to do something towards the alleviation of unemployment in some areas in the country.

In arriving at the decision to establish small farms, the Company was influenced by the agricultural achievements of its affiliates in other countries : notably at Borgo a Mozzano in Italy, Chene-Arnoult in France, Sever do Vouga in Portugal, Cagua and Zulia in Venezuela and Uboma in Nigeria. The operative principle in most of these contributions, is the provision of varying intensities of technical assistance in order to improve an existing agricultural enterprise.

Somewhat different was the proposal for Trinidad in which it was intended to ensure that men on the land are assisted in such a way as to create a stable, continuing agricultural community in an area where this did not exist.

The People of Point Fortin

Before oil was discovered in Point Fortin, the only inhabitants were a limited number of persons, all of whom dwelt in plantation style barracks provided by the estates on which they worked. The arrival in the area of the foreign technical oilmen was soon followed by a perceptible flow of indigenous labour. In the early days, labour was in great demand, and persons of widely differing skills, aptitudes and competence came from anywhere and everywhere. Labour was recruited from Port-of-Spain and San Fernando, but the demand was still unsatisfied. Immigrants from the other West Indian islands, principally Grenada and Barbados, soon joined the stream of human traffic to Point Fortin. Such was the scarcity of labour that it was not uncommon for a workman to be dismissed by the refinery, and within a few hours of his dismissal, to be re-

engaged for work in the production fields. In the same way a worker engaged as say, a mason, would move to another section to work, perhaps, as a carpenter, if this capacity paid a more attractive wage.

Some idea of the physical endurance of these people can be gleaned from the fact that at that time access to Point Fortin was exclusively by Coastal Steamer, from which cargo was conveyed to shore by row boat. When traffic was heavy, it was not uncommon to see men, women and children all huddled together with sheep and goats standing on an assortment of crates, boxes and suitcases.

Towards the latter half of the 1930's a very militant trade unionism developed in the oil industry, and the turbulent events, climaxed by the 1937 riots, included large numbers of workers from Point Fortin. Following the disturbances, as also in the aftermath of strikes in subsequent years, some of the workers elected not to return to work with the Companies for fear of victimisation. Many of these, in defiance of officers of the Forestry Department, proceeded to squat on Crown Lands, producing in the process, a multiplicity of small gardens in forest clearings. From the produce of these gardens, many a family subsisted.

By the early 1960's the population of Point Fortin was approaching the 20,000 mark, and was far in excess of the oil industry's labour requirements. Indeed, by then, technological and other changes had rendered numbers of the engaged labour force superfluous to the need, and substantial numbers were declared redundant and were retrenched.

What is suggested by these historical evidences, is that the core of inhabitants of Point Fortin consisted of a collection of people whose experiences with the earlier employment practice forced them to become very adaptable, while at the same time encouraging a marked degree of instability which was not conducive to the entrenchment of undue loyalty either to the work purpose or the profession. It is not difficult to understand that in the circumstances, the attainment of any degree of competence in any particular skill would be considered worthwhile only insofar as it would seem likely to enable an immediately foreseeable advantage. An attitude to work was developed which did not assist the cultivation either of pride of achievement or of scrupulous industry. It is around material of this background that it was hoped to forge small farmers whose industry and perseverance would determine their fortunes.

Agriculture : Preparatory Steps

Following upon the decision to establish a small farm development, an area of land suitable for the purpose was selected. Since all the freehold land held by the Company was already fully committed to industrial installations, the search had to be carried elsewhere. The choice fell on a 500-acre block of Crown Forest which was located adjacent to a small village called Lot 10. One of the first problems to be reconciled in bringing lands in an oilfield area into agricultural production is that of the conflicting needs of both types of undertaking. Thus, not only is it necessary to reserve for oil the areas already occupied by installations, but it is equally important to estimate and hold in reserve such areas as may seem likely to be required in the future. In this case, it emerged that there could conceivably be need for at least six times the existing number of occupied sites, without taking into consideration additional needs which changes in technology may give rise to. The significance of this observation lies in the fact that in such areas it is quite impossible to organize orderly contiguous holdings, and one must settle for several small blocks of agricultural land interrupted by areas of reserved forest. What the effect of this will be on the supply of common facilities or even on the control of vermin, is still unknown.

The plan called for holdings of a minimum size of 5 acres, with an option of larger acreages being left to the participants. The agricultural land was therefore surveyed into 5 acre parcels.

The proximity of the agricultural land to Lot 10 made that village a natural starting point from which to make an initial selection of persons for a trial effort. The village council was therefore approached and invited to submit names of applicants who might be interested in the project. The principal criteria for selection were those generally in use in the country for Government-sponsored farm development, but in this case special emphasis was placed on interest in, or experience of, agriculture as evidenced by the cultivation of a garden kept in a condition which could be considered good for the squatter level. There were forty-five applicants from whom thirty-two were selected and studied at first hand during the ensuing year, while the land surveyors were undertaking the division into allotments of the agricultural area.

Some interesting information was obtained which enabled an approximation of the economic level of the families ; but more important were the insights into the social experiences which have proven to be more reliable guidelines in the shaping of the subsequent development.

All the male heads of families of the village have at some time been workers in the oil industry, but at the time of study, in 1964, there were only eight who were on any oil company's permanent work force. For the most part the others sought casual employment from contractors, and the income so obtained was supplemented by the produce from gardens squatted upon. Of the thirty-two persons selected, six depended entirely on squatting during the previous year, the others having been able to obtain casual employment of variable duration.

While family life seemed to have attained some measure of stability, there were a number of cases in which one or other of the parties living together either had children by a third person, or had previously been married to someone else and had separated. Similarly, in religion, there had been several cases of switching from one Christian denomination to another. The thirty-two selected included six who were prominent leaders in a Revivalist sect.

Some of them had previously been victims of "sharp operators." Thus, at one time several of them had contributed to a co-operative enterprise which did not prosper, and they lost their contributions. Some had fallen prey to someone launching a scheme to recruit people to "their homeland in Africa" where they would obtain an easy living, and even be able to visit Trinidad periodically. After they had subscribed towards passage money, the promoter disappeared. Even the offer of land for agriculture which was now being proposed was nothing new. Forest rangers in the past, in attempting to identify squatters whom they would prosecute, had used the approach of wishing to list the persons in order to be able to obtain lands for them. Some ended up with charges for offences against the Forestry ordinance.

So that here you had a small society with more than normal grounds for suspicion of strangers wanting to improve their lot. Their earlier susceptibilities were expressions not so much of gullibility as of a search for a medium through which some degree of stability could be achieved. The vicissitudes of their personal lives suggest a quest for loyalty from their companions, and more generally from their fellowmen. In the words of one of them: "It was the search for truth."

It is no wonder therefore that the first reactions to the present proposals of land for agriculture bordered almost upon hostility. All sorts of theories were exchanged between themselves as to the motive of the offer, and those who were not selected or not interested spared no efforts to try to dissuade the thirty-two.

The fact that rent would now have to be paid for the same land which had for so long been available free for squatting upon was certainly the most difficult proposition to resolve.

The economic position of the families was not particularly glamorous. Wages earned during the previous year by those selected totalled a little over \$12,000, and proceeds from sale of agricultural produce were around \$6,000. In other words, the families had an average cash income of less than \$600 each for the year, to which agriculture contributed less than \$190. Of the agricultural income, livestock products — mainly pigs and young bulls sold on the hoof — accounted for 25% ; the rest was made up of crop sales principally bananas and dasheen. The quantity of crops consumed was nearly equal in weight to the amount sold.

The Agricultural Plan of Action

In determining the programme, it was recognized that the energies of the farmers should not be frustrated by an inability to meet cash investments necessary for bringing the land under cultivation, at the same time it was realized that to embark upon a spectacular development could easily result in a very substantial capital outlay without assurance of success. All the evidence suggested that assistance in cash would very probably be used for purposes other than agriculture. Indeed, even some of those who were selected and would be recipients in any cash assistance, offered the warning that this would be disastrous. Apart from money for investment, there was also the pre-occupation with the means of sustenance of the farmers during the early period when very little would be obtained from the holding.

The course adopted was one of gradual build-up of the holding in which a minimum of one acre would be brought under cultivation each year. This would allow some time for casual employment outside for those who could get it, and the others would also have time to tend their old gardens from which they could continue to get some produce as they did in the previous year. An arrangement was negotiated with a reputable firm in the area for supplying all the agricultural tools and chemicals including fertilizers. The need for any material on any holding would depend upon the advice of the extension worker, and the firm would only supply against his order. The farmer signs a simple statement showing the material, quantity and value of articles received. These receipts constitute credit which is repayable when the holding comes to production. By this method, it is hoped that instead of a dramatic transformation from a situation of stringency to one of plenty, the farmer by his own efforts, assisted where necessary, could gradually acquire a standard of

earning superior to that which he enjoyed at the beginning.

The first task to which attention was directed was marketing. The previous practice was to grow a garden to obtain food for the home. When a little cash was required, or when produce was surplus to requirements, some of it was sold.

Exchange of produce and free gifts to friends and relatives were very prevalent. Some of them had sold no produce during the previous year. The point here was, that to people who had been accustomed to heavy oilfield pay packets, the comparatively small returns from sale of small quantities of produce seemed hardly worth the effort. As a result of a concentrated indoctrination campaign, the farmers have been completely converted to a policy of sale of even very small quantities of produce. The line adopted was that work in any form constituted expenditure of labour, and if when working for someone else cash is expected for labour given, similarly, agricultural produce being the reward of labour, should be converted into cash by sale. The possibility of purchasing small but essential domestic needs such as a pound of sugar by cash from sale of even one pound of a crop like sweet potatoes was emphasized. The extent of success achieved can be gauged from an incident some months ago : one of the farmers, eating an ear of corn from his holding while walking through the village was asked by someone for part of the corn, to which he replied that he could not even afford to break the ear to give part of it, because he required the bare cob for use afterwards. In a more serious way, a number of the women in the families now make it their business to ensure that their holding always carries at least sufficient material to meet the requirements of the weekly customers they have since acquired. This clearly indicates the beginning of an approach to planned production. It is not however, meant to have this peddling system of marketing as a permanent feature. It is expected that when commodities, for which guaranteed prices have been declared, begin to be produced in sufficient quantities, there will be scope for a more efficient organisation.

Performance

It is now one year since the holdings were allocated, and work begun. In spite of the unusual incidence of a record dry season, and a record wet season in that one year, and taking into consideration the setback of an island-wide influenza infection, which the farmers did not escape, the results are considerably encouraging. The pace developed from one of obvious hesitancy to one of general drive and enthusiasm. A sub-conscious competition developed in which no one wished to be left behind. In the

process 50 acres were brought under cultivation, with at least five cases being determined to, and appear capable of, completing the 5-acre holding by the end of the second year.

During this first year the emphasis was on the teaching of skills specifically related to the enterprise on the particular holding: the planting of permanent crops in straight lines on hillsides, the control of water on lowlands, the use of fertilizers, herbicides and insecticides, the importance of varietal selection. There has been a remarkable ease of assimilation of these techniques, and it soon became apparent that the adaptability which was acquired during occupation in industry could be of great advantage in agriculture. Thus, persons who worked in mud-plants in the oilfields showed immediate appreciation for the necessity for accurate measurement and mixing of herbicides and insecticides. Those who had been associated with precision work in which any carelessness could be fatal, did not require too much persuasion of the need for safety precautions in handling agricultural chemicals. The familiarity with underground formations which some of them had gained during drilling operations has proven to be invaluable in the identification of water-bearing strata which form reliable sites for the sinking of water wells. The pipe-fitter and rigman were at home with spraying equipment, and the carpenter and mason could apply the principles of levelling to contour work. There was not a single skill which required more than two demonstrations, and subsequent assistance almost entirely consisted in the timing of operations. Once a technique was understood the standard was not allowed to drop.

Towards the end of the year, a preliminary acquaintance to the farm management phase was attempted with the introduction of simple farm records.

These achievements have resulted in only about 25% of the development being accomplished, so that there is still a long way to go before any claim to success can even be contemplated. They do, however, justify the adoption of methods which may accelerate the rate of progress.

In terms of value it was never envisaged that the first one or two years would see vastly increased agricultural incomes, nor could it be expected that the farmers could easily match the \$9.84 per day which can be obtained in industry in the area. But there have been all round modest increases of income to a sufficient extent to have generated a new hope in the lives of the families. Capital appreciation of holdings has ranged from \$4,000 at the best level to \$1,000 at the lowest. But, perhaps

the most eloquent testimony to what has been achieved came from the farmers themselves. All of them were certain at the end of the year that they had not erred in embarking on the venture, and none wished to abandon it. Requests came from among them for additional 5 acre parcels, and most significant of all, were the applications of other residents who had not previously been interested. This is even more notable in the light of the fact that the new applicants included persons not long past 21 years, whereas before no one younger than 32 years had shown any inclination to be connected with agriculture.

Mechanization

There has not been any pronounced enthusiasm for mechanization of the land clearing operations. Not a single farmer favoured the use of a bulldozer for clearing his land, and the operation was carried out manually with surprising expeditiousness. The use of a power-saw to replace the axe in the felling of very large trees was, however, universally welcomed. With the increasing adoption of vegetable growing, it is anticipated that the need for mechanical ploughing will become manifest, if larger acreages are to be operated, and already preparations have been instituted to have a tractor with plough available for the second year. Similarly, it is projected that the current practice of hand watering will soon have to give way to a more efficient irrigation system

All planting and after-cultivation have so far been carried out by hand, except for the more recent introduction of herbicides for weed control.

These performances suggest that the widely assumed aversion to agriculture or hard work or drudgery, if real, is not totally insurmountable. The present experience is positive indication that the oil worker who cannot find employment in the industry can be expected to willingly perform the arduous work entailed in agriculture, and that he can become adjusted to the comparatively smaller income. If an impatience should arise, it would more probably derive from the uncertainty of the returns, brought about by fluctuating production and market conditions.

Co-operation

One of the commonest suggestions received in consultations prior to the commencement of this activity, was that a small compact unit such as these people represented, constituted an ideal nucleus around which the co-operative spirit in farming could be fostered. While the idea of co-operation seems attractive, its

organized promotion should rest on at least two basic ingredients ; one is a definite purpose : something to co-operate about ; and the other is a willingness on the part of the individuals to assist and be assisted by others. It cannot be said that any operation so far engaged in would have been more expeditiously or more efficiently performed by a number of persons together rather than by each man working on his own. Even in the initial stages of land clearing by hand, when a few got together and worked on each other's holding in turn, it was found that the larger area cleared in one day by three or four persons working together on one holding, could have been equally achieved if each person worked continuously on his holding and did not have to return the equivalent of time received to each of his colleagues. Further, the companionship which developed between the parties working together, also resulted in time being taken up in friendly chatter. But the severest limitation to this form of co-operation was the fluctuating standard of industry and thoroughness of the same person between one holding and another.

It was earlier pointed out that experience in the oilfields had taught these people the virtue of adaptability. With this characteristic was developed a rugged individualism born out of the struggle to get ahead before the other man. Even in such a small community, a certain social stratification developed in which the determining factors were type of work, level of earnings and assumed level of education — this last is only relative, as none of the adults went beyond primary school. Inevitably, the petty family jealousies developed and lingered. The accident of fate which brought them now to participate in the same agricultural enterprise might not be sufficient reason to immediately cancel off the superiorities which had been established over the years. Each family has a different combination of goals and ambitions ; problems of different intensities result in different utilization of the family's labour resources. One year of common pursuit was certainly not enough to expect the animation of as lofty a sentiment as co-operation for the common good.

This is not to say that co-operative action may never come about, but what is abundantly clear is that the expected rewards from such action will need to be very manifest before a real desire for it is excited. Any premature urging of co-operation, in under-estimation of the importance attached by these people to their seemingly trivial disparities, could forfeit further chances of success for a considerable time.

A Look at the Future

What is expected to constitute the most difficult aspect of the programme is to find a formula through which the agriculture

if prosperous, will continue to be that way, by the farmers being willing to forego early conspicuous consumption in favour of investment on the farm. One is not dealing here with a typical rural community with restricted motivation to earn more. Quite the contrary; these are people who at one time were able to enjoy the highest standards of living for workers of their class. The circumstances of continued employment and relatively attractive wages which characterized the early stages of oil development were accompanied by a notoriety for prodigal and competitive living. A mark of distinction was that a residence had to be fitted with new sets of curtains at Christmas, New Year, and Easter. As an example of extreme "keeping up with the Joneses," housewives, unable to purchase a chicken on a particular Saturday, have been known to take a bird from their small backyard flock, conceal it in their shopping basket on their way to the market, and have it conspicuously displayed among their purchases when returning home. The level today is more sophisticated: there are television sets, refrigerators and fancy furniture. Already two television sets have made an appearance in our small village. Against such a background, it is normal to expect increased incomes from an agricultural activity to become easily tempted into consumption expenditures at the expense of savings for re-investment on the farm.

It is in this regard that the female adult of the household is likely to exert a powerful if indirect influence. Already there is evidence that where there is common understanding between the man and woman, willing and healthy co-operation on the farm is always forthcoming. On the other hand diligence at the agricultural effort has been observed to become attenuated after the man has been brought up to date with the needs of the household and children.

With this situation in mind, a conscious effort has been initiated to involve the women more actively in the farming effort, in cases where participation was considered deficient. One sees in this the possibility of room for the collaboration of an exercise in home economics through which domestic affairs may be rationalized.

Some Concluding Observations

The agricultural activity discussed is being undertaken essentially through the instrument of agricultural extension, and it seems appropriate to reflect upon the way in which this service has found it necessary to operate. The theory has been advanced that the extension worker might phase his services beginning with the dispensing of specific technological data, then

moving on to the farm management aspect, and finally ending up with activities of a social development nature.

Our evidence suggests that the initiation of an agricultural activity may very well require preparation of a social atmosphere at the family level in order to achieve effective dedication towards the application of resources to farming. Agricultural development seeks to improve economic conditions by modification of the social orientation, and our experience leads us to believe that the understanding and influencing of family attitudes, goals and aspirations could result in greater universal acceptance and use of the sophisticated tools of production.