

Vermont Environmental Report

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GETTING A START IN FARMING: Do Young Vermonters Have A Chance ???

A succession of research papers, government reports, and commission findings verifies what is clear to the naked eye: Vermont agriculture, the family farm, the survival of rural values and rural life, -- these things, are under siege.

This process, called in the language of the literature, "the decline of the family farm," is happening around us, not as a sudden, apocalyptic event, but by degrees, in stages. The results of this process are no more acutely measured than by their effects on a new generation of young farmers, young men and women who are looking for ways of making a life on the land. In the words of the Governor's Food Commission: "*In the long term, the major problem facing Vermont agriculture is this lack of new farmers.*" (Our italics)

Statistically, this is the situation as it has changed over time, as set down in Benjamin Huffman's June, 1973 report on *The Vermont Farm*.

The number of operating farms in Vermont has declined at a rate greater than that for the decline of land area under farm ownership, due mainly to a consolidation of smaller farms into a fewer number of larger individual operations.

In 1969 a total of 6,874 farms were in operation in Vermont, 4,850 of which were defined by the **Census of Agriculture** as "commercial" farms, -- those with sales of farm products amounting to \$2500 or more in 1969.

In 1949 the total of operating farms was 19,048, in 1959 the number was 12,099. The total number of farms declined between 1949 and 1959 by 37 per cent, and between 1959 and 1969 by 43 per cent. At the same time, the average size of Vermont farms steadily increased, from 185 acres in 1949, to 243 acres in 1959, to 279 acres in 1969.

In the May and June issues of the **VER** we shall examine the prospects facing the young Vermont farmer, or would-be farmer. We shall attempt to define the problem as it was described to us by informed agricultural observers and practising farmers. Then we shall talk to federal farm credit managers, and finally to young people who are planning to enter farming or who have just entered farming.

FARMING & YOUTH

From every quarter, this is the observation, almost a litany, "Yes, there is a problem."

From Ron Albee, the newly-appointed Deputy Commissioner of Agriculture: "I think the State feels there is a problem (with the entry of young farmers.) I think everyone you talk to will say there is a problem."

From Newton Ryerson, Director of the Placement Office at Vermont Technical College (VTC) in Randolph Center: "The number of farms is declining. The cost of land, the cost of a registered herd, is going up. The guy that leaves here and actually farms a farm is less and less. The guy that leaves here that can step into a farm is less and less."

From Deacy F. Leonard, Executive Secretary of the Vermont State Farm Bureau, these words: "There has always been a problem, --probably always will be a problem. It used to be that an older farmer moved into town and leased his land to a young fellow. If a young fellow took over one of these farms, if he raised heifer calves, at the end of the year, they divided the herd. Then a young man had built up equity. He could use this cattle as a security for a loan. Today if a man retires, he gets out of it completely. The number of farms available for lease is quite limited."

While there is wide agreement about the difficulties of getting started in farming there seems to be some confusion about the "young farmers" themselves, -- who they are, what they want to do, and whether they are willing to work hard at what is clearly hard work.

Newton Ryerson at VTC talks about the nature of the agricultural students at VTC and what they would go on to do. "More and more of our agricultural students do not have a farm background. People are coming up from New Jersey and taking the agricultural course." And yet, reports Ryerson, "Jobs have not grown as fast as the number of students." A lot of young women are taking the agricultural program. They are thinking of going into biological work, or they like working with animals.

Ryerson has conducted an Alumni Survey of students who left VTC ten years ago. The engineering students, by-and-large, have stuck to their profession. But the agricultural students have tended to be diverted from the main issue. They are doing different things. They have gone into the Peace Corps, or into teaching, or they are selling lawn mowers and seeds, or like the ex-VTC-student who was farming near the Connecticut River, -- now he has his own agricultural equipment business. And as Ryerson observes, "He could leave farming entirely."

There seems an eagerness on the part of farmers, particularly, to draw a line between those who are interested in farming and those who are **seriously** interested in farming. John Lee, who has a place in Marshfield, who was raised on a farm, who is a part-time university student, a part-time fertilizer salesman, and who does some farming, is just as hard on himself as he is on others. "If I was going into business next year," he says, "I would have to mortgage an arm and a leg. I do not think that there are that many people who are seriously interested in farming. The back-to-the-land thing is not farming. Self-sufficiency is one thing. When I say "farming" I mean production for the market. I do not consider myself a farmer. By my definition I am not."

Is there a renewed interest in farming, and if so, what does it mean? The confusion persists. There have apparently never been so many young men and women looking for farm work. Inquiries are pouring into Extension Offices and farms from young people both in Vermont and from out-of-state. When you talk to practising farmers, today's young people come off pretty badly. You hear instances, over and over again, of young people who were brought up on farms, who know the life, and want no part of it. At the same time, given the choice, a practising farmer will always hire the young man or woman who has lived on a farm and who knows first-hand the rigors of farming life. Get around, talk to farming people. There is a new sense of the importance of farming. It is as if outsiders had suddenly re-discovered the enterprise of farming.
