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Mike Starn

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VERNON WALDREN

a day with the new breed of county agent.

The spreading suburban sprawl west of Omaha makes Vernon Waldren mildly uncomfortable. Not that he's against progress. For a farm boy who grew up in a Kansas county with a total population of 2,000, he understands the demographics of urban expansion very well.

Waldren is an agricultural extension agent for the most crowded county in Nebraska. Of the 425,000 people in Douglas County, two-thirds live within the city limits of Omaha. The problem, in Waldren's eyes, is the lack of planning. As a product of the land, he knows the tension between urban and rural growth and that land does not stand idle very long in the farm belt.

From his car window Waldren points to the scoured ground of a new housing development at the edge of the city. Condominiums and apartments are growing there, sprouting playground sets and barbeque grills.

"Look," he says, "my neighborhood is moving outward too, but right here is good soil, and until recently it was producing good crops. They could have built these homes over there a few miles on less productive land and solved everybody's problems."

In spite of Omaha's horizontal drift, there is an openness than can hardly be imagined on the seaboard of the country. The flat land disappears into a ruler-straight horizon. From the air, countless rectangles form a random grid of brown and green, connected by the ruled lines of secondary highways and county roads. There is order here, maintained with meticulous care. But even in Nebraska, land is not limitless.

It is this fact, perhaps, that is a source of discomfort for Waldren and others in the rural community. They believe that most of the 222 million consumers in the U.S. do not understand the importance of the food production system. There is a disturbing mythology about farmers and farming, they think, that is perpetuated inadvertently by government and mistakenly by the consumer in the grocery checkout line. Government

with its price supports and assistance programs lends false credence to the notion that the farmer is protected from failure. The consumer at the other end is convinced by the price of food that the producers are living off the fat of the land.

"One of the most difficult jobs we have in front of us is to educate people about the realities of agribusiness," Waldren says. "And that includes people in the farm belt. The urbanization of America has placed people in separate camps, and there is a great deal of false information circulated. People think farm life is simple. They see the farmer standing in the field wearing a red bandanna and with a wheat stalk hanging from his mouth. The truth is that farming has changed tremendously in the past 20 or 30 years, perhaps more than any other industry you can name. It has become a very demanding and complex business."

The Extension Service is evidence of the complexity of agribusiness. It was created in 1914 to provide information—primarily research information—to farmers and homemakers. Land grant colleges had been doing agricultural research for some time before that, but then the decision was made to share the results with the people who actually needed them. It began simply enough, placing agents in each county of each state having a land grant college.

Today, Extension is part of a vast agricultural network. In Nebraska, the governing organization is The Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources, located at the University of Nebraska at Lincoln. Its components are the Agricultural Experiment Station, Extension, the College of Agriculture, the Conservation and Survey Division, the Water Resources Center, and the International Programs Division. The Institute also works in close concert with the Nebraska State Forest Service, the Office of Environmental Programs, and a Climatological Center.

Cooperative Extension has also joined the age of specialization, focusing on four principal areas: agriculture and natural resources, home economics and family living, 4-H and youth development, and community resource development. The last includes such modern concerns as recreational development, housing, land use planning, and zoning.

The familiar extension agent who used to operate like a displaced traveling salesman is,

like Old MacDonald, fading into history. The 365 men and women of the Nebraska Extension Service are all college graduates, and many have advanced degrees. Waldren, one of the younger agents in Douglas County, has a master's degree in economics. He is essentially the new breed of landsman, clearly at home in the hybrid environment of rural pragmatism and urban dynamism. In his office at Douglas County's modern extension center, he speaks confidently of the complexities of agribusiness, shifting effortlessly to other years when he worked a Kansas wheat farm with his father. Softspoken, intelligent, decisive, Waldren was never a prodigal son who returned belatedly to the land. He never left.

And like Waldren and the other county agents who serve them, the farmers here have also adapted to a new way of life. Indeed, farming has undergone nothing less than revolution in the last half century. The trappings are still there—tractors, combines, pickup trucks, cats, dogs, cows, chickens, barns. There is even a straw hat now and then. The real changes are to be found in the people. The farmer is no longer isolated from the accelerated life of America, and he is not immune to such modern economic demons as inflation or recession.

The first hard truth is that the farmer cannot leave the farm. There is no one else to do his job. Caught between a rock and a hard place, as they say in the midwest, he has the least amount of control over his product, the price he asks for it, and as a result, his livelihood. The second hard truth, as Waldren explains it, concerns the consumer.

"Let me just put it this way," he says, as the white county car slips past the endless rows of corn and soybeans west of Omaha. "The consumer had better hope the farmer doesn't leave the farm. It's incredible how completely ignorant the average person is about the products he buys in the grocery store.

"The average American spends about 17 percent of his disposable income on food; that's probably the lowest anywhere in the world. There are dozens and dozens of countries where people are spending 30 to 50 percent just for food, and it will increase for them in the future. What Americans don't realize is that this probably won't happen in the U.S. because of the cheap food policy we've had for years. Both

government policy and our system of supply and demand keep food prices very low"

The food production system is a victim of misunderstanding, Waldren points out, even though it operates like any other industry. Few products go instantly from manufacture to the marketplace, and farm products are no exception. They move from raw form through processing, packaging, distribution, wholesaling, to the final destination on the grocery shelf, and the price reflects this progressive journey.

But Waldren is an enthusiastic cheerleader for the vitality and efficiency of his industry.

"Farming as an occupation has gone from 80 percent of the population to two or three percent, and just one percent of that is feeding this nation, plus people in other countries. Now you see the importance of agribusiness to this country's economic well-being. Farming is the one thing we do better than anyone else in the world, and people may not know it but food is our principal export. Last year we exported \$32 billion worth. What other product, besides technology, is so valuable?"

Visiting Two Farms

Like most extension agents, Waldren wears many hats. He is an economist, an agronomist, a horticulturist, and a plant pathologist; but he is primarily an agriculture expert serving Douglas County's full-time farmers. Today, he steers his car into the paved driveway of the Dickinson farm—800 acres of corn, soybeans, alfalfa, cattle.

Jim Dickinson, 64, has been a farmer for 45 years, working the rolling Nebraska land with his father, then, in turn, sharing the work with his own son, Bob. With the exception of one term in the state legislature, Dickinson has remained on the farm and operated a successful business with his one son, and the help of a teenager in the summer.

In the comfortable living room of Dickinson's modern brick home, it seems strange to hear the father and son talking about the risks of farming. But that is the irony of their lives.

"Farmers are always fighting the appearance of wealth, but that's all it is, appearance," the elder Dickinson says, even now showing a degree of polite impatience with a conversation that is taking him away from the job. "People seem to think we are exempt from the economics that plague their lives, things like

inflation and high interest rates. Yes, farming is satisfying work in many ways, but it's also demanding. It means tremendous debt, hard work, and long hours. Even the advances in farm technology cost a lot of money."

"We pay a high price for our efficiency," Bob adds, "and it just keeps going up. The investment in farming is unbelievable, and it takes a heavy toll on our profits—what profits there are. Look, not only don't we know what we're going to get for our product, we don't know if we're going to get a product. It's one big gamble, and it doesn't always pay off. There's no guarantee. Most people in other jobs make a salary, and except for taxes, can keep what they earn. Not the farmer. Most of what he makes—if he makes it—goes back into the farm to pay for materials and equipment he bought at high interest rates."

"Yes, we have a lot of money in assets," his father interjects, "but we have little cash. That's why they say that a farmer lives poor and dies rich. The only way to really make money is to sell out, but then who's going to do the job?"

Several miles west of the Dickinsons, the land begins to rise and fall, the patterned fields a rumpled quilt. Down a narrow, graveled lane between gently rolling folds of corn and hay is Ken Dillon's farm. Unlike Jim Dickinson, Dillon has never been away from the farm, and, until this year, has not had a vacation since he married 18 years ago. Nor is it likely that he had many before that. Dillon is a dairy farmer, and since milk cows don't take a holiday, Dillon doesn't either. Night and day, seven days a week rain or snow, the 39-year-old Nebraskan and his two teenage sons are milking, feeding, and raising feed crops for 300 head of cattle.

Dairy farming is a tough business, and the cycle of planting, harvesting, feeding, milking never ends. After all those years, the cycle may be familiar, even tolerable, but it is rarely smooth. Dillon knows precisely how many bushels per acre it takes to feed his cattle, but like the Dickinsons, he can't depend on it. Last June, a hail storm damaged 40 percent of the corn; and one month later, a wind storm and a flood added to the injury. But straddling a picnic bench in his shaded yard, Ken Dillon smiles easily, the fingers of one rough hand drumming idly on the table as he tells Vernon Waldren that he probably won't make any money in the season just ended.

VERNON WALDREN

"We'll just hold our own, probably break even. Yeah, the hail got me first, then the flood. What happens is that when I don't get the bushels per acre I need to feed my cows, I have to go on the open market and buy it. That's what hurts me. But it's not all bad. I've got more hay than I've ever had, probably have some to sell, which I've never done before.

"It's tough to get ahead now with inflation, the price of fuel and things. If I make a little money one year, I have to pay on the combine."

Like most farmers, Dillon has taken to improvising, fabricating what he needs right on the farm. He even makes his own fertilizer. A short distance away—too close for the squeamish—sits a 600,000 gallon open-top tank nearly filled with liquid manure. He channels the barnyard runoff—there's no shortage of it on a dairy farm—into the tank, where it's mixed with water and other ingredients. The savings is considerable.

But Dillon isn't exactly in business by himself. He has a not-so-silent partner who is more than casually interested in his operation—the federal government. Not only are milk prices federally regulated, which deprives him of the market advantages of supply and demand, but every three months a government inspector drops by to make certain Dillon's cows are in Grade A sanitary condition. And these people don't fool around, he says. They want it clean.

But in spite of the hazards, the grueling hours, and the limited rewards, Dillon sees better days ahead, at least for his sons. The older son, Dan, 17, has decided to stay with the farm, and Dillon acknowledges the choice with quiet pride.

"The market will be better for them. It's got to be, with more and more people to feed and fewer farmers to do it. They'll probably see more profit than I've seen in all my years of farming, and that's fine with me. Somebody's got to do this, and they might as well benefit."

On the way back to Omaha, Waldren's car passes miles of corn that will soon be harvested. He stops the car. On the edge of the field, the only sound is the wind that is propelling summer into autumn.

"Farmers are kind of like corn," Waldren says. "In a drought, corn will wait for moisture. Soybeans, too. They will actually go into a holding pattern and stop growing until the moisture comes. If there's none, the lower leaves go first, then the drought will work its

way up to the higher leaves and the ears.

"Farmers work, then they wait to see what happens, too. You can be the best farmer in the world and still lose the crop. Maybe even lose the farm, if you have a few bad years. There is very little margin for error in this business, given land payments, equipment payments—a medium-sized tractor costs about \$30,000—home mortgages, materials, and supplies. And as the Dickinsons said, what profit they make goes back into the farm. People, even some farmers, say they are against government price supports and disaster assistance, but if it wasn't for assistance in bad years, the farmer would go out of business, the supply would go down, and the price would go up. And whatever happens to the farmer also happens to the rest of agribusiness. All those people up the line—the processors, the packers, the herbicide companies—would be out of work. You can imagine how that would affect the rest of the economy.

"I guess that's why I've been uncomfortable with using food as a political weapon. Yes, it's a real weapon we've got, but I think it hurts us more than it hurts anyone else. Besides, it's not very effective. Take the grain embargo on the Russians. There's nothing to prevent a shipment of wheat sent to South America from being resold somewhere else. It may take a little longer, but they've managed to skirt the embargo pretty easily. What the embargo says is that if we don't like what you're doing, we're going to play politics with food. Besides the obvious moral aspect, who gets hurt in the long run? We do. Food isn't like technology. We've got to sell it."

Waldren's meaning is clear. The farmer is at the beginning of the agribusiness cycle; and the size of agribusiness, a vital and irreplaceable part of this country's economy, is measured in billions of dollars.

And to Vernon Waldren and others who know the land, the care and feeding of America is in the best possible hands, and for the foreseeable future will remain there. It is easy to become lost in the litany of problems that plague the farmer, but one look at the wealth he has coaxed from the ground makes it apparent that the rumors of his demise are premature. He has a clear understanding of his place in the scheme of things, and though the next century may bring startling changes to the farm belt, he and the land will remain constant.—Mike Starn