The Farmers Arise

Rural voters organize

In the small town cafes where farmers gather for morning coffee, conversations are turning from weather and crops to the intricacies of bankruptcy proceedings, political organizing, and the voting record of state legislators.

Long considered a bastion of conservative politics, rural Idaho is beginning to reverberate with the echoes of Woody Guthrie and the progressive farm movement of the Great Depression. Just as the Vietnam War politicized draft-aged youth, national farm policies are politicizing farmers and rural residents.

Despite a lack of tractorcades to Washington, D.C., the farm crisis is rolling full speed ahead, crushing farmers with a combination of low commodity prices, increased costs of production, falling land values and shrinking credit availability. The drought expected in Idaho this summer will only worsen the situation.

Idaho leads the Western states in farm bankruptcies and is fifth in the nation, according to the Idaho Bankruptcy Court. In 1986 alone, 1,449 of Idaho’s 23,000 farmers went out of business, according to the League of Rural Voters. From the potato fields of the upper Snake River to the ranching country of the Lost River Range, frustration and anger is festering like an open sore.

Story and photos by Glenn Oakley
In growing numbers farmers are taking up the admonition of Texas' commissioner of agriculture Jim Hightower to, "Raise less corn and more hell." In Idaho they are united by the Idaho Rural Council, a group affiliated with the National Save the Family Farm Coalition; the League of Rural Voters, a Minnesota-based organization with one staff director in Boise; and the American Agriculture Movement.

If the farmers are upset over low commodity prices and bank foreclosures, the message given by these farm organizations makes them furious. The elimination of family farmers, they are told, is deliberate. While rejecting conspiracy theories (of which there are plenty in rural America these days) the progressive farm movement groups do define the farm crisis as a "crisis by design."

The message Phil Lansing of the League of Rural Voters carries to farmers across Idaho is this: "The United States made a government policy 20 years ago to remove farmers from the land. We are moving toward a national picture of 50,000 super-farms controlling the vast majority of food production in the United States."

The slide show he carries across the state and shows in school auditoriums, churches and homes lays out a picture of the major grain corporations, banking institutions and chemical companies working in concert to convince Congress and the administration to establish farm policies that favor their interests at the expense of the small-scale farmer. The league details a history of corporate maneuvering, beginning with a 1962 report by the Committee for Economic Development, a corporate-funded think tank, which argued for "a program, such as we are recommending here, to induce excess resources (primarily people) to move rapidly out of agriculture." The league says there is a "revolving door" between the CED and the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

President Johnson's special commission on food and fiber policies carried on this philosophy, identifying the nation's biggest farm problem as a surplus of farmers: "... the technological advances in agriculture have so greatly reduced the need for manpower that too many people are trying to live on a national farm income wholly inadequate for them."
The theme was carried on by Agriculture Secretary Earl Butz under President Nixon, who championed the slogan, "Get big or get out."

Many farmers have gotten out, with either scarce notice or even approval by the American public. At the turn of the century one-third of all Americans were farmers. It is now a boast that less than 2 percent of the country is engaged in producing food for the rest of the nation and the world.

While many farmers have gotten out, many others have gotten big, but they are not farmers in the traditional sense. Insurance companies, most frequently through foreclosures, have acquired more than 4 million acres of American farmland, according to a recent article by the Washington Post. Prudential alone is said to control some 1 million acres, which it manages through its agricultural division. Through foreclosures, the Farm Credit System and the Farmers Home Administration control another 4 million acres.

Corporate control of food, say the farm organizations, extends from the dying farm towns across rural America to the poverty of Third World villages. "To capture larger markets," says Lansing, "you have to destroy markets in other countries, which is what we're doing by grain dumping in the Third World." State Senator John Peavey, a Carey rancher and Rural Council member, also takes a world view of the farm crisis. By keeping grain prices low and dumping them on foreign markets, he says, "We go on the side of the big banks and the friendly governments who go against the aspirations of the people of those countries."

While the motivations and intent of the U.S. farm policy are open for debate, there is little doubt that current policies are indeed crippling the small-scale farmer. Grain prices, set by the United States government, are considerably below the cost of production. The government makes up a portion of the difference through subsidies, but not enough to cover the costs of growing the crops.

Minnesota's commissioner of agriculture gave Idaho farmers a national perspective on the situation at a Rural Council rally last year. "Last year we produced 8.3 billion bushels of corn," says Jim Nichols, "subsidized the farmer $11.9 billion and sold 1.1 billion bushels. Do you know how much it was worth? Three point one billion dollars. We spent $11.9 billion in subsidies to sell $3.1 billion in corn. If you hate the farmer, for God's sake have mercy on the taxpayer and give the corn away.... And who's behind it all? The multinational corporations — the Cargill's and Con Agra's of the world. They've figured it out. Drop the price on 8 billion bushels of corn so you can sell 1 billion. Then they buy it back cheap, feed it to their cattle and sell them at a high price to the consumer." The league explains the consequences that follow at the local level: "We spend huge sums of taxpayers' money to compensate farmers for part of their losses caused by this subsidey to the grain trade," states the league's booklet, Crisis by Design. "Then we force farmers to borrow enormous sums of money to cover the rest of their losses."

This borrowing has helped precipitate the current farm crisis. Farmers who tried to expand in the more bountiful late 1970s are falling behind in their loan payments because of continuing low crop prices. The federal lending authorities press the banks to collect on these debts, and the farmers end up further in debt fighting off foreclosure in the courts. Foreclosure and bankruptcy creates a downward spiraling effect of its own. As more farms are auctioned off, the sale prices drop, lowering the value of the land for the remaining

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farmers. Since a farmer's ability to borrow is based on the value of his farm, the remaining farmers' ability to qualify for financing decreases and their vulnerability to failure increases.

Nationwide there are but 2.2 million farmers, hardly a major political force numerically, especially considering their isolation. "We don't amount to one square block on a city as far as votes go," says Harold Storey, a Magic Valley farmer who was foreclosed on in February.

But leaders in the farm movement are quick to point out that rural America—the small towns and rural residents—account for one-third of the U.S. population. The national progressive farm organizations hope to rally this sizeable and potentially powerful group behind their cause.

The power of the farm movement was evidenced in the Midwest presidential primaries. In Iowa, the League of Women Voters deferred to the League of Rural Voters in staging a Presidential Forum on Agriculture and Rural Life. The Republicans refused to participate, but all Democrats, excepting Albert Gore, did come to Ames to discuss farm issues, and all but Gore and Bruce Babbitt supported higher commodity prices and supply management, the two key issues with the progressive farm movement. Richard Gephardt's subsequent rise in the polls was attributed by the league to his strong populist stand on farm issues.

"Politically, what's interesting to me," says Peavey, "is the strength of Jesse Jackson in Idaho." Noting that Jackson did not come in second in the Democratic caucuses by appealing to Idaho's miniscule black vote, Peavey says, "Jackson is the closest thing to a populist" running for president. The New York Times notes that Jackson "sees agriculture as part of a 'systematic crisis' in which small farmers are threatened by large farming and business interests, just as some workers' jobs are threatened by the merger of multinational corporations."

Peavey believes "little organizations like the Idaho Rural Council have an incredible future. It's a big, powerful coalition waiting to happen out there—labor, farmers, small businesses, and even small banks."

Idaho seems tailor-made for the farm movement. Agriculture remains the leading industry and farmers and ranchers constitute the single largest occupational force in the state legislature.

Nevertheless, the Rural Council's most coveted legislation—a bill mandating mediation between foreclosing banks and indebted farmers—failed for the third year in a row during the 1988 session. The farm organizations cite intense lobbying pressure from the lending institutions as cause for the bill's failure. But while the bill was co-sponsored by ranchers Laird Noh, R-Kimberly, and Peavey, the other two farmer/legislators on the Senate Agriculture Committee voted against it.

Not all farmers accept the views of the Rural Council and the progressive farm movement. "I'm not unsympathetic. I could have gone bankrupt, too," says Sen. Lynn Tominaga, a Rupert farmer who along with Sen. Jerry Twiggs voted against the mediation bill. Tominaga says he believes the banking institutions when they say mandatory mediation will dry up credit for young farmers like himself.

"Their major social function is to go to church. They're not the sort of people to mobilize behind a social issue. There's not the time to do that and run a farm, too." Trying to organize farmers, she says, "is like trying to keep frogs in a wheelbarrow."

Daniel Levitas, research director for the Iowa-based rural advocacy group Prairie Fire, suggests another hindrance inherent in organizing Idaho farmers. "I think Idaho is one of the hardest nuts to crack," he says. "The ideology of 'me and a six-shooter against the world' still prevails."

But many have adopted Challis ranchwoman Mabel Dobbs' belief that "the political involvement can be more important than the ranch work" at times. Dobbs and her husband have juggled ranch work and political activism while fighting off foreclosure on their cow-calf operation.

"I've made a commitment," says Dobbs. "If we lose everything I'll spend the rest of my time on hotlines and do whatever I can to get the word out."

The same intensity of commitment is seen in many of the politically active farmers. John Spanbauer, a Magic Valley farmer who is president of the American Agriculture Movement of Idaho and vice president of the Southern Idaho Rural Council, says he was spurred into action by the foreclosure of his parents' eastern Idaho farm. "To see what they did to my dad and mom, I'm pretty much committed," he says. "I could go somewhere and get a good job, but I can't quit." He picks up his two sons and adds, "This is another reason. These will be the fourth generation of farmers in the family. If there's anything left..."

Spanbauer describes the difficulties of farmers entering the political arena. "It's so hard for us to fight because they [opponents of the mediation bill, particularly banks] have guys in Boise who can be at the Legislature in five minutes, take guys to dinner. We don't. I've been to Boise five times in the past year. It's my gas, my money, and my job here on the ranch doesn't get done when I'm gone."

"We won't win this issue with farmers alone," says Diane Peavey. All rural voters, she says, will be needed to change local and national policies. And from an even broader perspective, she says, the farm movement should be of concern to everyone in the country.

The broader issue involves a very fundamental question, she says: "To me it's a struggle that goes beyond 'Is this community going to save its farms?' It's how is this country going to do its business in the next 50 years. Who will control the means of food production in America?"