

Our farms are
becoming bigger

DANGER: LAND MONOPOLY!

By DAVID L. GRAHAM

WITH the passage of the Sherman Anti-Trust Act in 1890, Congress went on record as being opposed to business monopolies; recent condemnation of labor monopolies culminated in the Taft-Hartley Act. Concentration of power is now spreading to a part of our national economy where most Americans would least expect to find it—the land. Latest census data reveals that the concentration of farm land, like the concentration of industry, has been proceeding at a brisk, purposeful pace.

As with industry, war accentuated the trend toward bigness, and unless reversed by unforeseen forces, this trend may well liquidate the traditional American farmer. The new agricultural giants are swallowing the traditional farmer just as large corporations are gobbling up the independent businessman. No wonder during recent years Agriculture has been able to stand toe to toe with Big Business and slug it out for Congressional favors. Agriculture *is* big business.

Farms are bigger and fewer and productivity is at least better. Forty per cent of all farm land now falls into units of more than 1,000 acres; 25 years ago such holdings embraced but a quarter of the land, and today the average American farm is 50 acres larger. Yet we have 600,000 less farms than we had in 1920—despite the addition of 186 million acres to the total area in farms. So the record gross income of 23.9 billion dollars which farmers received during 1946 (1947 will probably go a third higher) represents by no means the dispersal of cash or potential con-

sumer buying power that one might assume. For 80 per cent of the total production during 1944, the last year fully reported, was achieved by only a *third* of the farms, and *half* the nation's farms weren't grossing \$1,500 worth of products a year.

The number of farms in the "very small" category (under ten acres) has increased by about 300,000 since the first World War—90,000 of them since 1940. In some cases the giant farms haven't swallowed the family-size farm, they have merely whittled it down. At present these small holdings account for ten per cent of all farms, compared with five per cent 25 years ago.

High prices, the housing shortage, and the menace of more wars and depressions may be enticing a lot of people into subsistence and part-time farming; but the traditional or family-size farm is fading from the American scene. The number of farms from 10 to 500 acres in size, which includes the old 160-acre homestead unit, is dwindling steadily; in 1920 these middle-size holdings comprised two-thirds of all farm land; today, only half. During the war, farms in the 100—180-acre category were particularly vulnerable, 110,000 of them disappearing.

The trend toward large farms makes for more economical operation and, therefore, seems inevitable. Like industry, the farm has achieved greater efficiency and lower production costs by resorting to more and better machinery. The secret of the astonishing agricultural output during the war, averaging 122 per cent of the pre-war years, was chiefly mechanization. In 1920 there were only 250,000 tractors on American farms; today there are more than two million; by 1950 there should be three million.

This recourse to mechanical power and the equipment that goes with it, including pick-up hay balers and mechanical cotton pickers requires capital; and herein, of course, lies the big farm's main advantage. For not only is the big farmer presumably better able to obtain the necessary money, but his broad acres are better suited for the economical use of machinery. Depreciation is time's inexorable tax on machinery; nothing neutralizes depreciation like maximum use. On a large farm, machinery is more likely to wear out than to rust out; on a small farm, the contrary is true. The larger acreages can best absorb these steadily increasing capital outlays.

The demand for farm products is expected to level off during the next year. A 95 million bushel potato surplus in 1946, costing the government about 80 million dollars in price support, has shown the way¹. Yet even a sharp decline across the board in demand and prices for farm products would not reverse the trend toward mechanization but would certainly step it up. The keener the competition for the market, the greater the need for efficient operation and machinery.

A former official of the Farm Security Administration has estimated, that by 1955, 21½ million additional farmers and farm workers will have left the land. This expert insists that three-fifths of all farms today are too small to support their farm families satisfactorily. The Department of Agriculture predicts that, largely by means of increased mechanization, crop production per acre will be a third greater in 1950 than it was for the 1935-39 average and that the gross production per farm worker will be 147 per cent of the 1935-39 average.

The inflated farm real estate market of the past year, whose frenzy has been viewed with misgivings by everybody from the President down, has continued driving the middle-size farms into the arms of the giants. In general our traditional family-size farm is too large for the part-time farmer and too small to use mechanical power effectively—industry produces four or five times as much value per man-hour of labor. Yet the banding together of these family-size farms into cooperative

management associations has made but little headway.

Ironically enough, the various measures inaugurated during the 1930's to rescue the depression farmer (whose income collapsed even more disastrously than that of his urban brother) have worked to the advantage of the big farmer and left the isolated family farmer as he was. Government payments are largely based on sales volume and acreage, and about 80 per cent of them have gone to the top third (by income) of farmers. During 1944, for instance, the bottom half of the nation's farmers, who presumably needed help the most—since even in that boom year they weren't producing \$1,500 worth of commodities each—received \$40 or less apiece of government payments. The A.A.A. benefit payments, parity price payments, soil depleting crop payments, and other federal benefits did nothing to retard the trend toward bigness in agriculture but, on the contrary, accelerated it.

Any discussion of farm price support naturally leads to the question of what to do with the farmer. The editors of *Life* seem to favor liquidating some 3,800 million farmers and their families or reducing them to peasantry, leaving only the big commercial farms to wrestle with the land and fill the nation's lunchbox. What liberties these comparatively few, well-organized producers might then take with the price of food seems not to have troubled *Life's* editors. Cheap production is one factor in determining prices; but when a few producers begin to dominate the field, price agreements have a way of creeping in. And price agreements mean high prices.

Our age-old surplus of farmers has perpetuated, except for short intervals, the low *wholesale* cost of food in America—and, incidentally, maintained about half the nation's farmers in a state bordering on destitution. Two-thirds of the nation's farmhouses, it has been estimated, are unfit for human habitation; one-third of them are beyond repair. Yet even at present employment peaks, there is little room for surplus farmers in the cities. As increasing farm productivity makes more and more of them unemployable in agriculture, the probability is that industry, too, will be

¹ For a Congressional discussion of the potato surplus, see FORUM, December, 1946, pp. 540-549. For a debate on food subsidies, see the December, 1947, issue, pp. 350-359.

less able than now to absorb them. For their own sakes, therefore, as well as for the general health and stability of the country, some means must be found for keeping a large part of our farmers on the land—but not at the present subsistence levels, not in slum conditions. As late as 1940, for example, 89 per cent of all farmhouses had no bathtub or toilet, and 7 per cent not even an outside privy.

FARM ORGANIZATIONS

Considering the mood of the present Congress, the government can scarcely be looked to for action; besides, experience shows that government aid usually winds up by benefiting most those who need it least. The secret of the family farmer's rehabilitation seems to be suggested by his most lamentable weakness—his isolation. For while his physical isolation has been diminishing to almost nothing, his economic isolation has grown. Everybody else in society has been getting effectively organized, while the farmer continues to keep company with such noncommittal movements as the Farm Bureau and the Grange.

Compared with the organizations he is pitted against in the market place, the organizations of the average farmer are anemic and toothless. When he buys, he faces trusts, corporations, and trade associations with millions behind them; when he sells, he has to deal with commission merchants, packing houses, and chain stores nearly as formidable. Meanwhile, the industrial worker has his union and the professional man his professional association.

What the average farmer obviously needs is a militant organization of his own. To battle successfully with the giants, he himself will have to become a giant. It will be difficult; it may be impossible—in which case, the average farmer will disappear. But if the wage slave could organize, surely the farmer can, too. Cooperatives, unions, or federations—let him call them what he will—they must be genuinely his and strong.

If he were well organized, the average

farmer could buy at wholesale and sell at retail, instead of vice versa, as is the case now. Organized, he could demand of Congress legislative protection from combines and monopolies. He would have the use of the expensive new machinery and scientific techniques which insure low production costs. He could, in short, claim a place at the table of American prosperity—that table at which no segment of society ever seats itself without a bold and intelligent fight.

Some farm experts recommend an annual minimum wage for farmers, guaranteed by the government; others would maintain existing farm populations by steering a considerable percentage of them out of agriculture and into the professions and the service trades, thus raising country living standards simultaneously. But the fundamental problem, certainly, is to prevent too many of our people from becoming landless wanderers. That state is healthiest, regardless of its size, in which the greatest proportion of the people have a tangible stake. For land-hunger has been the greatest breeder of revolution and chaos in history.

If modern history teaches nothing else, it shows that when the land of a country falls under the control of a few people, that country is headed for internal chaos. Mexico under Diaz, Czarist Russia, modern Spain—in each instance, a major cause of the country's social and political crisis was the scarcity of land, frozen in large holdings.

America, of course, is far from any such extremity. Land is no longer the great source of wealth and power with us that it once was. Nevertheless, it has been the best land which has shown the greatest tendency to concentrate, and this concentration of our national resources is no healthier than any other monopoly. The warning is clear. For if the trend flourishes, the day could come when many millions of Americans would find themselves without jobs, land, or hope; and only the deadliest weapon in the hands of our enemies, the A-Bomb itself, would be more ominous.

Sign in Minneapolis butcher shop: "For the convenience of my customers, I have made arrangements with a finance company to take radios, refrigerators, cars, and pianos as down payment on a pound of meat."

Minneapolis Tribune

Our Guests

We are not the only ones in our house,
We must remember the others and be kind
To the small ones that shelter under our roof
And eat the crumbs we drop, the seeds, the
rind.

No deed, no wood or plaster can shut out
Creatures that go on toes silky and wild,
There is no law in bronze that can maintain
The sole heir to our house shall be a child.

Our house is large, there are the dwelling
places

Too high, too deep and dark for us to keep,
Small love and quiet feasting will go on
After the masters are possessed by sleep;
When we who live by lights and fires go
To our cool dreams which have not any words,
Then our cooled chimney, roofed with gentle
stars,
Fills with the wings and winsomeness of birds.

When our doors are closed, below our stoop,
Under the granite stone, a door of earth
Opens, and below our cellar floor
The woodchuck's halls and rooms quiver with
mirth;
Hairy faces touch in shrewd embrace,
There is the tender language of soft paws;
The slim skunk prowls our shed. These are
good guests,
They have their hour; they keep the starry
laws.

—ROBERT P. TRISTRAM COFFIN