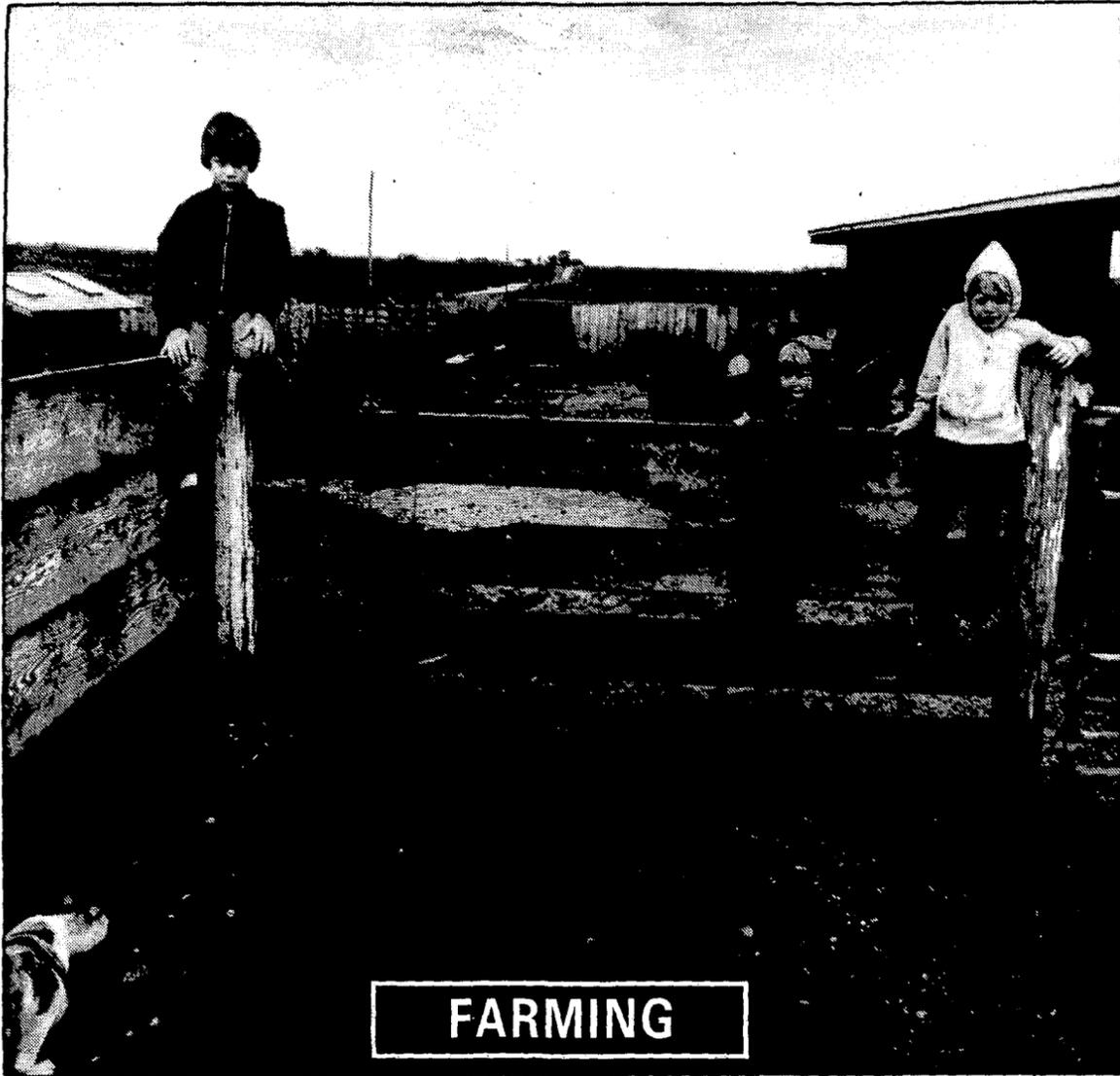


Growing interest in the Earth



FARMING

**Family Farming:
A New Economic Vision**
By Marty Strange
University of Nebraska Press
311 pp., \$7.50

By Charles Isenhardt

FARMWORKERS AND WILDLIFE HAVE suffered pesticide poisoning for years. Fertile soil has been washing and blowing off agricultural land for decades. At various times and for their own reasons, farm and environmental groups have howled about such things, but rarely in unison.

Now, however, the ecological and health hazards of modern farm prac-

tices are getting sustained attention because another, broader constituency is getting into the act: consumers. Increasingly, average citizens worried about contaminated food and pesticide-polluted water are asking: how much longer can we put our tax and supermarket dollars into an agribusiness system that might be killing us?

The recent tariff squabble between the U.S. and the European Economic Community was a case in point. Ostensibly a dispute over free trade, it's actually rooted in Europeans' distastes for hormone-treated meats and the associated health dangers. And consumers everywhere are challenging farm-

ers and environmentalists to attend to problems they've been dancing around separately for too long.

A strange mix: Into this mix comes Marty Strange, matchmaker. For a work not apparently dedicated to environmental concerns (no chapter title has a conservationist bent), Strange's book on family farming sets a new standard of ecological conscience for books about American agriculture.

Instead of writing an obligatory section on farming's environmental aspects, Strange weaves his concern into the fabric of every topic he discusses—from land tenure to commodity prices to farm technol-

Strange—an ag policy analyst at the Center for Rural Affairs in Walthill, Neb.—is a cordial critic of both farmers and environmental advocates. After eight years of a Reagan administration hostile to their concerns, those environmentalists may have learned to get along better with each other, but Strange believes they could be more simpatico with other potential allies.

"Consumers, farmers, environmentalists—all three of those interest groups behave narrowly when they want to, which is most of the time," Strange told *In These Times*. "I work among those camps as much as anybody in the country. I see the selfishness at every corner, and environmentalists can be the worst."

For example? "They think social structure doesn't matter, in agriculture or any other area," he claims.

How long can we put our money into a potentially deadly agribusiness system?

"They say they're not worried about the deterioration of family farming, that they're worried about groundwater pollution, as if they weren't connected. Yet their guiding light is the principle that all things are connected."

Strange's book, *Family Farming: A New Economic Vision*, clearly and convincingly explains the connections among issues of farm size, land use and ownership, federal tax and commodity policies, as well as the spread of inappropriate technology. He shows how almost all of the issues involve farmers in degrading the environment and irretrievably consuming the Earth's resources.

Harmonic divergence: He identifies and links the various trends in agriculture. Chief among them is a move away from the myth of "family farming" toward the contrary values of "industrial agribusiness." In ideal ecological terms, Strange writes, "family farming strives for production processes in harmony with nature" and is "resource-conserving," compared with the "standardized" and "resource-consumptive" industrial style. "Most people who work the land have little or no hope of owning it. Those who own the land have no desire or need to farm for a living. Thus, many who actually farm have little long-term interest in conserving the land for future generations."

Strange links the changing social structure of agriculture to the threat it poses to nature and, in the long run, the sustainability of national food production. In discussing the debate that "bigger" farms are sup-

posedly "better" ones, he notes: "Most efficiency studies ignore social and environmental costs (e.g., groundwater depletion, pesticide contamination) because these costs are external to the farm. The study of economics is the study of selfishness, and therefore economists tend to ignore costs that the farm can force others to pay."

Diversified farm operations are ecologically safer than specialized ones, but, Strange asserts: "In agricultural economics, a bias against diversification persists, reflecting the conviction that doing one thing well on a large scale is more important than doing many things well on a small scale. It is a function of our fixation with maximums, and of our indifference to optimums."

Farmers go AWOL: Strange maintains that modern farming practices are being recognized as the No. 1 environmental issue in our society. (Indeed, as Congress begins to look at the 1990 farm bill, support for strengthened conservation measures is high.) But he says both farmers and environmentalists mistakenly pose the issue as farmer vs. environment.

While Strange calls "narrow" those environmentalists who ignore internal inequities in the farm economy, he says farmers are just as notable for being AWOL from the great social movements of our time. Meanwhile, "the search for an environmentally gentle way of producing food has barely begun, and is in great need of more ideas."

Strange recommends greater emphasis on preventive science. He suggests that for every public dollar spent developing new technologies, two should be spent anticipating their consequences.

But perhaps his boldest challenge is this: "If farmers are expected to steward natural resources even when doing so is not in their immediate self-interest, the rest of us must be willing to sacrifice the immediate benefits of cheap food for the long-range benefits of a sustainable food system."

In the picture of American agriculture Strange has painted, farmers and environmentalists are natural allies. Will another anti-ecology, anti-family-farming president be needed to forge the alliance? George Bush may be the man to do it. "I am an environmentalist!" he has declared. But if Strange is right about the need to reverse trends in agriculture and restrain unfettered technology, then Bush has some explaining to do. In one of his stump campaign speeches on farming, Bush said, "We are riding giant trends of history and technology that we cannot stop."

But if you believe Marty Strange, we have to. And environmentalist farmers must be the ones to do it.

Charles Isenhardt is a freelance writer based in Dubuque, Iowa, specializing in agriculture and the environment.

**TIRED OF THAT HEAVY OLD DOCTRINE?
TRY NEW CATHOLIC Lite**

Half the Hail Marys,
All the Absolution!!!

fig. 1 THE HARE SHIRT
A breed apart

fig. 2 DOING PENNANTS
Pope Tech
CARDINALS
APOSTATE

fig. 3 NEW PRODUCTS
For suburban Parishes...
Hostias Heavenly HOST
... And in the Hispanic Inner City
Popitros Macho Cheese FLAVOR

Rough CUTS BY JAKED

Loyalties: A Son's Memoir
By Carl Bernstein
Simon and Schuster, 262 pp., \$18.95

By Nelson Lichtenstein

Of shifting loyalties and the family ties that bind

CARL BERNSTEIN, OF WATERGATE fame, is a good reporter and a difficult son, which, taken together, give his memoir both its insight and its tension. There are two stories here. The first is a richly evocative tale of growing up Jewish and progressive in the still-segregated, half-Southern Washington, D.C., of the 1950s. The second is an awkward contest between father and son over what it meant to be a radical in the McCarthy era and what part of that past is useful today.

Bernstein has a fine memory of what the simple pleasures of childhood can offer: the joy of a new bike, the comradeship of other mischievous boys and the ever-widening exploration of his Chesapeake Street neighborhood. Along with so many others in the Jewish community, the Bernsteins moved to Silver Spring in the mid-'50s, to a suburban liberal enclave, just in time for Carl to embark on a rebellious adolescence.

All this he recounts with a sure sense of the significant detail: what it was like to smoke cigarettes during lunch at Blair High School and the thrill of drag racing down Colesville Road at midnight. To straighten him out, Carl's father got his son a job as a copyboy at the old *Washington Star*—the rest is journalism history.

Childhood's end: Bernstein's parents were not your ordinary Jewish liberals. They had been Popular Front progressives in the '30s, Communists for a few years in the mid-'40s, trade unionists, integrationists, defenders of the Rosenbergs and victims of the McCarthy era. Bernstein's memoir is therefore an exploration of the way that political currents of the time intersected and disrupted his otherwise comfortable childhood.

His parents were in the forefront of the effort to desegregate the Washington lunch counters and department store restaurants in the early '50s, but Carl hated these embarrassing expeditions that tore him from his playgroup, threw him together with children he didn't know and put him in an adult world he didn't understand.

The execution of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg was even more traumatic. The fate of this couple hovered over the Bernstein home as Carl's mother, Sylvia, threw her energies into organizing a Washington defense committee. By the time of their death, the Rosenbergs were "familiar," writes Bernstein. Indeed, the Rosenbergs had been married on the same day in 1939 as his own parents. "If they could be executed, what was to prevent the execution of one's own parents...?"

And then there were the congressional investigating committees, before which both of his parents were periodically hauled. The most painful experience came in 1954

after the House Un-American Activities Committee grilled his mother and other District leftists. Relatives and friends quickly ostracized Sylvia, a sociable woman who had been born in Washington and lived there most of her life. Neighborhood kids

COLD WAR

stopped coming around to play, and Carl got into a nasty fight in the schoolyard when a classmate called his mother a communist. And to cap it all off, his little sister was expelled from the cooperative nursery run by the D.C. Recreation Department.

FBI bar mitzvah: Naturally, his parents both developed huge FBI files, which Carl quotes to good effect—it's practically become a literary convention for political memoirs of recent vintage. The FBI remained an unseen presence in all of the Bernstein family's affairs: funerals, Sunday afternoon get-togethers, even Carl's bar mitzvah. As late as

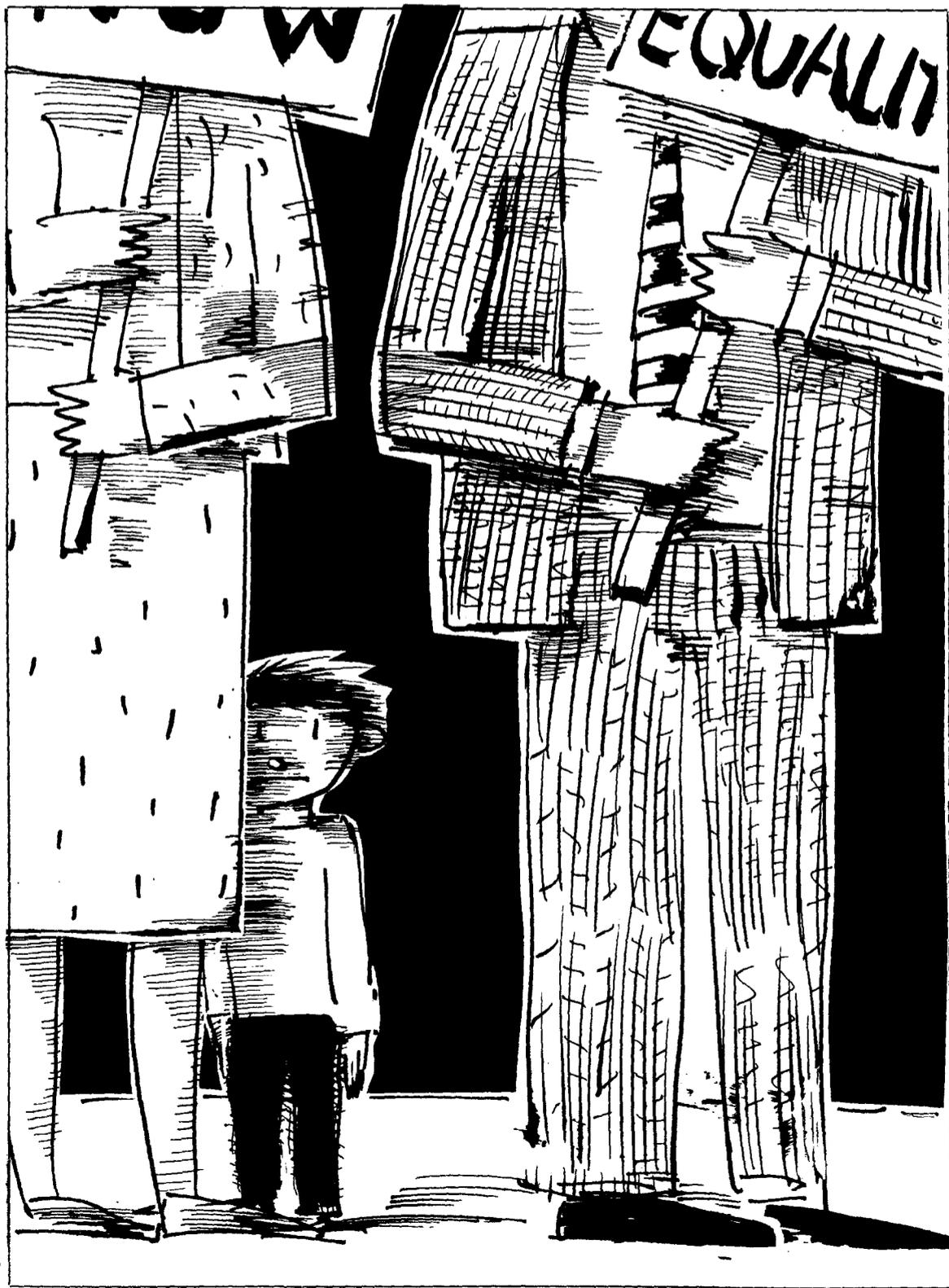
1962, during the Cuban missile crisis, the FBI kept tabs on the family and their friends; they remained on Hoover's list of people to round up if the president declared a national-security emergency.

Counterpointing this childhood memoir is the story of Sylvia and Al Bernstein—their extended families, political activities and conflicts with the McCarthy-era thought police. All is told as part of a tension-filled dialogue with Carl as he seeks to record their story and uncover the passions and commitments that

made their lives so difficult.

Sylvia seems to have come to terms with her past, but Al Bernstein is a figure both admirable and irritating. A graduate of Columbia Law School, he was one of the corps of young New Deal lawyers who sought to investigate and reform the American plutocracy in the late Depression years. Unlike so many others who mellowed after the war, Al was a natural organizer and threw his talents into building an industrial union of federal employees, the United Federal Workers, whose member-

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ship extended from mid-level white-collar professionals to the largely black janitorial and cafeteria staffs.

Al's work got really interesting in 1947 when President Truman inaugurated the McCarthy era by setting up a federal employee loyalty-security program. Within a few years the government brought almost 13,000 cases before its various loyalty boards, Star Chambers in which the accused knew neither the names of their accusers nor the exact charges against them. In his capacity as a union officer, Al Bernstein handled more than 500 of these cases, winning about 80 percent. One day Carl returned home to find a new TV set in the living room, a present from some of his father's grateful clients.

Life (and death) of the party: But the late '40s were hardly a triumphant time for Al Bernstein. His union was ground down, expelled from the CIO, and his livelihood destroyed. For a few years he operated a laundry on Georgia Avenue, until the McCarthy era abated and he could turn his considerable talents to fundraising for a series of Jewish and liberal charities.

But Al Bernstein still lives in a world in which the shadows of 1951 spread their darkness everywhere. "I don't want you to write a dishonest book," he tells Carl, "but I don't want you to write an evil book either." So he resists his son's efforts to probe the inner meaning of his transit through the Communist Party. To tell all, to uncover the passions and the personalities of that era, might still damage reputations and destroy what little political effectiveness his generation retains.

Al Bernstein's timidity exasperates Carl, and it unsettles the reader as well. After all, it's 40 years since those days, and dozens of once persecuted Communists, like Jessica Mitford and Julius Scales, have told their stories in recent years. But compared to these party members, the elder Bernstein's diffidence may have something of an explanation. Most of those ex-Communists who have spoken up were part of the generation of radicals who joined the Party in the '30s, often held full-time posts and then left after 1956. Their whole life was the party, and they now feel compelled to account for it.

But Al Bernstein's story is different: he joined the Communists at their most "liberal" moment in the war, and his most intense and rewarding years were bound up in building a union whose very survival depended on carving out an identity separate and distinct from the party. He was by nature a cautious man, yet his "punishment" was in many ways more severe than those more closely identified with the party. He never went to prison, but he lost his vocation, many friends and his chance to move the world. No wonder he had trouble telling son Carl about those days.

Nelson Lichtenstein is the editor of Harvey Swados' *On the Line*, to be reissued this fall by the University of Illinois Press.