

The Resurgence of Populism by Paul Schaefer
Extracted from North Country ANVIL No 43, Spring, 1983

ONE MORNING LAST FALL I stood in the desolation of a vacant Wisconsin farmyard. Toys and tools were scattered on the lawn, a kitchen window was cracked and taped, and several barn doors yawned uselessly. An awful emptiness existed where, three years before, a family had pursued the American Dairy Dream. The dream fell apart: they sold their cows and left the community; the farm was put up for rent. As I examined an old hay rake, two semitrailer trucks pulled up to the barn. Another in a series of renters was coming, and I was there to help unload his hay. This man had been a tenant on a farm near Madison, on land owned by a wealthy professional. With little warning, the landlord had sold the place, forcing the farmer to leave. He had come to our area in response to an ad in Hoard's Dairyman. The farmer's dairy cows, some 40 Holsteins, would arrive later in the day and be milked almost as soon as they got off the truck.

While we worked, the two truck drivers, both from farm families, joked about how crazy the farmer was for shipping hay and a dairy herd around the state. They also laughed at their own plight: loads being were reduced to hauling alfalfa in their sleek reefer rigs. "Shit," one of the truckers spat as we repaired the broken bale elevator, "it gets so a person doesn't know what the hell to do."

Not knowing what the hell to do is the perennial American farm problem. Most have responded by leaving. Between 1929 and 1965, than 30 million people left the farm, a number greater than the total of European immigrants arriving in America between 1820 and more 1960. Between 1970 and 1980, when all the woods hippies were moving back to the land, our farm population dropped by one third.

Many of the five and a half million people still farming are in tough shape, as is the land. Over half of the remaining farms are small, part time operations dependent on off-farm employment. More than half of our farmland is worked by tenants. Farmers run ever-larger pieces of land with enormous machinery purchased at high interest in an attempt to counter low prices with increased volume. Like colonized peoples everywhere, they are forced to sell their raw materials cheap while buying manufactured goods dear. The difference is made up with injurious credit, resulting in no-exit debt and the eventual loss of farm through liquidations, bankruptcies and foreclosures.

Trying to forestall loss, farmers work the land more intensively, planting exportable row crops which open the soil to erosion losses up to fifty tons per acre. Looking over their shoulder, they see not only their creditors, but an increasing number of developers eager to urbanize prime farm land at enormous profit. And they see their families, educated to expect urban standards of living and leisure in a time when real farm income is lower than it has been since the depression of the 1930s.

Last January two attorneys spent most of an hour talking to a group of farmers in Mondovi, Wisconsin. The lawyers were telling the farmers how to combat foreclosures. Many of the farmers present faced the loss of their farms.

The meeting had been organized by members of the Wisconsin Farm Unity Alliance, a group formed in reaction to the latest farm crisis. Unity, which has a sister group in Iowa, is committed to a goal of fair prices for farmers. Until that goal is achieved, the organization seeks to prevent farm sales forced by creditors: hence, the Mondovi gathering. In related activities, Unity members had publicly protested the loan policies of a nearby Production Credit Association, one of the major sources of farm credit in the area. As a result of the protests,

association officials were forced to renegotiate a loan with a distressed farmer. At the regional level of the association, officials then made an investigation of loan procedures, and the board of directors agreed to review cases where farmers were having troubles. In all of this, Unity has shown farmers that credit and other policies are not fixed in stone - but matters subject to debate and open to change.

While useful, the information conveyed by the lawyers at the Mondovi meeting was, I judged, not welcome. The arcane legalisms surrounding foreclosures were just further evidence of the baffling complications encountered by those who simply want to do a good job of raising food and being paid for it. To farm these days requires the aid of lawyers, tax experts, management consultants and financial analysts. Farming is now big business. Those who are unwilling or unable to adjust should get out, it is said, and most have done so.

When Tom Quinn, Unity President, and Tom Saunders, an organizer, began to talk to the sixty-some farmers, eyes brightened and the meeting livened. The response was partly due to the speakers' skills: Quinn told a good joke and Saunders has a forceful manner. People were also responding to the Unity message, which is that farmers need to organize, locally and nationwide, and to form alliances with workers and consumers. Of greatest importance, however, was the response of those at the meeting to one another.

The focus of the gathering left the head of the room, where the lawyers and organizers stood, and moved around to fix on farmers who spoke up about their difficulties, about the frailties and unfairness of the credit system and its bureaucrats, about the need to stand together. Several men noted that when a farmer is in financial straits, lenders make him feel that he is at fault - and singularly so. Embarrassed, farmers quietly go under without realizing that many of their neighbors have been, are, or will be in the same situation. The meeting's greatest

value, therefore, was mutual awareness and the support and confidence that grow from such beginnings of community.

Talking to Quinn, Saunders and Craig Adams, Unity treasurer, several days later, I told them that I had seen some awfully fancy pickup trucks at the meeting. Weren't they, as some of my neighbors charged, simply helping the "cowboy" farmers who, having access to credit, bought everything in sight, including more land than they could reasonably work? They responded that, while farm foreclosures and price legislation are immediate concerns, their great hope is the creation of a radically different set of social possibilities. To create such change requires working with the diversity present in farm society. How is anyone, argued Saunders, going to "back off" from cowboy farming without evidence of alternative ways, and the assistance to enact them?

Quinn, Saunders and Adams are dairy farmers. They differ from many other dairymen, however, in several respects. The queen of dairy cows is the black and white Holstein, milked by most. Some hardheads milk and argue by other breeds. The Unity trio milk Jerseys, the small brown ladies with Bette Davis eyes and butterfat tests so high some claim that existing measures can't reckon them. Quinn and Adams, their wives Helen and Lucy and their children each own 30-cow herds of registered Jerseys. Their farms, close enough for the exchange of work, include modest acreages, silos, tractors, homes and debt. Saunders, his wife Pam and their children farm somewhat differently. Tom calls their place "the manifestation of Wendell Berry's vision." Berry is the poet-farmer who makes a compelling case for a return to small-scale, horse-powered farming. His vision, Tom Saunders version, consists of 80 acres, a new dairy and horse-barn built from lumber logged and sawed at home, an old house, 12 milk cows and a number of horses. Still working on the vision, Saunders recently revived an old threshing machine and used it to thresh his own and a neighbor's oats last fall.

None of the Unity organizers has a farm background, although Saunder's father was an agriculture teacher. Each went to college in the '60s and was involved in anti-war activities. Quinn was a founder of the food co-op movement in Minneapolis, attempting to create economic institutions that were part of the political process. In 1972, he and his wife and a number of others formed a cooperative farm near Connorsville, Wisconsin. As with other such communal ventures, most of the members eventually left to pursue separate lives. Tom and Helen stayed and worked in the area, bought some cows, and rented their present place.

The Saunders were also involved in cooperative, communal activities in St. Paul. Tom did a brief tour as a rural school teacher in Montana, then returned to the Twin Cities. After moving to their present place in Prairie Farm, Wisconsin, Tom became involved in an anti-nuclear movement that stopped Northern States Power Company from building a power plant at nearby Tyrone.

Craig Adams and his wife live with kin: Craig's parents and one set of grandparents. Previously resident in the Twin Cities, they all moved to Connorsville about the same time. A graduate of a Lutheran college, Craig has been involved with a Christian Land Stewardship study program. Unlike Quinn and Saunders, he uses a religious idiom in speaking of the farmers' plight and the social change needed to ease it.

The three organizers met socially as members of a large back-to-the-land community in the area. Perhaps because of their background, they are willing to think about, and act upon, the farm problem with some confidence that it can be solved.

"Bad management" is a common explanation for recent farm failure in my community. "A lot of people got into farming during inflation," a

neighbor recently told me; "they weren't real farmers but increasing land prices kept their net worth up so they looked O.K. on paper. Now that land prices are falling, these guys can't make it, so we're getting rid of the chaff."

Farm Unity members charge that the "bad manager" epithet is a red herring. Price, they say, is the real issue. When farmers are not even paid for the cost of production, let alone able to realize a small profit, even the best managers go under. Hence their support for "parity," which is simply a means of keeping farm prices and costs in balance with one another and the rest of the economy. To ensure parity, the government guarantees loans on certain commodities at whatever a fair price is determined to be in line with a base period when equity existed. In doing so, it essentially places a floor on prices, in that farmers can get at least what the government is offering, thereby forcing buyers to offer that much or more. If the farmer gets his price, he repays the loan with interest. Failing to get a price, he keeps his loan and we, the government, get to keep the grain and store it against future shortages or sell it when the market goes to a point beyond parity. Because program participants are required to observe certain production limits and soil conservation practices, problems of oversupply and soil erosion are controlled.

The replacement of price supports with credit has a source in government and corporate policy. As outlined in *The Loss of Our Family Farms*, a U.S. Farmer's Association booklet, a Committee for Economic Development (CED) was formed by corporate leaders and academic economists during World War II. The committee was set up to create policies designed to prevent economic chaos following the war.

Among their proposals was that of rapidly reducing the number of people on farms by cutting government price supports in the parity program. The move was justified by rhetorical concern about farmers'

low incomes, which would be increased once there were fewer farmers. Getting rid of farmers was more in the interest of the corporations represented on the CED, however. Among the ways they stood to gain, Unity members say, was the creation of an agricultural sector more favorable to large capital investment and the depression of wages caused by the entrance of over two million farm people into the labor pool. With the virtual elimination of parity in the mid-'50s, the CED proposals became government practice, and millions began to leave the land.

To achieve parity, Unity hopes to create a political base among farmers, workers and consumers which will be powerful enough to influence legislation and in time effect radical social change in the direction of democratic socialism. "The biggest obstacle to real change in this country," says Tom Quinn, "is calm acceptance of hard times and inequities; what breaks that down is vision." Unity's vision draws much inspiration from American Populism, particularly as described by Lawrence Goodwyn in his book "The Populist Movement."

Following the Civil War, Goodwyn claims, the manipulation of money by banking interests led to farm disasters. Prices dropped cruelly: corn sold for less than 10 cents a bushel, wheat for less than 30 cents. Where, say, 100 bushels of wheat had equalled a mortgage payment, 200 to 400 bushels were now required. And debts were being repaid in dollars much more costly than those borrowed. Interest rates also soared, forcing many farmers into forms of debt-peonage little different from slavery.

Conditions were worst in the South, where a crop-lien system required that farmers sign over future crops to local "furnishing merchants" in exchange for credit at the merchants' stores. These "advancing men" would charge up to 200 percent interest, ensuring that whatever price a farmer's crop brought, and it was lower each year, it would never pay

off the loan. Following years of debt, farmers eventually “paid out” by turning their land over to the merchants and then staying on as tenants. By World War II, over fifty percent of the land in the South and the Southwest was tenant-farmed. The majority of those owning land were also heavily indebted. [The article goes on for several more pages]