
Background Information:

AN EXCERPT FROM

A NEW LOOK AT AGRICULTURE



Redefining agriculture's role in our
economy, landscape, environment
& social culture

EXCERPT #9

An American Tragedy

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An American Tragedy



From *The New York Times*, May 30, 1999, page A12:

Mark Drabenscott, a vice president of the Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City, said ... the American farm economy is now “clearly in the throes of a serious downturn.”

The root of the suffering is a market that has sent the prices of crops ... to 12-year lows. Livestock, too, has been hit hard ... The United States Department of Agriculture reports that average farm income dropped 33 percent from 1996 to 1998 and that an additional dip of 10 percent is expected for this year.

[This] steep drop in income has ... meant disaster to farmers already working on slim margins.

[One example is] Larry Barber, a rawboned 57-year-old ... who recently lost a farm that had been in the family for more than a century ...

A week before Mr. Barber was forced to sell his cattle, he sat and cried, tears streaming down his face, making no sound, his body shuddering.

“I lost all desire to do anything,” Mr. Barber said, tears now again in his eyes as he drew hard on a cigarette. “This is like a death, you know.”

Riding the agricultural economy’s roller coaster, farmers like Mr. Barber saw record prices for their crops just three years ago, before the Asian economic crisis stifled demand for American agricultural products.

“People tell me, ‘It’s not your fault,’” Mr. Barber said, “but it is a little like driving a car, then skidding on a bad patch of ice and hitting a child. It wouldn’t be your fault, but you’d live every day with the doubts and thoughts of how could I have avoided this terrible thing.”

From the front page of *The Baltimore Sun*, November 8, 1998:
Captions from an article entitled
“The Last Harvest: ‘I’m done fighting’”

Farming: Bad weather, crop disease, plunging prices. A North Dakota

grain raiser surrenders to the pressures that are driving the U.S. family farm to extinction.

Last harvest, then auction.

“My boy is 20. I asked him if he wanted to farm. And he said, ‘Dad, are you crazy?’”

“As things are right now, you could have a bumper crop and still go broke.”

Calling it quits: Allen Kunze operates the combine harvesting his soybeans while brother Tom Kunze watches from the field. All the equipment was auctioned when the crop was in. The family has farmed this land for five generations.

Low-tech: Allen Kunze’s son Kory, 20, pulls an old buggy across the road to be auctioned. It once belonged to his great-uncle. Pushing is farm hand Jerry Burns, 68, who lost his farm in Minnesota in 1983 after six years of ruinous rains.

This is a tragedy for both these families and the nation. Texas cattle ranchers, Montana wheat farmers, Washington apple producers, Georgia peach growers, Florida tomato farmers, the story is the same everywhere you look.

As the prices paid to producers plunge and more farmers and ranchers go out of business, do not expect to see any change in the price *you* pay for food. In fact, there is likely to be little change in prices in supermarkets or restaurants. Every one else in the food chain — processors, shippers, wholesalers and retail outlets still will be taking their profits. The farmer is generally the loser in this scenario.