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## Goals and Values Underlying Programs of Farmers Union

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**A** CONSIDERATION of the goals and values underlying the programs of Farmers Union is necessarily a task that cannot be completed in one chapter. The subject matter has so many ramifications that my analysis must fall somewhere short of the mark.

This assignment in some respects raises the question of conflict of interest. As farm organization leaders we are primarily concerned about the economics of farming and administrative problems. In our price and income objectives we are dealing almost exclusively with economic man. Though we recognize the philosophical and social implications of our programs, we are hesitant to tread the same ground as the rural sociologist. This dual role of both psychologist and patient is an unfamiliar one. What follows must necessarily be a highly personal interpretation of our organization's goals and values.

### CHANGE AND THE FAMILY FARM

In considering goals and values we must recognize change. Farming, when Farmers Union came into being in 1902, had little in common with agriculture as we know it today.

Dr. Henry Ahlgren, associate director of Agricultural Extension in Wisconsin, recently recalled those strenuous and rugged days:

Horsepower was provided by "oats and timothy" rather than by "gasoline and electricity." There was a minimum of farm machinery. Farming

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was an art rather than a science. Livestock and crop varieties were – for the most part – nondescript. Habit and custom and trial and error were the basis for most farm operations.

There was no electricity, nor were there telephones. There was no running water in the home. Whoever got up first in the morning built a fire in the kitchen stove. We took a kettle of hot water out to the pump on cold winter mornings to thaw it out so we could get at our water supply. We heated bricks – or stove lids – to warm the family sleigh – or our beds – on cold winter nights. We read around the kitchen table with a smoky lamp providing the sources of our light.

The farm furnished the milk, meat, eggs, fruit and vegetable supply. Mother made the butter and clothing for the family, baked the bread, fed the chickens, worked in the large garden and often helped with work in the fields.<sup>2</sup>

This is our rugged rural heritage which still is the basis for much of our value system as applied to agriculture. The family farm image still stirs poets and provokes nostalgia in the city dweller who dreams of returning to the land. However, the process of change has produced inevitable conflicts between the old and new orders.

Individual and group goals and values have changed with the changing farm environment. The introduction of good roads, enlarged marketing areas, expanded educational opportunities, off-farm employment and improved communications and transportation have all had their impact on the aspirations and lives of rural people. The farm community is undergoing changes in social institutions and values as the industrialization, mechanization and urbanization of our society continues.

But in changing America there are certain goals and values which we consider to be fundamental – to be preserved as part of the American dream or democratic ideal. We cherish our belief in the dignity of the individual, in the basic freedoms in our Bill of Rights, in the importance of every man having the opportunity to think for himself. Dr. Henry Wriston has given eloquent expression to the American spirit:

The ideology of the Declaration and the Bill of Rights shaped our history. It set in train forces that moved inexorably toward democracy. It made this a land of opportunity for the oppressed of the world and precipitated the greatest movement of peoples history had ever seen. Mere availability of land would not have produced this result. Other sparsely settled regions of the earth with greater unused natural resources saw no

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<sup>2</sup> Henry L. Ahlgren, At the Forefront of Progress, A Tribute to the Past – A Pledge to the Future, address, Golden Anniv. Celeb. Coop. Exten. Serv. in Wis., Madison, Feb. 12, 1962, pp. 2-3.

such tidal influx. The spirit of liberty acted as a powerful magnet; the commitment to freedom made us hospitable to others. The ideal of equality of man set our course as a revolutionary force, a foe of colonialism, hostile to tyranny anywhere.<sup>3</sup>

The family farm ideal was an intrinsic part of the American Revolution and the democratic ideal. Placing ownership, management and labor in the farm family was the democratic answer to Europe's system of a landless peasantry.

The family farm since colonial times has maintained its cultural role. Economist John Brewster has called it "a unique belief-forming role." According to this view, the family farm places great value on the "work-imperative," avoiding the easy way for workmanlike excellence.

With over 90 percent of its population farmers, this fledgling nation developed an agricultural fundamentalism that persists to this day. It involves much more than a belief in the economic importance of farming. It involves a judgment that the family farm, as it performs the social function of feeding and clothing the nation, is a superior institution. Says Historian Gilbert Fite:

Agricultural fundamentalists have insisted that there is something special and unique about the rural way of life. It has been said that farmers are more dependable and stable politically than city-dwellers and that they have high moral character exemplified by honesty, integrity, and reliability. A man on the land is independent and self reliant. Some have even argued that farming is a divine calling where God and man work hand in hand to supply the physical needs of mankind.<sup>4</sup>

Many social scientists are out of sympathy with these fundamentalist views, which they see as expressions of rural sentimentalism. But they do concede that these attitudes have influenced past and present farm policy.

It can be argued that the general farm organizations all have roots that are anchored deep in this fundamentalist tradition. Many of the values ascribed to the family farm by the agricultural or agrarian fundamentalists are stated in the official programs that these organizations have adopted.

With the advent of the Industrial Revolution and the Machine Age certain value judgments fostered by the agrarian fundamentalists have come into conflict with ideas and values associated with our growing industrial complex. According to Brewster

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<sup>3</sup>Dr. Henry Wriston, *Goals for Americans*, Chap. 1. The Amer. Assem., Columbia Univ., New York, 1960, p. 37.

<sup>4</sup>Gilbert C. Fite, "The Historical Development of Agricultural Fundamentalism in the Nineteenth Century," *Jour. Farm Econ.*, Proc. Issue, Dec. 1962, p. 1203.

three value judgments, in particular, retarded desirable social change under corporate industry:

(1) Proprietors, or their legal agents, deserve the exclusive right (power) to prescribe the rules and procedures for operating their production units. (2) The individual (or family) alone is and ought to be wholly responsible for his own economic security throughout life. Therefore, (3) the primary function of governments is to prevent (a) encroachment of the "natural" right of proprietors to run their production units as they see fit, and (b) the imprudent from pressing either government or business into assuming the burden of their economic security. In no small measure, our modern industries were founded by lads from the field, such as the McCormicks, the Deerings and the Armours. It is not wide of the mark to say that the typical "captain of industry" was simply a farm boy a long way from home.<sup>5</sup>

These three value judgments belong to the economic fundamentalism that evolved in conjunction with agrarian fundamentalism. Economist John Schnittker has this to say about economic fundamentalists:

In short, they argue that the agricultural economy ought to be left to function the way it used to function, and implicitly the way it was meant to function.

The central dogma of this school of thought is that government programs to limit agricultural production ought to be terminated, and that any price supports which were left in effect should be reduced to levels much lower than now in operation, that is, to a stop-loss rather than an income-stabilizing level.<sup>6</sup>

Farmers Union policy, as it has evolved since 1900, has retained what we consider to be certain ethical considerations from the old agrarian fundamentalism, i.e., the character-building value of proficient work, the importance to democracy to have a considerable number of people on the land, the spiritual and cultural values we associate with the farm family and the interdependent rural community.

Apart from these ethical considerations, Farmers Union has championed the family farm as the best suited economic organization for American agriculture. A Farmers Union policy statement summarized this belief in this fashion:

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<sup>5</sup> John M. Brewster, "Technological Advance and the Future of the Family Farm," paper presented at joint meeting of the Amer. Farm Econ. Assoc. and Canad. Agr. Soc., Winnipeg, August 20-22, 1958, pp. 9-10.

<sup>6</sup> John A. Schnittker, "Economic Fundamentalism - Its Relation to Agriculture," Jour. Farm Econ., Proc. Issue, Dec. 1962, p. 1213.

The Farmers Union believes that, (1) family farming (a) is the most efficient method of food and fiber production; (b) provides greatest protection for the consumer since family farmers ask only to be allowed to earn parity of income with other groups; (c) is essential to a truly democratic way of life. (2) The small business nature of farming is a strong bulwark against Communism or Fascism, but it leaves the family farmer without protection in the market place.<sup>7</sup>

Farmers Union fundamentalism, if we can call it such, has been greatly tempered with the growing social consciousness of our industrial society. It is here that we part company with the economic fundamentalists and their "laissez-faire" attitudes. Emphasis on "for good of the group" is inherent in Farmers Union goals.

### BASIC GOALS OF FARMERS UNION

1. Farmers Union believes efficient family farmers should have full parity of income returns on labor, management and capital invested in comparison with returns to comparable resources invested in nonfarm enterprises. We believe that the principle of economic justice involved here is indisputable.

2. Farmers Union believes that preservation of the family farm is in the national interest. Farmers Union is an organization of family farmers who believe that the keystone of a democratic society, as well as of a strong rural America, is the efficient, economically adequate and prosperous owner-operated family farm.

3. Farmers Union believes farmers must acquire more bargaining power in the market place. There is a widespread belief that farmers are the only economic group in the country who are out of step with our free enterprise system. That's why we hear so much about returning farmers to the free market. Actually, the farm market more closely approaches the free market concept in our free enterprise economy than the markets in which other industries operate. Most industries wield great economic power over the supply and prices of their products. Farmers have little of such control and are essentially "price-takers" in the market place.

4. Farmers Union believes in expanding food consumption at home and abroad. Getting our agricultural abundance to the needy is a sound objective both in its humanitarian and economic aspects.

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<sup>7</sup>"The Modern Family Farm," Farm. Union Pol. Leaf. No. 10, p. 3.

5. Farmers Union believes in the preservation of rural values closely associated with the family farm pattern. Tied into this bundle of values are soil conservation and stewardship, citizenship and participation in church and community affairs.

There are numerous subsidiary objectives that will be considered when we take up the matter of the means Farmers Union employs to obtain its ends.

One of the fundamental differences between farm organizations revolves around the role of government in agriculture. The basic aims of our organization are closely related to the policies of government at federal, state and local levels that contribute to the economic betterment of farm families on the land.

Beginning in the early 1920's the government's involvement in the economic affairs of the nation's farmers has steadily grown in importance and scope. This involvement was based on the principle that maintaining a sound and healthy agriculture was in the national interest. Intrinsic in this belief was the realization that millions of relatively small farm operators were at a disadvantage in a market place characterized by a growing concentration of economic power. This lack of farm bargaining power gave rise to the parity concept upon which federal farm price support programs have been based.

A preponderance of evidence is available showing that farm income was raised substantially by farm price support programs since the 1930's. During the period government programs have been in force, our farms have become the most efficient in the world and have provided consumers an overflowing abundance at the lowest relative cost in history. Yet many who have reaped the benefits of these programs still view them with suspicion.

The economic fundamentalists still believe in letting such problems as low and unstable prices and overproduction work themselves out in the market without any government interference. Such a course, Farmers Union contends, would result in intolerable hardships imposed upon a large part of our farm population.

Most of the farming in this country is still done on family farms. These farms have been growing in size, becoming more mechanized and increasing their capital requirements, and thus far at least, ownership, decision making and the labor supply have been concentrated in the farm family. With the growth of contract farming and integration we have seen changes made in this traditional pattern. We see feed companies, chain stores, packers and other integrators taking over some of the management functions and in a sense making a hired man out of the farmer.

The large capital requirements are also affecting the family farm pattern as we have known it. A young farmer's entry into agriculture is becoming more and more restricted. There is a serious question of whether or not a family will ever be able to accumulate enough capital in a lifetime to own the farm and all the machinery and equipment necessary to operate it efficiently. These are developments which are of great concern to Farmers Union.

The shrinking farm population, the restrictions on entry and the encroachments by agribusiness interests have caused Farmers Union and others to concentrate on greater efforts to strengthen and perpetuate the family farm ideal. Economist Marshall Harris places much of the blame for lack of a family farm policy on society in general:

Another factor of concern is society's lethargy concerning family farm policy. Like the weather, everybody talks (writes) about family farming but no one does anything about it. Family farming is held in high respect; outspoken critics are hard to find. Professional groups pay intellectual homage to family farms; farm organizations and political parties draft resolutions in their behalf; and Congressional Committees hold hearings on the subject. Yet a national family farm policy has not emerged from these deliberations.<sup>8</sup>

According to Harris, under such an established family farm policy, action programs would be designed to maintain its integrity. Although larger-than-family and smaller-than-family farms would be permitted, constant effort would be made to establish family farms.<sup>9</sup>

Farmers Union policy goals have consistently been attuned to the proposition that the family farm should be strengthened and perpetuated. This objective is implicit in all our legislative proposals.

Farmers Union legislative programs seek the establishment of a food and land policy in America that will put the use of our natural and human resources on a more rational basis. Lack of such a policy has encouraged chronic overproduction with accompanying low farm prices, depressed farm income and wasted resources. The main features of such a food and land policy are as follows:

1. An annual determination of the nation's food and fiber requirements would be made. This determination would include

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<sup>8</sup> Marshall Harris, "The Family Farm in Domestic and Foreign Land Tenure Policy," *Jour. Farm Econ.*, May 1962, p. 543.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 539.

commercial demand at home and overseas, domestic welfare programs, Food for Peace commitments and adequate reserves to meet defense and other emergency needs.

2. Development of supply management programs at the farm level to adjust agricultural supply to anticipated demand.

3. Farm income would be maintained at support levels by adjusting supply to demand and through direct payments to farmers.

4. Family farm "maximums," representing production units, would be established to bring the primary benefits of farm programs to family farm operators.

The direct payment approach and the establishment of family farm "maximums" are receiving much attention although previous Farmers Union programs have contained both features.

Farmers Union is convinced that a direct payment program incorporating supply management has several advantages over our present price supports through government purchases:

1. Payments are made directly to the producer and not to the processor. This eliminates the risk that the support price will not be passed on to the farmers.

2. Since the market is allowed to clear the product, consumers will receive the benefit of lower food prices and the government will not have to meet high storage costs.

3. With the ready-made government market removed, processor plants will operate in a more genuinely competitive market.

4. Prices at which American products move in international trade will be reduced in keeping with our policy to liberalize world trade.

Total government expenditures for direct payments are not a satisfactory measurement of the program's costs. Lower food prices must be subtracted along with sums formerly expended on government storage. Direct cash payments will also have an accelerator effect as this money is fed into the economy.

Historically, policy positions to limit government payments to family-sized farms have followed two approaches: (1) A dollar-and-cents ceiling on government payments and loans; and (2) payments would be limited to production units falling within a production maximum determined for the family farm. Presently, Farmers Union favors the latter approach. Though setting production ceilings for family farms may appear arbitrary and tend to freeze production patterns, the resultant rigidities, we believe, will not hinder economic progress. We must balance the social gains of maintaining the family farm against the social costs of an economy that is bleeding agriculture's resources.

Apart from the broad policy goals, Farmers Union activities



are directed at many corollary objectives for strengthening the family farm. In the public policy field, Farmers Union is working for expanded farm credit sources, prosecution of illegal price fixing by buyers of farm commodities, new opportunities for families on inadequate farms and full employment policies for the entire economy. Farmers Union's primary concern is with the well-being of the farm families that make up its membership. But as a socially conscious minority it has traditionally expanded its interest beyond the confines of agriculture. It has taken stands against greed and exploitation, poverty and hunger, ignorance and disease wherever they have arisen.

Much of Farmers Union's efforts have been dedicated to co-operatives. Farmers Union members have built some of the most substantial cooperative institutions in America. Having helped build these cooperatives, Farmers Union is dedicated to protecting them from unjust attacks. Farmers Union believes that cooperatives are a very democratic form of free enterprise where ownership is widespread and management is responsive to the wishes of the patron-members. The farmer's cooperative is actually an extension of the farm business beyond his own fence lines. Combined with his neighbors, he is able to have more buying power through his supply cooperative and more selling power through his marketing cooperative.

Farmers Union also performs significant educational functions. The organization provides a "voice" for family farmers so that their needs and interests are crystallized and made known. Action programs initiated at the local level are closely identified with the hopes and aspirations of the people most vitally concerned.

Farmers Union conducts an extensive youth program for helping young people be better citizens and community leaders. Primarily, the program is designed to educate the youth in co-operation — to develop a sense of social responsibility toward one another and the rest of society — to create a better understanding of their rural culture so that they can make the most of the opportunities provided.

Changing rural America has produced difficult personal problems for many family farmers who have been forced by economic and other environmental circumstances to change their way of life. Many are faced with the critical decision of whether to remain on the land or give up farming. Others have found compromises. A fourth of our 3.7 million farms are operated by persons who depend almost entirely on off-farm work or other income for their living. We seriously question whether this is good for agriculture.

Farmers' contribution to the economic growth of our nation, through the years, is second to none. Family farming has provided a philosophy of life, manpower and an overwhelming abundance of cheap food and fiber. Is the nation going to show its gratitude by foreclosing the future on the land for family farmers? Farmers Union believes economic justice for family farmers is more than a dollar-and-cents problem. It is a moral issue that confronts all America.