

## CHAPTER 2

### *Too Many Farmers on Too Few Acres*

**T**HE WORK REQUIRED to build the pyramids of Egypt was as nothing compared to the patient Italian farmer for centuries building his stone walls along the flat valley land to separate his fields, or around the steep mountain sides to hold a little soil for his vineyard and orchard.

Along the coast of Amalfi in southern Italy, I saw dark green lemon trees loaded with thick clusters of waxy, yellow fruit—clinging desperately to small terraced plots buttressed by 20- and 30-foot walls. Frequently a high wall holding up the soil took more square feet of space than the small plot of soil it supported against the steep mountain side.

Because of the thin layer of soil, the farmers must prune the trees to keep them from growing too big for the roots. Seldom do the Italian farmers allow the lemon trees to grow more than six feet high. The new branches are tied to a framework which limits the growth of the branches and helps protect them from the frost. Over the top

## 10      **Too Many Farmers on Too Few Acres**

of the trees in the fall they place mats of young evergreen, oak, or chestnut branches with the leaves left on to protect the tender lemon trees from the winter. The mats make a kind of roof over the trees.

The terraces represent a huge investment of time and money, somewhere between \$3,000 and \$8,500 an acre. Much of the money was originally furnished by immigrants who came to this country at the turn of the century and sent their savings back to Italy.

Here the average farm is only one to seven acres. Frequently the family must hire themselves out to the larger farms or rent a nearby farm on shares. By our standards, wages are pathetically low, fifty cents to a dollar a day, including food.

Italy's first agricultural problem is how a rapidly increasing farm population can make a living on poor soils. Nearly 40 per cent of Italian farms are in the mountains, another 40 per cent on hill land, and only about one-fifth in the rich valleys. Said one farmer in northern Italy, "There are just too many Italian farmers."

### ***The Farmer's Story***

Desantis Giacomo is a 35-year-old Italian farmer near Pontecagnaso, a little town south of Salerno in southern Italy. For two years a prisoner-of-war in England, Desantis speaks excellent English. He still keeps in touch with English friends. Desantis' 90-year-old father, now retired, spends his days puttering around the farm, keeping the account

books or driving into town in his small cart. The Giacomo homestead, a cluster of white-plastered, sturdy, stone buildings, crowd around a courtyard with trimmed sycamore trees. A tall palm tree at one corner of the house, according to Desantis, gives the place "a colonial outpost look." With its neatly kept orchards of apples, pears, and oranges, its flat, rich irrigated fields, and the snow-covered mountains in the background, the palm is the only outpost-looking part of the farm.

As we walked down the lane where Allied troops once camped — the farm is only a short distance from the Salerno beachhead — Desantis pointed to three teams of white oxen with graceful, upsweeping horns. "We are now plowing for tomatoes. Each year we grow about 600 tons of tomatoes."

Like much of the land along the coastal plains of Italy, this land has been drained and is now irrigated by networks of ditches. As early as the 12th century, monastic orders began draining the swamps and laying out ditches for irrigating the meadows of northern Italy. Since then no European country, with the possible exception of Holland, has reclaimed more land by drainage. A total of six million acres has been reclaimed. Now, with ERP aid, \$60 million is being spent to drain and irrigate additional land. Present government programs hope to eventually irrigate over one and a half million acres.

At the end of the field we came to an open pasture along a pleasant stream. Twenty head of inquisitive water buffalo cows watched us as we

entered the pasture. For a moment I felt as if I were back in Egypt.

"Buffalo cows are very hardy in southern Italy," explained Desantis, "and very intelligent. When they have calves, the boy who tends them calls out each cow's name and she comes up to the gate to be turned in as her name is called. The cows average only about 20 pounds of milk a day, but it contains 18 to 20 per cent fat. It is made into butter and *mazzarella*, a soft, white Italian cheese. Regular cows' milk sells for 50 lira a liter, about \$1.50 per hundred pounds. Buffalo milk sells for twice that, or about \$3.00 a hundred."

With the exception of some very high grade dairy herds, much of the livestock of Italy is unimproved. While the number of cattle in relation to land looks fairly good, it is pitifully small compared to Italy's population—less than two head of cattle to every ten people. America's ratio is five head of cattle to every ten people. This may explain the high price of meat compared to other foods and the low amount of meat eaten by the people, an average of 40 pounds a year for the whole country. Milk is pretty much of a luxury and is drunk only by babies and small children. With most cows infected with tuberculosis and brucellosis, all the milk must be boiled.

### **Political Unrest**

Past the creek, my Italian farmer friend showed me a low pasture now plowed up. "I shouldn't



have plowed it," he said. "It's too low to grow crops. But today we farmers sometimes plow land unsuited for cultivation to avoid criticisms from the communists that the farmers aren't trying to produce food."

I heard a similar pattern of fear at the street cafes in Rome and from landowners on the rich farms in the north. Even today, with the threat of the communist to the government pretty well over, the discontent of the under-paid workers in the factories and on the farms rings loud in politically restless Italy. Said one large farmer in the Po Valley in northern Italy, "The same people who marched at the head of the fascist parades now lead the communist rallies."

Faced with this fear, forward-thinking citizens know that the future of the Italian democracy rests on solving the problem of too many people for too few jobs, too many farmers and farm laborers for too few acres.

Other landowners and businessmen dream of the regimented order of fascist days. I was surprised how frequently someone would say, "Mussolini wasn't so bad, he only made the mistake of going to war on the wrong side." Some of these people today would gladly sell their birthright of political freedom for order and protection against the masses of poor people, most of whom are uneducated and easily led by the ridiculous promises of every would-be leader.

"I have only one tractor, somewhere between

## 14      Too Many Farmers on Too Few Acres

20 and 25 years old by now," said Desantis. "I'd like to buy a new one, but they cost too much. A new English-made tractor costs \$2,300. And that's a lot of money for an Italian farmer."

Greatest handicap to mechanization in Italy is the high cost of farm machinery, the high cost of fuel and the surplus of farm workers.

Take the farm of Salvoni Sante I visited near Milan. Sante's 200 acre irrigated farm is in the rich Po River Valley. His 35 Brown Swiss cows average nearly 10,000 pounds of milk a year. Last year his fields of American hybrid corn hit 130 bushels per acre. His fields of wheat averaged 80 to 85 bushels. Every square foot of his farm is intensely cultivated. Rows of pruned mulberry trees line the lanes to the fields. Once silk worms grew on the mulberry trees, but today the nylon industry has pretty well wrecked the Italian silk industry. Salvoni Sante would be a good farmer in any country.

He asked me how many people would it take to run a farm this size in America. I told him perhaps two if it were a general purpose farm. Maybe three if it were a dairy farm. Sante has 35 farm workers. The government, confronted with problems of unemployment, forces the farmer to employ one man to every seven and a half acres of good land. "Including the families of my 35 farm laborers and my own family, 116 people must earn their living from my farm," Sante told me.

With a surplus of farm workers, the Italian

farmer just can't afford to pay high wages. In America new factories drain off the surplus farm people, and these new city folks furnish an increased market for farm products. What is more important back on the farm, there are only 3 people to share the farm pay checks instead of 35.

Holding today's farming limelight in Italy is the government's program to break up large estates and land holdings in the south, many of them poorly farmed. With wide political appeal among the tenant farmers, the program will bring into cultivation much poorly farmed and idle land.

More important are the irrigation and drainage plans under the European Recovery Program, that will bring many more acres under intensive cultivation. This is part of the over-all plan to put Italy on its feet.

On the eastern coast near Venice, I saw a farm by motorboat. One large industrialist is spectacularly reclaiming 2,500 acres of land now covered by water and marsh reeds — digging out channels and piling the dirt into islands surrounded by dikes. In the end he will have 1,500 acres of channels, 1,000 acres of land. On this Venice-like farm, landing craft left over from the war take the cattle out to graze and haul back fruit grown on the islands. In the channels the industrialist plans to grow fish.

Even though irrigation and drainage will eventually add thousands of acres of land to provide food and jobs for Italians, the country will still be faced

with the problem of providing work for a rapidly expanding population. With the possibility of emigration limited, Italy must eventually find jobs in factories for many of its farm people. Industries must someday absorb large numbers of people now working under various regulations forcing farmers to employ surplus labor — that is if the living standard of the people is ever to go up very far.

In Italy too many people must earn their living from the land — 45 per cent in the rich Po River Valley, 85 per cent in over-crowded southern Italy. There are nearly 500 people for every square mile.

In prewar Germany or tiny Holland, with even more people per square mile, only 20 per cent of the people work as farmers. The rest move to the cities and towns to work in factories.

*The first lesson that I learned in Europe was that a prosperous agriculture depends on an ever-expanding economy.* New factories drain off the surplus farm people and furnish a market for farm products. What is equally important, the farm income is divided among two or three families instead of ten or twelve.

If we in America had not had expanding factories to absorb the surplus farm people, we too would have been faced with the problem of providing jobs on the farm for an increasing number of farm people. This, in turn, would have pushed down farm wages and earnings of farm families. It would have prevented modern mechanization



and started our own farmers on the road to peasantry.

*Farm prosperity in America, as in Europe, depends upon the trek of people to the city.*