

# GOODBYE, WHEAT FARMER!

BY MORROW MAYO

Large corporations whose sole business it will be to perform the operations of plowing, planting, cultivating and harvesting will supersede the individual farmer, or groups of farmers will combine to perform their work in a wholesale manner. That is the proper way to do it, and the only way in which economic freedom can be won.

—HENRY FORD: *A New Age for Farmers*.

IN THE last few years there has been a very definite movement towards corporation wheat farming in the United States, a movement which has been accelerated by the creation and functioning of the Federal Farm Board. At least half a dozen farm corporations are now operating and expanding in the Wheat Belt, and others are being organized. They have acquired huge wheat acreages at distress prices, erased small farm units, bought out insolvent growers, dispossessed poverty-stricken tenant farmers, and placed a part of the wheat-growing industry on an economical, efficient, mass-production basis.

Farming from 15,000 to 75,000 acres scientifically with modern power equipment, these new corporations can produce wheat profitably at a price which spells ruin to the small American grower. Last year when it was selling at around seventy cents a bushel, with the Federal Farm Board in a state of hysterics, and thousands of farmers beating their breasts and groaning to high heaven, Charles M. Sledd, president of the Sledd Farm Corporation of Lyons, Kansas, said:

Some farmers complain about the price of wheat right now, but so far as we are concerned the price is all right. We can make plenty of money at the present price.

Technically, the machine has revolutionized wheat farming fully as much as it has revolutionized automobile production. In 1900 it required three hours of labor to produce a bushel of wheat; today it requires three minutes of machine time. Under horse conditions 500 acres was about all the land that a wheat farmer could handle. He could plow only from two to four acres a day. Even with a six-horse drill he could plant only eighteen or twenty acres a day. Today with a small tractor he plows fifty acres a day, and drills fifty acres a day. With a tractor and combine two men can cut and thresh fifty acres of wheat in ten hours—an operation that but a few years ago required twenty-three men the same number of hours. The machine has reduced 10,000 acres of wheat land to the size of 500 acres, and 500 acres to the size of 20 acres.

Under horse conditions it took considerable work to farm 500 acres of wheat land. At plowing, planting and harvesting times (the three operations required for wheat farming) the wheat farmer often toiled fourteen and sixteen hours a day, and each operation was a slow, tortuous process. In time hours, on the basis of the city worker, the 500-acre wheat farmer probably worked two-thirds of the year. Today it takes but fifty-three days a year—about

one day a week—to produce and market 500 acres of wheat. In the Fall the farmer plows three times (a total of thirty days) to condition the land and kill the volunteer wheat and other vegetation, and then he spends thirteen days planting his wheat. He is then through with it until the following July, when he harvests his crop, hauls the grain to the elevator and sells it—all in ten days. The machine has reduced his production time, and expense, and labor, by at least three-fourths.

The American wheat farmer has voluntarily and gladly adopted the machine. But he has made very little, if any, economic and social adjustment to the mechanical revolution which he has thus helped to bring about. The great bulk of our domestic wheat continues to be grown on what today can only be described as a piece-meal basis—that is, on wheat farms of from 200 to 600 acres—by thousands of tenant farmers and small independent growers. It requires them, as I have said, about fifty-three days a year (not more than 100 under any circumstances) to make and sell their annual wheat crop. They are using machinery which demands farm units of from 5,000 to 10,000 acres for efficient utilization. These small producers depend now, as they depended twenty years ago, largely if not entirely upon wheat for their main support.

## II

Perhaps 60% of our domestic wheat is produced by tenant farmers on a crop-share basis. Share-cropping goes back, in one form or another, to hoary times. The history of it in the Wheat Belt is interesting, and so is the conflict which has gone on for years with increasing bitterness between the wheat landowner and the tenant farmer, but we need be concerned

here only with the basic manner in which it actually and generally exists in the plains country today.

The tenant wheat farmer usually farms about 500 acres. He pays no taxes. He owns neither the land he tills nor the roof over his head. He does what work is necessary, supplies the machinery, which he owns or rents, and takes two-thirds of the crop. The house he lives in, the barns, sheds and other farm buildings are the property of the landowner; the landowner supplies them, keeps them in repair, pays taxes, and takes one-third of the crop. Commonly the landowner is no more of a wheat farmer than the man who owns a building in which clothes are made is a tailor. Thus what is referred to as the wheat farmer is often two men: the actual wheat farmer, or laborer, in the foreground, and the landowner in the background, one of whom does a few months' work a year producing wheat, and the other, conceivably, no work at all. The wheat is expected to produce an income for both.

If the tenant farmer's year is figured on the city worker's basis, allowing fifty-two days for Sundays, ten for holidays, and twenty-six for fifty-two half-day Saturdays, there remains a total of 277 working days. Supposing that he actually works 100 days a year in producing the crop from which he demands his livelihood, there remains a total of 177 days not devoted to wheat. The industrial worker who misses a day from his 277 working days has his pay envelope reduced proportionately. No business, no industry, nor society generally, expects to give any laborer 277 days' pay for 100 days' work. To be sure, society gives many a man—and, conceivably, the owner of wheat land—365 days' pay for no work at all, but that does not help the tenant farmer. If an idle man

does not starve, he is simply lucky. The tenant wheat farmer is not lucky.

On the other hand, the man who owns 10,000 acres of wheat land, and permits it to be farmed in 500-acre units by twenty tenant farmers, is worse off today than he was twenty years ago. He surely cannot be called a competent business man. He is, no doubt, kind-hearted. There is no evidence that he is a non-worker; no more than there is evidence that a man who owns and rents a building does nothing but collect his rent. He may be, and probably is, occupied with other interests. Nor can the owner of wheat land be blamed for not doing the actual work of farming his own land, for that is merely day laborer's work. Society does not ask the owner of a department-store to sell ribbon, nor the head of a gas company to read the meters. But it does demand, I judge, that his enterprise be managed efficiently. In nearly every other business the producer of a commodity acquires his land, erects his plant, invests his money, buys his equipment, hires his labor, faces his risks, directs his own business, and takes his profits or accepts his losses. Tenant-farmed wheat land is not operated efficiently.

What do the tenant wheat farmer and the small independent grower do in Winter? They cannot do anything with the land because wheat is in it. Some run small dairies of 10 cows, some raise 200 chickens, 25 hogs and 50 turkeys; some loaf, some go to the city. But all depend mainly upon wheat for their support. When the yield per acre is high, and the price higher, wheat will carry them through. When the yield is low, or the price is below \$1 a bushel, they are up against it. The small independent wheat farmer who owns his own land, does his own work, pays taxes, and takes all the

profits, if any, is even worse off economically than the tenant farmer, for he has a great deal more to lose in bad years, and very little more to gain in good ones.

The net general result is somewhat as it would be in the automotive industry if that were conducted along similar lines. The price of the Ford automobile is not too cheap, neither is there a surplus of Ford cars. But suppose Ford cars were produced, a few at a time, by thousands of individual mechanics? And suppose each mechanic operated his own little plant, either independently in a building owned by himself, or on a share basis in one owned by Mr. Ford? And suppose the mechanics worked only one or two days a week in producing their automobiles? Produced under such conditions, Ford cars would probably be selling for \$10,000 each—or else they would be selling at their present price with most of the individual producers in a state of insolvency. Such is the manner in which the great bulk of wheat is produced in the United States—and such is the result.

### III

So long as wheat continues to be produced in that way, it is inescapable that the wheat disease is bound to remain with us. Wheat farmers may groan, Wheat Belt Congressmen may shout until they are black in the face, economists may twist and squirm, and Uncle Sam may remain a glorified grain speculator and continue to pour millions of dollars of the taxpayers' money down the chute—but so long as the fundamental condition exists there can be no sane hope for economic remedy or permanent relief. Romanticists who believe otherwise—and they apparently include Congress, the President, and the Federal Farm Board—

are simply shadow-boxing with distressing results and effects, without attacking the basic and chronic disease. The only remedy for the wheat affliction is to remove the economic millstone which hangs around the neck of nearly every stalk of wheat produced in this country.

What is the remedy for the wheat farmer? Does it lie, as the Farm Board appears to believe, in a decrease of wheat acreage, in crop curtailments? It must be obvious that it does not. The composite production of seventeen principal food crops in 1930 was 6% less than in 1929, and 5% less than the 1919-28 average, and yet the index of prices of farm products on November 15, 1930, was 33 points lower than on the corresponding date in 1929. If a drought which cut the *per capita* supply of farm products 13% below the ten-year average could not raise the price index, what reason is there to believe that voluntary curtailment of wheat acreage will raise the price of wheat?

Still less is crop curtailment—even if it should eventually succeed in raising the price of wheat—the remedy for the general public, for the general public does not want to see the price of wheat go up. Crop curtailment, if I may say so, is a fool's remedy, and not only that, but a very dangerous one. It is almost unbelievable, but what the Farm Board is trying to do, with its stabilizing operations, and marketing organizations, and its revolving fund of a quarter of a billion dollars, is to hold up wheat prices artificially, and support the wheat farmer, until an actual shortage of wheat, brought on either by a disaster or by voluntary crop curtailment, causes wheat prices to soar again. Carried out to its logical conclusion, that is simply saying to American wheat farmers: "Boys, don't grow but five bushels of wheat, and the price will go up to \$10,000 a bushel."

Of course, that kind of "curtailment" would eventually increase the price of wheat. But is this the economists' answer to the advances of applied science, the method they advocate for producing and handling the world's most important food crop in modern society?

The price of wheat is not apt to be high again until and unless our so-called surplus is used up, and it is difficult to see how any sane man can advocate that. For, contrary to the current propaganda, the carry-over of wheat is not an evil; it is an economic necessity. The variation in the annual world wheat production is often three times more than the average carry-over. The world does not consume a fixed amount of wheat each year; it consumes whatever it can get and pay for, and since the days of Joseph it has never had more than it wanted for a very long time. It does not have more than it wants, or needs, now. How could there be too much actual wheat in the United States with thousands of people starving for bread? One reason we have more than we are using is because bread is selling for the same price it was when wheat was \$2.50 a bushel, and because cracked wheat, put up in pretty bags, is selling in select grocery stores at \$8.40 a bushel. There is not too much wheat in the world; there is not enough. But there is manifestly too much something else in the United States. Wheat fed to hogs in this country now is worth \$1.50 a bushel.

It is true that, so far as the wheat farmer is concerned, there is an economic surplus of wheat in the United States at the present time, and it has been here off and on for forty years. There is no reason to believe that we will ever be without it again so long as the bulk of our domestic wheat continues to be produced as it is now. Because an economic-

producer, not actual-consumptive, surplus is defined as "that portion of a crop in excess of the quantity that can be sold at a fair profit to the average producer." And the average producer in the United States, which is the tenant farmer and the small independent farmer, cannot make what they consider a fair profit, *i.e.*, a living all the year 'round, when wheat is selling at less than \$1.50 a bushel.

But others can. Anybody who produced wheat efficiently last year can sell every grain of it right now and make a good profit on it, for his production cost was only about fifty cents a bushel. Mere quantity does not make a surplus in wheat, for every grain of it can be sold. Price and production costs are the determining factors. The solution to the wheat problem in this country does not lie in the government supporting thousands of "average" piece-meal wheat farmers, and begging them to decrease production until the price soars, while, on the one hand, large efficient producers across the road are making money, and, on the other, men are walking city streets starving for bread. There is no surplus of wheat so far as bread-eaters are concerned. There is somebody else to think of beside wheat farmers. The solution to the wheat problem lies in economical production. The solution lies, first, in economical production, and secondly, in regulation which will permit the ultimate consumer to get the benefit of it.

#### IV

Corporation wheat farming is a first step in that direction. Here is the way they do it. Wheat land is divided into blocks of from 5,000 to 10,000 acres. Each block is under a foreman, who has charge of the labor, and the machinery when it is on

his unit. He is responsible to the production manager. A transportation outfit shifts equipment wherever it is needed. The Wheat Farm Corporation of Kansas City, which operates 75,000 acres, uses forty caterpillar tractors, a fleet of trucks, thirty combines, and hundreds of tillage machines, with an aggregate value of \$250,000. Laborers (*i.e.*, farmers) are employed when needed, about sixty or ninety days a year. They work eight hours a day, and punch time-clocks on their tractors. At certain seasons the work is carried on twenty-four hours a day, with the laborers working in three eight-hour shifts and operating tractors equipped with searchlights at night. I quote herewith from a letter from C. E. Nodurff, vice-president of the Sledd Farm Corporation:

It is not possible or practical for a farm corporation to keep its laborers busy during the whole year. . . . During the harvesting and planting season we hire from twenty to thirty men for a period of about ninety days. That is from late in June until late in September, during which time we harvest our grain and reseed the ground.

Critics will say that we are driving families out of the country, that we are depopulating the State, and that we are working a hardship on those people we hire, as we are only allowing them to work three months in each year. But as a matter of fact, we have dispossessed only two families. One family wished to sell out and return to their old home in the eastern part of the State. The other family dispossessed was a party who could do us or himself no good, as he had leased this farm for a number of years, and was unable to interest himself sufficiently in farming to make a living for himself, much less to make a living for himself and make a profit for us, even with our supervision. We replaced these two families by leasing a part of our land to others. In fact, we dispossessed two families and replaced them with three.

Now, as to the other men we hire for ninety days, we hire men born and raised in the State of Kansas, and attending colleges in Kansas. We pay probably a little better wage than any other farmer or organization engaged in raising wheat. Also, we engage local men who wish to work by the day or week, and we must satisfy them, as we have two or three men in Western Kansas who have worked for us for three seasons, and who have asked to be allowed to work for us again this season.

Regarding the amount of profit on wheat at its present price, this is governed a great deal by the amount of bushels per acre raised. Last year on one square section, 640 acres, we raised wheat at a cost of twenty-six cents per bushel. But this wheat made a little better than thirty bushels per acre. Of course, had the wheat yielded only fifteen bushels per acre, it would have been at a cost of fifty-two cents per bushel instead of twenty-six cents per bushel. That will give you a basis on which to figure your cost.

There is the remedy for the wheat disease. But what is the remedy for the tenant wheat farmer and the small independent wheat farmer? There is no remedy. They are not getting relief now, and there is no reason to believe that they will get relief next year or the year after. Thomas R. Campbell, the largest wheat grower in America, has proved that it is economic folly either to farm large wheat acreage on a crop-share basis, or to grow wheat independently under small acreage. There is no reason to believe that American wheat farmers will embrace coöperative farming. They have not the means to do it, and they are opposed to it on principle.

More, wherever ten of them combined nine of them would have to move off the land and give up being actual all-year-round wheat farmers if any of them expected to make any money. They face the almost positive assurance of low wheat

prices for the next few years, and competition with which they cannot compete both at home and abroad. They are being extinguished; not suddenly, but slowly and surely. They are getting "relief" at last; they are being relieved of the burden of growing wheat; they are being relieved of the land. They are simply victims of progress.

What Mr. Ford predicts, and advocates, in the quotation given at the beginning of this article, is, of course, nothing more or less than an agricultural revolution, in the sense that eventually our whole agricultural system will be revolutionized. In view of the facts it is obvious that this revolution is already under way. Whether we know it or not, the creation of the Federal Farm Board was our first overt effort, and a desperate and costly effort, to avoid our agricultural revolution. Its purpose is to guarantee the American farmer, and especially the American wheat farmer, a profit on what he produces, however incompetently he produces it, to keep him solvent artificially with public money, and thus to avoid the necessity for a change in our agricultural system.

That is what it amounts to. It is trying to serve as a stop-gap, a foolish barrier, and some day that, undoubtedly, will be recognized as its primary function. It has not succeeded thus far, and there is not the slightest chance that it will succeed. It is like King Canute trying to stop the tide, not with words, but by throwing dollars into the sea. As a matter of fact, the Farm Board is accelerating the agricultural revolution, not only by demonstrating that nothing can save the small American wheat farm, but also by encouraging capital, with its accompanying efficiency and economy, to enter the wheat-producing business. Here is a point to



bear in mind: when the government subsidizes a basic industry, and puts up huge sums in cash to protect everybody in it, there is the time and place for corporations to step in. Congress never thought of that. Or perhaps it did.

What is happening to wheat is happening in a lesser degree to cotton, corn, and other major crops. Some profess to see in corporation mass-production farming the most dangerous threat to democracy ever started in American history. They see in it the eventual wiping out, not only of thousands of small farmers, but also of hundreds of little towns, whose merchants, banks and professional men depend for their support upon the small farmers who live in the surrounding terri-

tory. They see a sinister connection between this movement and the growth of the chain-store. Some see it as a blessing. But regardless of what anybody *thinks*, it is going on. Small farmers are being bought out, tenant farmers are being dispossessed, ramshackle buildings are being torn down, and piece-meal farm units are being erased. Farm corporations are legal; they are incorporated under strict laws; they have a right to go into the farming business.

It is indubitably a tremendous movement. It seems to me to be a beautiful and interesting social phenomenon. We are moving—motivated by inexorable economic forces, which may perhaps be directed, but which respond to no brakes.

# GIRLS GONE WRONG

BY ELEANOR R. WEMBRIDGE

ALL members of an unknown species look alike to an inexperienced observer. The differences between them are only appreciated after longer acquaintance. Moreover, for all human behavior there is a cause. Human beings do not float in midair. What they do today hangs on what they did yesterday and last year.

These facts should be self evident, but for some reason people hate to admit them. Inquirers are usually put out with me if I suggest that there is a specific cause why some girls go wrong and others right. "Good girls avoid trouble. There is no reason why all girls should not," they inform me testily. Let the law of cause and effect work elsewhere, they insist, but not here.

I recall some hours with an expert who was sorting shells dug up by a harbor dredge, saving some and throwing others back into the sea. In vain I tried to discern the whorls and ridges which made certain shells important and others commonplace. The expert merely smiled at my protest that they all looked alike, and continued to sort. On another occasion, when interviewing a dog fancier who was about to sell a puppy to a friend, I was so incautious as to inquire whether he was sure that his dog's disposition was good enough to trust with children. The man turned on me scornfully. "Of course he has a good disposition. All dogs do if they are well, and have been well treated." No doubt he

was right. But I wondered if he would admit the same fact about the hoodlums on his street.

As a matter of fact, girls (and their brothers) present even more important differences than shells. And they reflect their early training quite as inevitably as dogs. So conscious am I of their differences, and of the separate and distinct reasons why some of them offend the social order, and some do not, that I refuse to generalize about any types with which I am not well acquainted. I know intimately just three groups of delinquent girls and no others: the daughters of poor unskilled foreign parents, the daughters of poor unskilled colored parents, and the daughters of native whites, who may or may not be quite so poor, but whose family stock has started to slip in its standards, so that the children merely slide further down the path already taken by their parents.

Moreover, I know these girls only when their behavior has been sufficiently pronounced to invite outside interference. Presumably others much like them have managed not to run afoul the law, and have gone their way unmolested. In this case I cannot tell why they were more discreet, for we have not met. I am told of the children of the well-born and well-to-do, who drive expensive cars, make college parties riotous with their drinking, and flout the demands of righteous parents. Such young people may exist, but