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THE FARMER TODAY

— Donita Lucas Shields

Grim words paint the picture of Western Oklahoma farmers who are facing economic havoc far worse than during the tragic Depression of the '30s.

Disastrously low prices for crops, meager farm incomes, soaring interest rates, and over-extended or unavailable operating credits do not allow farmers to keep up with machinery and land mortgage payments, fuel and repair bills, and day-to-day expenses.

Since he has invested heavily, the farmer cannot walk off the job. He cannot strike. He has no unemployment compensation. He can only wait for the axe to fall. While he waits, he repeats the sage words, "Things got to get better. They can't get worse. . ."

He is the only business man in the world who sells on wholesale markets and buys on retail. He may be forced to purchase his needs on highs then sell products at lows. Oftentimes he feels he is drowning in a maelstrom of problems that he cannot escape. Yet, even with odds against him, he continues to farm.

In spite of droughts, floods, and low prices, the Western Oklahoma farmer plants and harvests. Regardless of over-production and glutted markets, he attempts to avoid bankruptcy. He is the world's greatest gambler for the smallest of stakes.

The farmer's determination remains unshaken even though cotton, wheat, and cattle markets weaken. He cuts back production only when the government forces him. He believes his government has done too much against him and not enough for him, but still he strives for economic survival.

Bleak crop reports and weather forecasts fail to disrupt his faith. He visions a brighter future. Some call him a dreamer, but he is a fighter, a tough one who fights to the finish. In times of long droughts, he scans the skies for clouds and rain. His age-old saying "It will rain some time. It always has. . .," is proof of a faith that never weakens.

The Western Oklahoma farmer accepts destructive heat, cold, blowing winds, floods, and searing droughts without fear or malice. He harvests and sells his crops, realizing they will barely pay expenses.

One year of every ten may yield a bumper crop and good profits. He is a philosopher who reveres those prosperous years and takes many failures or near-failures in stride. He is an optimist who believes that next year will be more successful with adequate rainfall and better markets.

Nothing affects him more deeply than watching soil erode or blow away. Flooding rains ravage fields, float away topsoil, and gully freshly planted crops. Lack of rainfall and blowing dust cause plants to shrivel then die because of devastating heat and high winds. Hail and intense cold destroy his efforts within a few short minutes.

The farmer finds solace in the fact that he is not alone in his plight. His neighbors suffer too, and he is closely bonded with sorrows of his fellow man. Disasters create empathy and companionship, ties that remain unbroken throughout lifetimes. Neighbor helps neighbor in periods of strife as they work together to protect their soil and families until they put in and harvest another crop.

A Western Oklahoma farming career seems an endless cycle of adverse extremes as the farmer copes with the unexpected and unforeseen. He sprays when insects invade crops, knowing well that insecticide expenses eat away meager profits.

Yet he is guardian and protector of his crops. People depend upon him, and he cannot let them hunger. His farming domain is breadbasket of the world, and he has a heart far bigger than his bank account.

A farmer's job is to see crops through, nursing balky machinery to avoid too many repair bills and protecting plants from every adversity within his control. Crops are the heartbeat of his lifestyle.

Harvest is the time of quiet satisfaction for a job completed to the best of his abilities. Market places are beyond his scope and power. He can merely hope for good prices. He must sell to pay expenses and prepare for next year's crops.

A farmer jokes about his troubles in order to cover a multitude of heartbreaks. He may say he seldom worries because his banker does enough worrying for both, but his deepest dread is not being able to pay off last year's indebtedness. He constantly fears his benefactor will turn him down for money to put in another crop.

Yet he is no quitter. Being a quitter would destroy his pride as well as his way of life. He works at off-the-farm jobs, and his wife brings in a second paycheck. He admits they hold down outside jobs to support farming. When spring arrives, he goes back fulltime to his land and crops.

Only as a last resort will any farmer give up his lands. Nothing less than forced liquidation, foreclosure, loss of borrowing power, or extreme illness halts his farming gamble. He is certain that Fate will deal him a better hand next year.

If a farmer ceases tilling the soil, he considers himself a failure or a coward. He forever carries the burden that he defaulted his responsibility to humanity.

Some inner compulsion tells him he should have continued, regardless of its futility. Next year might have been the big breakthrough when he cleared away debts with enough left over for a new pickup truck, a new tractor, or maybe to have paid off the mortgage on his land.

If he is among the lucky minority in Western Oklahoma, the farmer's undying faith in his lands may now be paying off through oil and gas leases and production. Yet he cannot truly enjoy new wealth because of many years of frugality and hardships. Those unknown, unexplored miles beneath his fields baffle him. His new source of income could be a fleeting thing, a once-in-a-lifetime crop.

He hoards his bonanza in anticipation of lean years which he is certain will return. The true farmer has no faith in oil and gas empires. He buys nothing lavish or unnecessary. Yet he never hesitates in sharing newly acquired wealth with church, hospital, and community.

Whatever his destiny, he will forever remain a tiller of soil with unfaltering trust in what he can see, feel, and nurture. His faith will forever lie in his lands, his crops, and his God.