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Agriculture: America's Greatest Success Story

Ladd Hudgins

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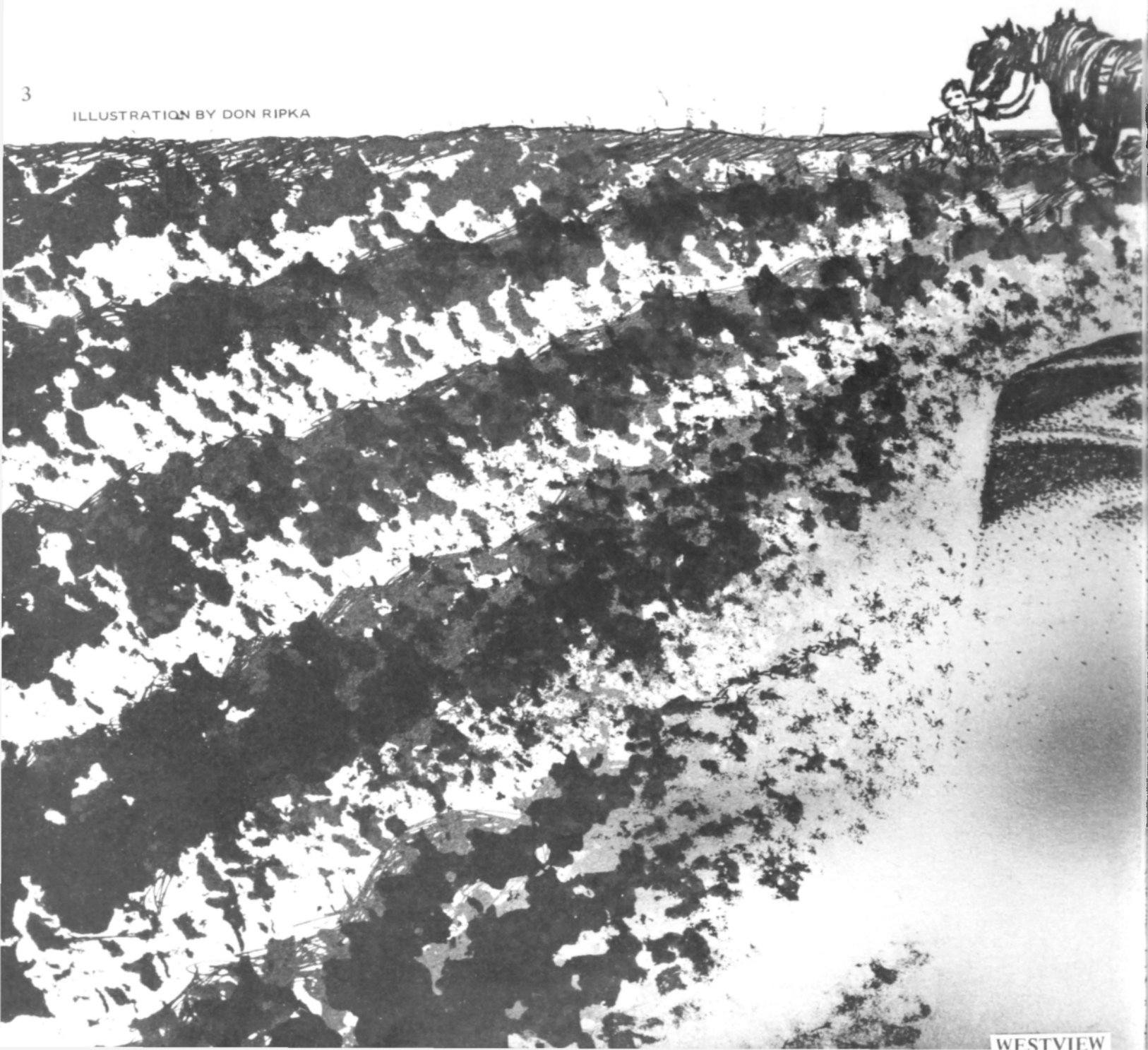
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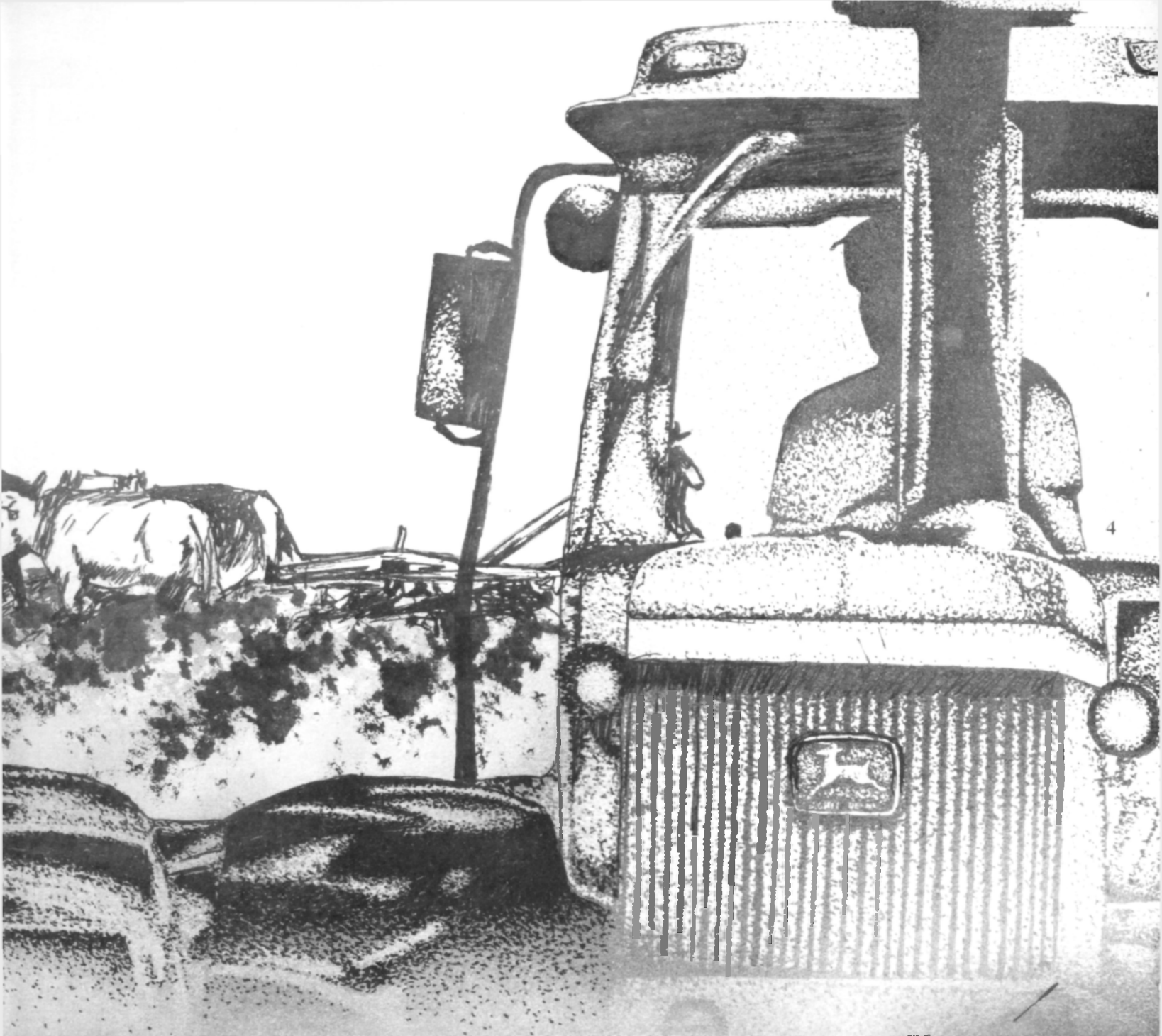
AMERICA'S GREATEST SUCCESS STORY

by County Agent Ladd Hudgins

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ILLUSTRATION BY DON RIPKA





When describing some of the changes which have taken place in American Agriculture in the last one hundred years, no title seems more appropriate than "America's Greatest Success Story."

What was America's Agriculture like in the early 1900's? First, there were many people involved — over 40% of the total U.S. population. Then it was primarily horse and mule powered. A very large farm consisted of three quarter-sections or 480 acres. Nearly

every quarter section had its own set of farm improvements and a farm family to occupy them. Farmers often had large families, all of whom had ample opportunity to share in farm work. Most farms were diversified. Many operated a small dairy enterprise and also had some chickens and hogs. Farms of this era represented hard work but also spawned close family and neighborhood ties.

There is quite a contrast with this labor-intensive type of agriculture of the early 1900's with the highly mech-

anized, scientific agriculture of today. Today less than 3% of the total U.S. population is involved in agriculture. Now a large 200-horsepower, 4-wheel-drive tractor does the work of tilling a quarter section of land in one day. A century ago several members of one family labored long hours for several weeks to work that same land. Now all that's left of many of those early homesteads is an abandoned water cistern or old concrete storm cellar somewhere in a farmer's pasture.

Probably this migration of people from the farm to the city is the most significant change in U.S. Agriculture. The rapid adoption of new technology in agriculture has allowed more people to leave the farm and provide other goods and services to further improve our standard of living.

How is this great change explained? An important part is due to the decision on behalf of the federal government to invest public funds in agricultural research and extension. This investment has paid enormous dividends. There is no equal for the increase in productivity as seen in U.S. Agriculture over the past one hundred years. For example, in the early 1900's a good wheat yield in the wheat-producing areas of Oklahoma was 20 bushels per acre. Expected yields on that same land today would be 50 bushels or better. Wheat yields in just the past 15 years have increased 25 percent. New crop varieties with vastly improved yield potential, improved fertility practices, and effective pesticides have all played a major role in bringing about greater yields.

Agriculture has a tremendous appetite for new technology. No segment of our business economy is more competitive. Capital continues to be substituted for labor. Today's full-time commercial farmer often farms well over a thousand acres. These new "super family farms" often include a father and one or more sons or sons-in-law. The farm business is often organized as a farm corporation or farm partnership. Most farmers today operate tractors equipped with the

comforts of air-conditioned cabs and radios. What a change from riding or walking behind a team of mules or horses as did the farmer's father or grandfather.

It is difficult to describe all the changes which have occurred in American Agriculture over the past hundred years; it's almost unbelievable!

Yet some things have not changed. The farmer of today still loves the land and still cherishes the rare opportunity that is his to help God create the essential products of food and fibre. Today's American Farmer remains intensely proud of his occupation. He willingly accepts the challenges presented by the always unpredictable weather, crop insects and diseases, wide variations in commodity prices, and changing government policy. Today's farmer still has the ambition and drive for self-improvement that brought his ancestors to this land. He farms a rich land as a vital part of a free economy. He knows that he is an important part of America's basic industry-agriculture.

Today, as it was a hundred years ago, agriculture is our greatest national strength. Perhaps today it is even more important. Annually the U.S. assumes an increasing role in feeding and clothing the world. During the past decade, agricultural exports grew by over 10% per year. We are now truly a global food merchant. The U.S. now accounts for half the world's wheat exports and over 70% of its corn and soybean exports.

In summary, we may have lost some ground in producing TVs, cameras, and small cars; but we are still undisputed champions in agricultural productivity. U.S. Agriculture is now the envy of the world.

American Agriculture has seen phenomenal changes in the past hundred years. It was one giant step to get to the moon but no less an accomplishment for our American Agriculture to achieve its current level of productivity. What better endorsement for democracy than American Agriculture — "America's Greatest Success Story." ■