

The Farmer and American Folklore

James P. Leary

Alert visitors to rural America will note a proliferation of bumper stickers proclaiming, "If you criticize the farmer, don't talk with your mouth full," and "Farming is everybody's bread and butter." In an era when many farmers feel that market forces and government policies threaten the family farm, in a time when too many people think milk, bread, and meat come from the store, these combative and pithy slogans stress the fundamental importance of farming and food. Through them, farmers remind their non-agrarian neighbors, "you need me"; they inform their occupational fellows, "I'm one of you"; and they tell themselves, "I'm proud to be a farmer."

Such conscious and complex cultural expressions beg consideration of the farmer's symbolic place in rural life and in American society as a whole. Unfortunately, Ray Allen Billington's characterization of the farmer as "the forgotten man" of American folklore remains accurate (Fite 1966). While investigations of the rural scene have been a mainstay of American folklore scholars, studies generally have been done according to cultural regions, ethnic groups, or folklore genres. We know about Appalachians, or Ozarkers, or Illinois "Egyptians"; about the Pennsylvania Dutch, or the Cajun French; about barns, or agricultural beliefs, or rural tall tales, or common folks' food. But our understanding of the expressive dimensions of farming as a changing occupation has lagged.

American farmers have stayed at home when frontier adventure and city lights beckoned, and home has always been a place where hard, repetitive, dirty work is done. Farmers have been maligned accordingly as unsophisticated rustics: rubes, hicks, yokels, and bumpkins. They have been lumped with regional fare and its procurement and have been associated unfavorably with outdoor work and topography through slurs like prune-pickers and rednecks.

No wonder John Lomax informed the American Folklore Society in 1913 that the nation's folksongs concerned miners, lumbermen, sailors, soldiers, railroaders, cowboys, and members of "the down and out classes — the outcast girl, the dope fiend, the convict, the jailbird, and the tramp." No wonder Richard Dorson's *America in Legend* declared sixty years later that the nation's heroes were preachers, frontiersmen, boatmen, mill hands, bowery toughs, peddlers, cowboys, loggers, miners, oil drillers, railroaders, acid heads, and draft dodgers. The steady, family-oriented farmer, the backbone of the community, seems to have sparked few songs or stories. The farmer apparently embodied the dull background against which others loomed large.

Despite name-calling and neglect, farmers have always made profound symbolic statements about their life and work — often in deceptively simple ways. One late May afternoon in 1978, I was driving through Portage County in central Wisconsin. The corn was just poking through the soil as I encountered a farmer with a hand planter working in the corner of a field. His mechanical planter's turning radius had prevented him from filling out the corn row — and he wanted symmetry.

Farmers take pride in the true furrow, the straight row, the verdant crop-signs of their skill, their industry, their dedication to the land. In contrast to other heroes in American folklore, their triumph has been one of community and harmony, not individualism and conquest. My old Barron County, Wisconsin, neighbor, George Russell, once told me about

. . . a city girl named Foy. She was a lawyer's daughter and [my sister] Ann worked for them. Ann took the girl home to the farm country one time, and we were out riding in the buggy. It was the late summertime and we were going



A cow sign by farmer/artist Ewald Klein adorns an outbuilding on the Kallenbach place in Barron County, Wisconsin.

Photo by James P. Lear

through the fields. And Ann said, "Nice country, isn't it?" She said, "Yes, but you can't see over the corn."

Ms. Foy missed the point. The corn *was* the country.

The Russells not only took pride in their crops, but they considered their ample farm a "showplace." The driveway and house were bordered with a stately pine windbreak. Flowers brightened the yard. The barns and outbuildings were painted vivid yellow and adorned with murals of livestock. Woodlot, pastures and fields were well-maintained and bountiful. The entire farmstead exemplified a balance between nature and culture. It presented the very image that aerial photographers capture nowadays and farmers frame on their fireplace mantles: a God's-eye view of the farm at harvest time.

This blissful image of the farm — drawn from life and emblematic of a way of life — has been replicated countless times, either entirely or in part, by countless farmers using assorted media. Some give their farms lyrical names and install portraits of fattened Herefords and full-uddered Holsteins on signs along the road. Some tell stories, write reminiscences or compose poems celebrating life. Others paint pictures of shared harvest chores, build models of equipment, sculpt domestic animals and fellow farmers, or stitch "story quilts."

Seasons turn and times change. The harvest — when it comes, if it comes — is too short.

Drought, deluge, disease, insects, frost, fires threaten. Accidents occur. Always there are bills to pay, and income is never certain. More give up farming every year.

I was visiting Max Trzebiatowski that cornfield afternoon in Portage County. Born on a farm in 1902, he had farmed all his life, raised 11 children with his wife, Rose, and done well. He had also had brushes with death from a

fall in a silo, a runaway team, a falling timber, an angry bull. But his most miserable experience was a brief stretch in the Great Depression when he sought cash to pay the mortgage by working in a Milwaukee brewery.

He told me a story about a young man who was forced to leave the farm.

One time there was a family. They had a lot of boys. They didn't need them all. So in the spring of the year dad says, "Boys, some of youse'll have to go out and find yourselves a job. There isn't enough work for all of us." So one morning one of the boys took off. And he went looking for a job. And he went to the neighbor, if the neighbor needed a man for the summer? "No, no, we don't need a man for the summer." He'd go to the next place. It was the same way. "We don't need." He tried maybe a dozen places. And — no work. Then he — by that time he was just about in the village.

[Like the heroes of "old country" magic tales, the youngest son sets out to seek his fortune. But there is no beggar or helpful animal to give him aid, and there are no workers needed on the farms. Max took his tale to town.]

So he went into the drug store to see if the druggist would hire him. Druggist was hard up for help; he needed a helper. But what did a farm boy know about a drug

store? Nothing. He didn't know what this is called, what this sells for. He didn't know nothing. But the druggist thought: I'll keep him here for a little while and see what he would make.

He had him there for two weeks and the boy was getting pretty good. He knew what this was being called, and what that sells for. And he thought he'd hire him. He asked the boy, "How much would you have to have if I hired you?"

Well, the boy hesitated. He thought if he was going to say too much, he wouldn't be hired. If he's going to say too little, he'll lose out. Oh he didn't say anything.

And the druggist says: "Well, how about a dollar an hour?"

And the boy hesitated for a while, and he says, "No, give me fifty cents."

Then that stunned the druggist. "Why, I wanted to give you a dollar, you just want fifty cents," he says, "Why?"

"Well," the boy says, "just in case you wouldn't pay me, I wouldn't lose so much."

The farmboy's response, foolish by urban standards, nonetheless reflects such rural virtues as economic conservatism and mistrust of commercial middlemen. While in-town wages may be fixed by contract, farmers' pay depends upon the nature of the harvest and a fluctuating market. He who borrows against expected revenue, who counts proverbial chickens before they hatch, may easily "lose out."

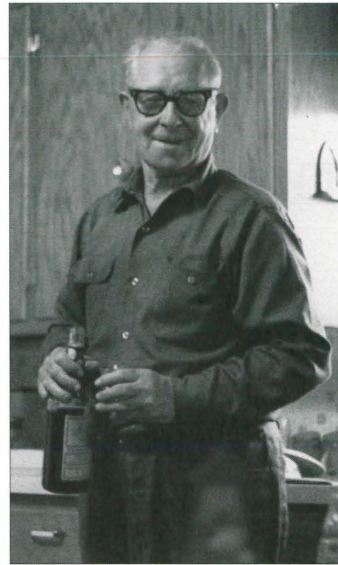
Family farmers as a whole have been losing out and leaving steadily throughout this century, a process revealed in recent jokes like the following:

What can a bird do that a farmer can't? —
Make a deposit on a tractor.

and

Did you hear about the farmer who was arrested for child abuse? —
He willed the farm to his son.

Coping with an altered rural community and an unstable economy also affects the expressive culture of those who continue. Modern farmers monitor the chemical composition of their soil, breed and feed their livestock in a way that maximizes production, and follow market trends on home computers. More than a few prefer terms like "milk producer" or "livestock manager" to "farmer." Some even speak of farms as "food



Max Trzebiatowski breaks out a social bottle of brandy while his wife, Rose, readies a lunch. Portage County, Wisconsin. Photo by James P. Leary

factories." But as yet this is not the prevailing rhetoric of family farmers. To be sure, they are astute businessmen and women; yet they are part of a long tradition that is more a way of life than a way to make a living, and that has more to do with beasts and land than with products and cash. How future farmers will deal with the tug between agribusiness and agriculture may depend upon their image of just what a farm is. We'd better watch those bumper stickers.

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Citations and Further Readings

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