

Where Are Our Future Ranchers?

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A serious epidemic has engulfed the western United States and threatens to cause widespread damage to our overall livestock picture if remedial steps are not soon employed. The problem was dramatically brought to my attention the other day when a long-time customer of the bank, who normally exhibits little emotion even during the toughest sledding, appeared visibly shaken. When the business at hand had been fully discussed he volunteered to relate his problem. Apparently his only son, who was born and raised on his father's sizable cattle ranch, had decided to seek employment in town. The boy had just been discharged from the service and appeared ready to become a serious understudy and eventual heir to his father. Evidently, no advance notice of the boy's decision had been forthcoming. Therefore it was only natural that our sympathy was directed toward the father. If the boy left him at this time there would be little hope of finding an adequate successor to replace the father when he retired, and, in turn, an operation and physical plant worth many thousands of dollars would presumably be split up and sold to outsiders of unknown ranching and managerial abilities.

Just as it is a banker's responsibility to foster range production and development through proper lines of credit, it should also be his job to prevent potential ranch managers from deserting such a specialized field where their services are at a premium. What perplexed the father in the above-mentioned example has been taking place ever since 1910 and only now are the consequences being properly scrutinized.

Some interesting observations on farm employment and production on a per-man-hour basis are given

in the April 1955 issue of *Monthly Review*, published by the Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City. In 1910 farm population was approximately 35 percent of the total U. S. population, while by 1950 it accounted for only about 17 percent of the total population. There are three reasons that explain the tremendous decrease in farm population.

1. High wages and standards of living in the city.

2. Decreased demand for farm labor resulting from increased labor productivity.

3. More rapid increase in non-farm labor demand than could be satisfied by the natural increase in the urban labor force.

Despite the nationwide decrease in farm labor requirements, farm output has increased substantially since 1910. The rate of increase in crop productivity has been greater than for livestock production primarily because of the difficulty of adapting mechanization to livestock production.

A look into the future produces a pessimistic note. There is little evidence to substantiate the fact that this trend will subside to any great degree if a dormant attitude continues to plague us. The problem does not concern those who have already left the farms and ranches but only pertains to those who will give such a move serious consideration sometime in the future. Granted that with our depressed cattle market over the past few years coupled with uncertain governmental policies, drouth, and rising land values, the situation appears anything but rosy at present. These factors tend to limit the entry of newcomers to the livestock industry unless they are persons of financially independent means. That is why we can-

not afford to lose those youngsters already situated on our ranches.

A makeshift solution would attempt to alleviate the problem by inducing the next generation to remain on ranches by means of modern, attractive and romantic surroundings. However, upon closer observation, it will be noted that the majority of ranch homes have running water, indoor toilets, gas and electrical appliances. When it comes to the attractive feature, it's quite a chore to expound upon it when some localities have breathed, swallowed and bathed in dirt and dust for the past four or five years. As for the romantic aspect of ranching, it is almost a thing of the past. Trucks and jeeps are essential equipment and the boy who thinks he can sit in a saddle all day without digging a posthole is the type of person who is better off in town to begin with. In short, a practical, realistic attitude should be developed at an early age among those who plan to make ranching a career. It is essential to separate the men from the boys.

There is no single solution to the problem of rural-urban migration. Educational policies and organizations play a profound role in molding future leaders for the livestock industry. Such projects as provided by 4-H and F.F.A. groups are certainly a step in the right direction. Available access to a county agent is essential. Our agricultural colleges are becoming a more popular faucet of range management education. The need for college graduates to fill responsible positions of leadership in agriculture cannot be overemphasized. Perhaps if these institutions of higher learning could indoctrinate a program that combined more of the actual experience with the technical side of learning, a greater insight of the problems that lay ahead might be digested by the student.

Those of us involved in livestock financing have a widespread influence upon anyone engaged in the production of meat. I think it is

time we assumed more of a responsibility in generating enthusiasm among our customers and their children. We must emphasize the fact that credit and sound management go hand in hand, and that the term mortgage is not a word to be feared, but simply one that often accompanies adequate loan arrangements. It is a sound idea to allow the younger members of a borrowing family to familiarize themselves with the basic require-

ments that formulate a successful loan. Such terms as principal, interest, etc. should become part of their working vocabulary. If possible, marginal operators should be discouraged from borrowing, especially in lean years. A number of these operators have not shown a profit for the past few years and this is certainly a detrimental influence on those who are considering ranching or farming as a career. After all, farm income

determines the farmers' ability to pay wages, and numerous talk about various men going bankrupt is not conducive to an optimistic future.

Actually, our primary responsibility, whether we are engaged in producing, feeding, financing, or teaching, is to see that stable and proper management is not only practiced but perpetuated. Now is the time to initiate such a program.