

Part-Time Farming

A short essay.

I wrote a piece on part-time farming for the Minnesota Bison Association journal.

It is tacked below.

As always, please keep in mind that it was written by an old farmer for a bunch of other farmers.

Here it is.

Part-Time Farming. There is a new documentary movie about American agriculture coming out. The title is "American Meat". The movie was produced by a New York group and it is surprisingly well done. It is sympathetic to farmers but opposed to animal confinement. I am not necessarily promoting the movie although I found it interesting. If you wish, you can learn more about the movie or see a preview by doing a simple Internet search for "American Meat".

So far this has little to do with my topic of "Part-Time Farming", but stick with me.

I was asked to be on a "farmer panel" that followed a July showing of the movie. Later, I was misquoted in a written report about the panel discussion. This is not the first time I have been misquoted. A wise man once told me, "Anytime you are quoted in a newspaper and the reporter does not make you out to be an idiot or a thief, be happy."

In this case the misrepresentation was relatively benign. The reporter ascribed to me a negative comment about part-time farming. That comment was not made by me but by another speaker. The gist of the comment was that the farming economy was so tough most farmers were only part-time. That caused me to think more deeply about the subject. Is the goal of part-time farming, full-time farming? Or is part-time farming a good end in itself?

I was raised on a dairy farm in Otsego. I have owned this farm for over forty years. I have always had an off-farm job, yet I have always considered myself a farmer.

Depending on how you define part-time farming, somewhere between 65% and 90% of US farmers are part-time, or more specifically, earn off farm income. The 65% applies if the principal farmer has a full-time off farm job. The 95% is a better estimate if you consider the farm couple as an economic unit. In that case seasonal or full-time work by a spouse also applies. How many farm families do you know with no income from off farm work? Very few.

Is that a bad thing? Maybe not. Off farm income can give us financial stability that farming seldom can. Without the extra income few could survive the changes that have occurred in farming over the past decades. Few could survive severe market cycles or weather cycles. We need a buffer and a refuge to regroup and restart.

Most of us with off farm income get many other benefits from our day (or night or seasonal) jobs. We develop skills and abilities that expand us personally. We get to meet and interact with a variety of people. Many of us travel for work and thereby see more of the world. And sometimes, it is just plain nice to do a job that is less stressful or less physically demanding than farming

But why do we farm in the first place? I have never met anyone who farmed because it was a good way to get rich. It is not. There is too much work and uncertainty in farming.

I think we farm because we choose farming as a way of life. Sociologists call that a life style choice. If that is so then when do we achieve our goal? If your kids believe they are being raised on a farm, if your grandkids think that visiting you is a trip to the farm, then you have made it.

I am to the point now in my life where I am only working off the farm one day a week. The rest of my work time is spent farming, which I love. I wish that I had thought this through years ago. I always had it in the back of my mind that I would not really succeed in my farming goal until I was a full-time farmer. That was a mistake. I should have come to peace with this long ago. It does not take a thousand acres or a thousand bison to make a farm. Part-time farming is good if it gives us and our families a farm life.

Best Regards, Tom Barthel

Secretary and Director at Large

See you soon.

Tom