

April 2019

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Recommended Citation

"A Modern Farm Fable" (2019). *James Hearst Documents*. 36.
https://scholarworks.uni.edu/hearst_documents/36

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A MODERN FARM FABLE

I want to tell a story with a moral to it, a sort of modern fable, about a man we all know, or ought to know. He's farmer, a real dirt farmer, the one that you know best, or the one you know the most about. His name is Legion - you've all heard the expression, "Their names are legion." It is true of the farmers that their names are legion, so I'm going to name this man Legion. And since we all know him well enough to call him by his first name, I'll give him a first name, I'll call him Ferd.

Now Ferd, like all the rest of us, has a lot of problems. He has the problem of getting up in the morning, the problem of the weather, the problem of his wife's family, and finally the farm problem. Now you'd think that Ferd, being a farmer, would have the farm problem right in his lap. Well, he did.

But he found out that the farm problem that he knew about and the farm problem the men in town talked about weren't the same thing at all. After all, Ferd wasn't so very articulate, he wasn't as he said himself, so good on the gab, so he wondered a lot about why what the other fellows said were ^{not} the same ^{the} as things he knew. Because we'll have to admit this right away about Ferd, maybe he isn't a good talker, maybe he can't put ideas into words very well, still he knows a lot more than most people suspect.

His long dealings with nature have developed a kind of sixth sense and what he misses by not knowing the science of logic, he sometimes hits on by the feel of his bones. So when somebody tries to put something over on Ferd and his intuitive sense which is something like the Quaker's inner light, says it is wrong, why, you are just pouring words down the sink if you think you can change him.

Lots of times he may look dumb, but just the same he knows what he knows. And when he does decide to change his mind, all the king's horses can't stop him. He just rolls over the opposition like a gigantic and growing snowball.

Well, as I said, Ferd thought a lot about the difference existing between him and his townsmen in their definition of the farm problem. He finally decided that the difference was in their approach. The men in town considered it as a political problem and therefore it was an academic question for them. That is, if one of them was a Republican he said that the Democrats had caused the farm problem, and if he was a Democrat he said the Republicans ruined the farmers. It was like the question of a debate. You state the thing and then argue about it. But Ferd lived with the farm problem and he knew it was economic, and politics may come and go but economics go on forever.

It used to amuse Ferd, and annoy him too, when he'd be in town and out of a clear sky the storekeeper or the garage man or the banker would say to him, "What have you farmers got to holler about, you're getting paid by the government for not working?"

But he never said much in reply because usually he was in a hurry and then you never know but what the banker or garage man or the storekeeper might be a friend in disguise. He just figured that maybe they had all they could do to keep informed about their own business and didn't have time to try to understand his.

But when he thought it over, he wondered if they didn't have some responsibility for their criticism of what he and his fellow farmers were doing. That is, if a person spits into the wind and the wind blows it back in his face, that person accounts for his action right there. He felt that you shouldn't throw things around loose, anything, snowballs, or tacks, or mis-statements. When you say anything about the other fellow's job, you ought to know some of the facts about it or you are apt to be unfair and talk nonsense.

He had a neighbor who was quite a fire eater, one of these men who act twice while they think once. He said to Ferd one day, "I've a notion not ever to go to town anymore, just sit out here and wear gunny sacks. (They lived near a town

we can call Hypoth^esis.) You know, Ferd, he said, "we could get along without Hypoth^esis all right but Hypoth^esis couldn't get along without us."

That sounded all right if you were mad but Ferd didn't think it answered anything. A hundred years ago, sure, but now now. The hive in which we live has become more complex and interdependent than that. A case can be made for isolation but it falls to pieces ultimately. It's the same with a man as it is with a county or a state or a nation.

Communication and transportation being what they are, you are brought into dealings with your neighbor whether you want to be or not. He needed the town as much as the town needed him. The thing is, according to Ferd, for everybody to recognize this and have some respect for the other fellow's job.

He was really a simple person and he used to wonder about a lot of things that probably weren't very important. He'd figured out in his slow way some of the relations of a farmer to his community and he'd decided that a town or a city can't live by itself. Some new wealth has to be brought in continually from the outside.

And that's where the farmer comes in, he's the fellow that brings in material for food and clothing that he has manufactured out of nature's resources. When you get right down to it, Ferd thought, there's no new wealth in the world except what comes from in the earth or off the top of it. That's the source of everything material in this complex life of ours. Take away the earth and what have you got to stand on. Of course he'd heard of Henry Ford's mechanical cow, but he knew that wouldn't fool anybody but the editors of the Saturday Evening Post.

It is this dependence of the people of the world on the land that makes the problem of land management the No. 1 problem for everybody. And if it isn't solved, none of the rest of the problems are going to be solved. The farmer, the miner, the lumberjack, these are the fellows who lay the foundation of the world's economy because they start the goods we use from their source into the channels of processing and manufacturing.

Then according to Ferd, the banker, the industrialist, the business man builds his house on these foundations. And the government holds its wing over them and says, Boys, stay under here in the shade out of the hot sun of world competition.

Ferd argues that a little shade is good for the farmers too. And what irritates him most is that the banker, the industrialist, the business man won't make room for him. These co-workers of his don't seem to have the slightest notion of where he fits into the national economy.

When things get tough and Ferd quits spending money, why they try to ginger him up a little. But he never quits spending money until he doesn't have any. ~~(A little intelligent investigation would show certain relationships that have to be maintained to keep the floor level of the house we all live in.)~~

Of course every four years the politicians give him a dizzy trip down the midway of their carnival. They always start him out as a special guest of the management with a welcoming committee constantly at his elbow. But he usually ends up with his head thru a hole in the sheet and the boys throwing baseballs at him.

It's always a headache no matter how quick he is on his feet. And though Ferd is a loyal fellow and doesn't say this, sometimes he feels that somebody should explain to his community the difference between back-slapping and cooperation.

Then they might understand what he means by a farm problem. The farm problem that Ferd knows about starts from a single fact. It starts from the fact that he is the first man in the line down which go the products of the business and industrial world, the food and clothing products especially. The miner and the lumber man and the fisherman come in here, too, in Ferd's place, though not in quite the same way.

Well, Ferd can look down the line of hands thru which the material passes and see it turn out a finished product ready for use. It's a wonderful sight.

But a fine view won't keep him clothed and fed and in a contented frame of mind. He's the first man on this endless belt of the economic factory and he sells his goods and services for less than the price of the things he buys. He can't pass his product on at a little higher price than the price he paid, and thus make a profit, he can't because he is the place where they start. This is where the farm problem really begins.

For example, Ferd takes his hogs to the nearest packing plant and he is offered a price usually based on the Chicago price which in turn is determined by the number of hogs available, the index of industrial activity, the price of competitive meats and meat substitutes and so on. Well, he can either take that price or he can take his hogs home.

But the packer reverses the process right away. That is, he has what he calls a cost price, or the price he paid for the hogs, and then he has a selling price which included the cost of processing plus a profit for himself and he charges the jobber that price.

The jobber adds on the cost of his services plus a profit, and sends it to the wholesaler who does the same thing and the retailer likewise. This is what they do if they want to stay in business.

The same thing happens all thru the business world. A banker, for example, borrows money from his depositors at a certain rate and tries to loan it out at a higher rate. Even the professional man may acquire his skill and knowledge at wholesale rates at a state supported university and dispense it in private practice at rates fixed by the association of which he is a member.

Well, Ferd has no quarrel with that. He knows that that is the way business is carried on. But what he wonders is, how can he deal with these men when he lives with Alice in Wonderland, a world where the things he buys cost more than the things he sells.

How does he keep going? Nobody could stay in a business long where he took in less than he paid out. And yet Ferd does keep going in spite of it. Well, for one thing the farmers have been getting a reducing share of the national income and that helps balance the deficit.

For another, they practise economics that are possible only to a producer of raw materials--that is, they raise and process some of their own food, use the labor of the family, construct part of their own equipment, repair their own machinery,

They barter among themselves, they manage capital sometimes without actually having any capital, they live partly by themselves and partly by the system. But

in that respect they are anachronisms and as such their day is rapidly passing. Nature will not tolerate the existence of organisms which do not fit into their environment. And these practises of Ferd and his fellow farmers which do keep them going, short change the system and will ultimately either have to be thrown out or else force a change in the system.

Ferd sees that all too plainly and he isn't very happy about it. Perhaps because he knows that the corrective measures are apt to be pretty severe. He remembers that his grandfather was also a farmer back in the good old days where everyone wants to go when he no longer has guts enough to face the present.

His grandfather didn't have to make money farming, he didn't have to make his books balance. The almost uninterrupted increase in the price of land more than counter-balanced any losses he may have had in the business. Probably he never even knew if he was making money or not.

But when Ferd came along that frontier of expansiveness was closed. The whole national economy had slowed down. And the farmer had to depend on the success of his own operations to stay in business. Furthermore, due to some law or principle inherent in our system of work and business, when one group loses its place and its income level sinks, everybody feels the dislocation.

If the farm income shrinks, or labor payrolls decline, it doesn't take very long for the blight to touch even the top man and of course everyone ^f below him first. When it hits him, he yells and jumps out of hotel windows and resorts to all sorts of absurd and desperate measures without once investigating his itch nor perceiving that other people have had it longer and in a more acute form than he has.

That spectacle Ferd finds grimly humorous. He is also amused by the fact that men who respect government and laws when the government and laws are on their side, don't like the situation when the same privileges that they have been enjoying are passed around. Ferd thinks that is funny, too.

But no doubt there are many things he doesn't understand for after all Ferd is only a simple farmer who enjoys more than anything else the process of putting some seeds and some weather and some ground together and making a crop.

But to herd, the capitalistic system is a dynamic system that has to grow and develop as long as we use it. If you try to fix it at some point, to freeze it so that only special groups are benefitted, you kill it. It has to spread out like a tree over everyone alike; over Democrats, Republicans and New Dealers, over laborers and farmers and business men, or it becomes just so much dead wood.

Ferd knows from experience that a calf can't say to itself, Now I will always stay a calf and this cow whom we will call the system will always be my mother and I will live forever milking the system. No, the calf grows up, the cow goes dry, she gets old and dies, and another calf grows up and takes ^{her} place-- it's the life process. Ferd thinks it's the same way with economic systems. The government can't always favor one particular calf.

He has read Thoreau's essay on Civil Disobediance and he can conceive of situations where a man might consider his independence superior to a bad government. He is a pretty independent fellow himself, bull headed in some ways and opinionated. But you'd have to be asserting yourself for some worthy moral principle such as the rights of man and not pleading for special benefits.

And Ferd knows the difference between them, lots of people think he doesn't but he really does. He thinks too, that the moral effect on a liberty loving people like his fellow citizens in the United States would be pretty bad if the system should suddenly be enclosed leaving large groups of willing people outside it, with no chance of getting in.

Ferd likes to call our economic system the house that Jack built. Everybody knows that that isn't very original but then Ferd doesn't pretend to be anyone unusual and certainly not a heavy thinker.

But one thing has led to another until he has come to consider our economic system as a whole, not just the farmer's part of it but the whole thing. He calls it the house that Jack built because he finds that since our free land is gone and since the change of our position from a debtor to a creditor nation, we have become a very intricate social mechanism in which each part is dependent on all the other parts. That is, each one of us is Jack, and each one of us builds the house.

He will make it more concrete if you can catch him some day when he has time to talk. I remember that one of his examples goes something like this--he was commenting that day on an item in the newspaper where somebody had said that the farmers have too many automobiles and they ought to stay at home more. The whole point is, he said, that we aren't headed in that direction.

Everything that we learned in school, all our from rags-to-riches stories, our whole mythology of success has been away from the theory of individual self-sufficiency. If I don't buy an automobile, my auto dealer goes out of business and the town is that much poorer, the fellow in Detroit who made my car has no work and consequently he doesn't buy my pork and beef.

If he can't buy food, the prices of my stuff go down and I can't buy a tractor, the factory worker then can no longer buy my butter and eggs and my income shrinks further, he finally goes on relief and the relief comes out of my taxes which I am unable to pay. Then I either go thru eviction and bankruptcy or I join a farmers' holiday movement and further upset the system by striking out in my anger at anybody or anything. Keep on with this example and you come to the collapse finally of business and then of government.

Ferd's wrestling coach used to tell him that there was a break for every hold and he has been trying to find the break for this toehold the economic system has had on him. He says that you can start the whole system by increasing the farm income. That seems to be the beginning of the chain. Probably because as I mentioned before, Ferd sees the farmer as the odd man, the fellow who buys high and sells low.

But it is true that an increase in the farm income is reflected in larger payrolls, quicker turnover, less unemployment--in fact better times all along the line. Ferd says with a grin that a farmer never has a dollar more than two minutes anyway, he puts it back into circulation so fast it's a wonder it doesn't burn the next fellow's hand. The farmer would buy out the town if he had the money, there are so many things he needs.

Ferd's thinking goes something like this, ever since the days of Alexander Hamilton this country has been committed to keeping the price level up higher than that of the rest of the world. It was the marriage of our country to industrial development and for better or for worse, in illness or in health, for rich or for poor, we have kept that union unbroken. If we call the economic system the house that Jack built as Ferd does, he will go on with the analogy and say that we all live on the same floor of that house, each group in its own room with the door more or less open to permit the members to shift some from one group to another.

All right, then we jacked up the floor of this house on stilts above the level of the world. We have a lot of fancy names ^{for} this process but Ferd knows that we did it to develop the country and to make money. Because something went haywire with the jacking up process, the floor didn't go up level. Part of it went up a whole lot faster than the rest of it.

For over a hundred years the room the farmers lived in sagged pretty badly and never got back to the level of the rest of the house. The farmers got so used to it that they thought maybe that was the normal tilt for a floor to have, that when you built a house you could not do it any better than that.

Then along came the end of World War the first and kicked the props out from under the farmers' room in the house. Boy, says, Ferd, if they were sagging before they were sure dragging now. And the worst of it was that the rest of the country under the leadership of--well, I won't repeat what Ferd has to say about the country's leaders in those days. But for years the farmers bumped along in the basement while the other part of the floor was being jacked up higher and higher.

Finally, Ferd, says, he and his fellow farmers caught on to what had been going on all these years. The rest of the country had been jacked up so high that it had turned over and fallen smash. And Ferd says that the elevating machinery was left in plain sight and the farmers saw it. At first they were dumb with surprise to find what they had always supposed to be a natural economic law was nothing but a bunch of artificial regulations made for the purpose of price boosting. Then they

were mad, and after ~~time~~ they cooled off got some elevating machinery for themselves. They had finally caught on.

Earlier in this story something was said of the irresistible movement of farmers once they change their minds. You all remember that quotation from Emerson:

"Here the embattled farmers stood

And fired the shot heard round the world."

Well, Ferd ~~thinks~~ that quotation is very pat, he likes to say it. Because when the farmers did get some jacks and start to lift up their corner of the economic floor, nothing could stop them.

They got the razzberry all right, people ~~said~~ they were ruining the country and robbing the treasury and all sorts of disagreeable things, when they were only doing what the rest of the country had been doing for years.

But just the same, when the floor began to level up everybody was surprised how much more comfortable it was--the implement dealers began to sell machinery, bankers began to sleep at night, the retail trade gained volume, and feed salesmen like locusts began to sweep over the farms. And the farmers are going to keep on until they get the floor level; they still have a shot or two that they haven't fired yet.

The one thing that burned Ferd up was the sentimental nonsense that was talked about killing the little pigs and restricting production to demand. Why, he said, the industrialists have been doing that ever since they built and then shut down the first factory. And if the farmers hadn't been so dumb they would have caught on to that trick a hundred years ago. Everybody ought to know that when food prices are lowest in this country, the bread lines are longest.

Then there is the conservation side of the story too. Ever since the first recorded date in history, 42 hundred and something B. C. back there in Egypt, we know that people have gotten hungry and farmers have raised food. I wouldn't be surprised, Ferd said, if it keeps on quite a while in that way. And if you treat the land right you can keep taking crops off it, it won't stop producing like an oil well or a coal mine.

All the farmers are trying to do, Ferd said, is to get under the government wing along with the other industries, to bring agriculture within the protective system, and the boys under there don't want to make room for them. But parity prices for agriculture means keeping the economic floor level, so when we go up and down we go up and down together.

Is this the only way, I asked him.

Ferd grinned, No, there's another road but it's kind of scary.

Well, I told him, I'm a farmer, let's have it.

Ferd said, All right, kick the stilts out from under the floor and let it settle back on the foundation. I mean absolute free trade and absolute free competition. Let the folks that talk about free competition have a taste of it. Abolish all tariffs, all patent right, all corporation charters, take away the government support from public utility and railroad rates, nullify the bargaining power of labor unions, destroy all trade and price agreements--that's the other road and lots of farmers would just as soon travel it too.

I'll tell you, he said, when tractor factories agree to run at full production all the time and put their tractors on the market for what they will bring, let demand make the price no matter how low the price falls, why I'll go back to unlimited production and ten cent corn myself.

I told Ferd that there should be a moral for this story about him.

Well, the moral is, he said, that it's easier to stand up on a level floor than on a slanting one, and if you are going to talk about general welfare in a democracy, it's got to be for all the people--not just part of them--a government of, by, and for all the people.

J. S. H.