



FARMING and your FREEDOM

By RALPH WATKINS

Four decades later, can ag back up?

by Ralph Watkins

Reflecting on what has been lost from 40 years of rural downsizing makes me wish agriculture could turn around and drive out of what appears to be a long journey down a dead-end road.

The greatest loss is the exo-

dus of people from farms and small towns. In 1950, some observers of U.S. agriculture believe that a national decision was made to force farm prices downward in order to reduce the number of people in farming. At that point there were 5.65 million U.S. farms.

In the 1950s decade, nearly

30% (1,685,000) vanished. In the 1960s, another million disappeared; in the '70s, 521,000 left; in the '80s, another 290,000 of a smaller total number of farms went out of business.

We now have just 2.1 million farms, including many that exist only because their operators also work at off-farm jobs. It is fore-

cast that by the year 2000, if we continue down the present dead-end policy road, there will be only 1.7 million farms.

I asked farmers and others old enough to recall the 1950s and '60s what the major losses to farming and small towns have been. Here are some answers:

Northwood farmer Fred Davidson, 65: "We've lost our innocence. We used to ride an open tractor seat, listen to the meadowlarks, and enjoy being out there in the field on a beautiful spring day.

"Now we're sealed up in a cab, operate big complex machinery, fight off the government and the environmentalists, and deal with the ASCs or SCS in town. Most of the fun of farming is gone."

Jean McMullen, office assistant at the Crawford County Extension office in Denison, grew up on a farm in the 1950s and '60s: "Some of the socializing was fun; now farming is too serious and kids get bored. We had 160 acres, hogs, stock cows, and chickens.

"Dad traded work with 12 to 15 other farms, and Mom was famous for her round loaf of homemade bread. When times were tough we ate a lot of eggs."

North-central farmer Harlan Harper, Radcliffe, said, "Now we have big machinery and everybody does their own work. The troubles of a neighbor can come and go and we may not even know it, let alone help.

"Now, here, contract finish-

ing of hogs dominates, so many producers are dependent, not independent. Also our small towns have less than half the business places they used to."

Gary Dressler of Anita started farming in the late '50s but will soon move to town and leave his son Monte to operate the farm, said Gary, "We've almost lost the family farm. Back then there weren't many big farms. It takes many small farms to keep schools open and towns alive."

West Union farm woman Florence Johnson, farming with husband Ernest who started in the mid-'60s, remarked, "we've lost many of our small markets, like sale barns and the small packers. Now we deliver our products farther, there's more shrink, and we don't know the

people there.

"Companies that buy farm products aren't service oriented, they're dollar-oriented. And they don't seem to be very interested in the small-volume farmer."

Nick Beuter, president of the Cedar-Johnson Farm Service Co-op in Tipton, remarked, "The co-op was stronger back then; it had more customers. Now if we lose one big farmer it hurts our volume.

"Also it was a lot easier to sustain yourself on the farm then. Farming is much more capital-intensive now, so you're more vulnerable."

An old saying goes something like this: If you've driven a long way down a country road that

keeps getting narrower, weedier, and more rutted, it will soon dead end. It's time to back up.

It isn't likely, of course, that agriculture can return to the 1950s and '60s. And we probably don't want to precisely; some of the changes in rural America have been for the better.

Recent FARMING and your FREEDOM columns discussed the need for ag policy changes that truly foster the family farm, the need for broad-scale rural economic development, the importance of shopping close to home, and of the injustice of continuing a national policy of cheap food.

We can start backing up with these.