What Would Happen Without the American Farmer

By John Rico

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UNCLE SAM’S BACKBONE - When Edwin Markham walked from his Lagoon Valley home to the schools in Vacaville before the turn of the century, he saw first-hand the toiling farmers in the area, which no doubt inspired him in later years to write his immortal poem, “The Man With the Hoe.”

Not too many days back, a group of concerned farmers drove their tractors to Fairfield in support of a nation-wide farmer attempt to shake up Washington brass and inaugurate some kind of price support for farm products.

Many people will pass over too lightly the importance of the part the American farmer plays in our daily lives. The American farmer is the backbone of our Uncle Sam.

Can anyone imagine what would happen without the American farmer? If you like to sip a cocktail now and then, the basic ingredient for that drink came from a farm; how about all of your food products; your clothing; your vitamins; in fact your daily routine whether you be a butcher or a beggar, is dictated by the American farmer.

Residents of Vacaville and California can look to the farmer to produce between 9 and 10 per cent of all the farm crops grown in the United States. Figures (1976) show California farmers had crops in that year worth about $9 billion. US farmers had well over $100 billion in crops that year. Solano County farmers in 1976 produced gross crops to the tune of $88.5 million.

California is a big state in land area, 158,693 square miles. That’s quite a chunk of real estate. It boils down to about 100 million acres. Solano County covers 827 square miles, or 529,280 acres.

California has 64,000 farms, and that’s only two per cent of the national total. US Census Bureau figures for 1974 show Solano County had 814 farms, with 325,000 acres devoted to crop production.

There was a period in Vacaville’s past history, when farmers across the nation were envious of a few fruit growers in this area who were able to put fresh fruits on eastern tables early in the year, and by so doing earned an above-average livelihood. Fruit growers in the local area were smug in their ability to produce a crop which gave them a modest income year in and year out.
Time, adverse conditions, along with state and federal regulations, soon reversed the smugness and brought on a financial catastrophe. The once small fruit ranch was not the bonanza of yesteryear.

Mass production became a part of the farm scene as it has in our industrial revolution. Stoop labor has given way to machines; and these labor saving devices need ample acreage on which to perform, thus the small ranch has had to find a secluded place in our scheme of things.

Farms contiguous to expanding urban areas have been gobbled up for subdivision purposes. Many farmers who once toiled long hours to earn enough to feed and clothe their families, were confronted with the choice of selling their lands for high prices or retain their independence and continue their age-old routine of sunup to sundown chores.

This situation predominates in the Vacaville area today. There are those farmers who have accepted the high land prices, and have seen their acreage soon covered with homes or shopping centers. There are others who continue to want their land, in many instances finding themselves in the position of being surrounded by urban sprawl.

Any person who has farmed, or has been reared in such an atmosphere, can well remember the heartbreak of adverse conditions. Many are the Vacaville fruit growers who labored throughout the year to raise a crop, and then find high winds, hail, and low prices, climaxing all that effort.

Time has erased many of the traditional heritages of the American farmer. It is seldom you see families gathering to butcher hogs; the maiden with her milk pail is a scene of the past; fresh bread baking in outdoor ovens is only a memory. The farmer now goes to town to buy back many of the items he had earlier sold.

Many of the farmers who sit on the sidelines find themselves being drowned in a sea of controversy. City, county, state and national officials, along with environmentalists, planners, and a long list of “dogooders” are sparring off in a never-ending feud of what to do with lands belonging to someone else.

The farmer finds himself being dictated to over the use and sale of the lands which he has possession. He is told in simple terms to keep it, grow crops on it, and then disposed of those products at someone else’s terms.

The farmer hears a consistent plea from urban inhabitants that prime agricultural lands should be saved, but that same farmer never hears anyone offering to reimburse him to save this land.
The plight of the farmer is a serious one, and it presents a problem which is going to take many long years to solve. Common sense dictates that you cannot expect a farmer to raise apricots, tomatoes, sugar beets or beef cattle, and then place him in a position of bartering for a price.

Perhaps it would be wise for President Jimmy Carter to forget his theatrical gestures concerning Israel and Egypt, and devote more time to the problems of the American farmer.

One Vacaville resident put it plainly: “I have been offered $250,000 for my 50-acre ranch; I can invest that money at interest of approximately $20,000 a year. That sure in hell beats growing prunes.”