

# EVER' DAY THINGS

## American Agriculture is AT-RISK

The other day I went to a feed meeting; I've been doing that for about 20 years. I'm the guy you get to hear after you eat at one of these affairs. I sell livestock technology. For lack of a better way to put it and so this doesn't turn into a commercial and the editor don't get vexed, that's what I do.

I like the word "vexed." It's a good commentary word ain't it? It's better than some of the words you hear when something don't load at the sale barn. If I used one of them somebody might sure get VEXED. That might end my career as a columnist and I don't want to do that. I like the benefits of being a columnist. I ain't gettin' rich but I can use it because about a year to six months ago I became a single parent. Never thought that would happen but here me and the kids are.

My niece teaches special education and at-risk kids in the local school district and she tells me that a single parent household is considered "AT-RISK" by the teaching profession and several other parts of the social strata. The biggest thing I have noticed is I'm havin' a tough time keepin' up on

ever'thing. Between work, school things for the kids, 4-H, school board, building projects for the new place, keeping house, and about a jillion other things, it ain't easy. Somebody asked the other day what I did in my spare time and I laughed. There ain't none. But what really bothers me is the realization that my family is considered AT-RISK

Lots of the things we have taken for granted are now considered AT-RISK. Tell you what I mean. Back to the first paragraph about the feed meeting. There were about 25 couples that came. I've seen thousands of your type of folks in the last 20 years. The crowd keeps getting older. Only two couples were under 40. Most of them were past 60, way past 60. When I think about what the 60ish crowd has been through I kind of like to be around them, might learn something.

They've been through quite a bit— Depression, The New Deal, World War II, the Cold War, the New Frontier, the Great Society, Reaganomics and several other "cullin's." March's issue of *Money* magazine ranked the top 100 jobs in the country and guess where the farmer-rancher came in—92nd. Median annual income was \$20,600. Eleven year job growth was down 21 percent. Short term outlook, job security, and prestige rating were poor to average. Stress and strain rating was very high. (What's new?) These folks with the bleached-out foreheads and hands with brown spots on the back and shoe-leather callouses on the palms are survivors. Maybe a little tough minded, too.

Lord knows they've tightened the belt like Mahatma Gandhi on more than one occasion. They've kept their

business in what economists sometimes call vicious cycles. Now they're asked to survive markets, weather, high interest, bureaucratic policy, animal rightists, environmentalists and a host of other deterrents. The mainstay of American agriculture, that bleached-out foreheaded crowd, is AT-RISK. It's starting to really worry me about who's going to own it, who's going to farm and ranch it, and who's going to keep it all together for the rest of America to eat in the next 10 to 20 years? And, why have they kept going under all the pressure?

The why part is maybe the easier for me to answer than the who. The generation isn't all

a bunch of saints but I think the hunger they saw in the Depression and World War II eats at their conscience. I think they have a set of morals that, after the 1980s a lot of people don't understand. Along with that conscience comes a sense of responsibility, a rarer commodity yet.

Now we come to the who part. I'll bet a new pickup, which I don't have and don't see much of a chance of getting for a while, that corporate America controls a bunch of the food

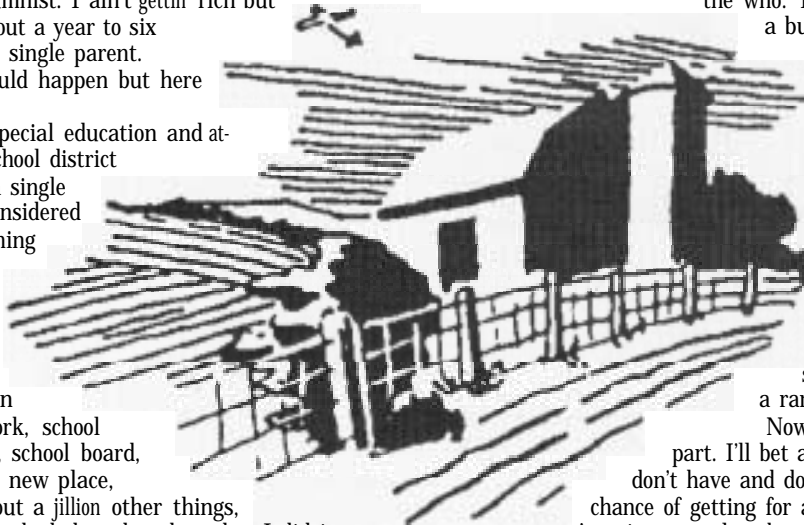
production in the next 20 years. I've lived in the corporate culture for about 20 years and they don't share the same views on food the bleached forehead crowd has. Sometimes, it's hard to find someone to take responsibility in that corporate bunch the way they should.

Now don't get me wrong— both bunches are made up of people, not saints and villains, people. The whole situation ain't easy to sort out because everybody has to make a living.

What the whole other part of society has to figure out is what the folks in agriculture production have known. They're AT-RISK every time they wake up. Maybe the salvation of the bleached forehead crowd, whether they're 60 past or younger, is they know that corporate America and the rest of America are fixing to learn.

Maybe America needs a lesson in the difference between involvement and commitment. For example, with breakfast, chickens are involved and hogs are committed. Encourage your kids to learn about commitment and to stay in production. A country has to eat to go on.

More than 200 years of a system of growing food has worked pretty well. If it ain't broke, don't fix it.



Tom McBeth