

## *Families Who Quit Farming*

**Regardless of age, families who leave farming frequently need information to help them make a smooth transition**

HAROLD D. GUITHER

MIGRATION of farm families into nonfarm occupations has been a continuous process since our country was founded. While the percentage of population living on farms has shown almost a steady decline since the first census of 1790, the absolute number of people on farms has declined steadily since 1935. While census figures show these general trends, they tell nothing about the individual farm families who leave farming and how their decision affects their families and the communities in which they live.

The findings of a study among Illinois farm families leaving farming<sup>1</sup> suggest some areas in which these families need educational information that would facilitate their adjustment from farm to nonfarm living. This is the area where Extension workers could render a valuable service. According to the findings of this study the greatest opportunities for Extension workers to serve farm families leaving farming are (1) counsel in making the decision, (2) provide information to help plan for retirement, (3) provide information about securing housing off the farm, and (4) assist in programs that boost off-farm employment opportunities.

Traditional Extension educational programs have placed major emphasis on helping build and maintain successful farm operations, improve family living, and develop the talents and abilities of

<sup>1</sup>Complete findings of this study are reported in Harold D. Guither, "Characteristics, Motivations, and Adjustment Problems of Farmers Who Leave Farming" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Illinois, 1962). See also Harold D. Guither, "Factors Influencing Farm Operators' Decisions to Leave Farming," *Journal of Farm Economics*, XLV (August, 1963), pp. 567-76.

---

HAROLD D. GUITHER is Advisor in Agricultural Communications, University of Illinois A.I.D. Projects, United States Agency for International Development, Amman, Jordan. The author expresses appreciation to Hadley Read, Robert Jarnagin, and E. W. Anderson for suggestions and criticisms of the first draft of this paper.

youth. Certainly these are worthy efforts and should be continued. And while families leaving farming may not comprise more than one to three per cent of the total in a given year, migration is continual. In addition, many farm reared boys and girls leave the farm and must adjust to nonfarm living. This group also presents an opportunity for Extension workers to aid members of farm families in planning satisfying and worthwhile nonfarm careers.

But how much help have Extension workers given farmers who fail to build a successful business? Can we assume that, even with all the technical know-how that has come from our experiment stations and research laboratories, every farmer will be successful if he applies this information? Undoubtedly Extension workers recognize that lack of available land and capital, failing health or other misfortunes, and personal preferences will cause some families to give up farming. Yet when farmers make these decisions, are Extension workers prepared to render educational assistance of a different nature (just as they provide farming and home economics information to families who continue farming)?

#### MAKING THE DECISION

Farm families face the decision to quit farming in a cautious mood. While a new life could lead to more pleasant living conditions, greater financial rewards, and less physical burden, they also recognize the uncertainties of new friends and neighbors, employment, business conditions, and ability to succeed. A decision that can change a man's life and that of his family is not usually made quickly and without considerable thought. More than half of the farmers leaving in the Illinois study sought counsel from one or more persons outside their immediate families.

Business or professional men were consulted by nearly one out of three. Relatives, other than the wife and children, were included in the decisions of about one out of four. Close neighbors and friends or public agents (such as county Extension agents and Farmer Home Administration representatives) provided counsel to about one family out of 20. Extension agents were asked for counsel by some families facing the very crucial decision about leaving farming. However, the number of Extension agents consulted was small compared to others who were called upon for help and advice.

Bankers, lawyers, and physicians can provide special counsel in areas where Extension workers are usually not qualified. However, in areas of farm management, crop and livestock production, and home management, Extension workers could certainly provide in-

information that might help the family decide if they could continue farming successfully or not.

One important need is farm management information prepared specifically for those farmers who must decide whether or not to continue farming. Likewise, for the young man beginning to farm, the decision may be: Do I have the necessary land, capital, labor, and management ability to establish and continue operating a farm unit that will provide the income and living conditions acceptable for my family? Helping the young man decide that he lacks the necessary requirements to be a successful farmer may be of much more service to him than letting him get started with inadequate resources that could lead to failure and disappointment later.

#### WHY THEY LEFT FARMING

Although most families could give several reasons for their decision, each could usually give one of five main reasons why they left:

1. About 34 per cent faced financial problems due to either shortage of money to meet expenses and family needs or too low return on capital and labor. Some also had the ability for higher paying off-farm employment.
2. About 19 per cent left either because of sale of the farm, termination of the lease, or difficult landlord tenant relations.
3. While 26 per cent had reached 65 and decided to retire, another 11 per cent of the younger men suffered some physical health problem and decided to find other employment.
4. About 10 per cent of the operators faced some family or other sociological problem that caused them to leave farming. These problems varied widely, including such situations as children leaving home, wife's dislike of farming, broken marriage, and personal ambitions to change occupations.
5. Some operators made unwise management decisions that eventually led to their leaving farming. Failure to build an adequate business volume or use labor fully were explanations for the resulting financial problems.

In the case of many families, the circumstances were frequently beyond the control of the individual. Little could have been done by Extension workers to have prevented the operators from making the decision to leave. However, guidance from Extension workers could have helped many of these operators if they had been reached at the right time. Others who could have used help from the Extension Service made statements which indicated they would not ac-

cept Extension's help even if it had been made available to them.

#### EDUCATION FOR TRANSITION

Whether young, middle-aged, or old, farm operators who leave farming frequently need information to help them make a smooth transition to nonfarm living. While about one-fourth of those leaving farming in this study had reached retirement age, some were not making adequate plans for their retirement. Only about one out of ten operators owned land. Almost all of these fortunate few kept the land and continued to receive income from it. However, the majority had no such source of income.

Only a few had saved money and invested it outside of their farm business to provide income for retirement. By the time they paid their debts, some retiring farmers had no capital left. Fortunately those retiring in recent years had social security income, if nothing else. However, there appears to be a real need for an Extension program to help farmers and their wives set up a financial plan for retirement. Some need help in how to invest money taken out of a liquidated farm business.

Planning for use of time during retirement is also overlooked by many farmers during their busy years on the farm. About one out of five of those leaving indicated no interest in either sports or hobbies. More than half of this group was over 60 years old. Without land ownership to give a continuing interest in farming, some retiring operators face a sharp change from lack of time to get all the jobs done to the time when they face a problem finding something to do that gives them satisfaction and contentment.

#### *Finding a Place to Live*

The housing situation at the time they decided to quit farming was as follows: (1) bought house in the past few months, 41 per cent; (2) rented house, 27 per cent; (3) had owned house for some time, 18 per cent; and (4) had not located housing, 14 per cent. However, nearly one in five reported difficulty in finding a place to live. The main problems were finding suitable places to rent and finding an acceptable house to buy that they could afford. While housing was not a serious problem for many families, the housing choices suggest that Extension workers could provide valuable educational information to these families.

When money was available from the dispersal of machinery or other operating capital, buying a house was usually the first choice

for using this money. Yet farm families who have lived on a farm most of their lives might profitably use information about how to wisely invest in a house in town. Others could use help in their decision of whether to rent or buy. Home financing procedures could prove helpful to others.

### *Locating Employment*

At the time interviewed, 70 per cent had decided on future employment, 21 per cent did not know yet what work they would do, and 9 per cent had no plans to take employment. The proportion of those undecided on future employment was lowest among those with more than a high school education. This would suggest that Extension workers could provide real service by encouraging young people to go to college or advanced vocational schools after completing high school.

Few farm operators made an exhaustive investigation into the job opportunities available to them. Most operators leaving did not find an abundance of employment opportunities. About one-half believed that a farmer had to take what he could find and did not have any choice. A few capable farmers were offered jobs either before or after they decided to leave farming. But they seldom, if ever, made further investigation to see if they could qualify for a higher paying job or one that would give them more prospects for advancement.

Among those who really looked over various job situations, about one-half found job openings where special skills were required that they did not have. Among operators under 40, about four-fifths were willing to take special education to qualify for higher paying jobs. Among operators from 40 to 59, about two-thirds were also willing to take advanced instruction.

At the same time, however, most families showed a strong desire to live in the community or general area where they had farmed. Only one in ten moved more than 25 miles from where they had farmed. More than one half moved five miles or less. These findings suggest that Rural Areas Development and Area Resource Development programs have some important implications for farmers leaving farming. Since those who leave farming usually settle close to where they farmed, educational programs that teach special skills or help improve earning abilities would prove beneficial to the individual, the family, and the community.

The Illinois study attempted to draw a representative sample of farm families leaving farming. The characteristics of this group in-

dicating that it is not possible to predict accurately in advance all farm families who will quit farming. The farm operator who shifts to other employment may be one under 25 who has farmed only a few years or a man over 65 who has farmed all his life. Or he may be in between these ages. However, the percentage of those leaving who were under 35 and over 65 was greater than for the total population of farm operators.

About 42 per cent had eight years of school or less; 17 per cent had 9 to 11 years; 32 per cent had finished high school; and 9 per cent had one or more years of school beyond high school.

A small volume of business is a problem for many of these farm families. About 56 per cent of those leaving farming reported a gross income of less than \$10,000 during their last year of farming—an amount that signals definite financial danger according to most farm management specialists. Of these, 41 per cent had incomes between \$5000 and \$9999 and 15 per cent were under \$5000. On the other hand, the remaining 44 per cent with gross incomes ranging from \$10,000 to \$40,000 also decided to leave farming for one reason or another.

All types of farming were represented among those operators leaving—grain, livestock, and dairy. During their last year of farming, nearly half of those leaving had worked off the farm and about one-fifth of their wives worked away from home at some time.

#### CONTACTS WITH EXTENSION

Many farm families who leave farming have used the services of Extension agents in the past, probably as frequently as all other farmers. In Illinois about four out of five operators (78 per cent) leaving said they knew their county Extension agent. About two out of three (68 per cent) reported getting help from him through newspaper columns, radio programs, office visits, or other contacts. About two out of five (41 per cent) attended Extension meetings at some time during their last three years on the farm. Four per cent listed the county agent as their favorite source of new ideas about farm practices.

While two out of three operators leaving felt that the Extension Service had been of some help to them, the remainder felt it had been of no help or had no contact with it. Young operators and those with gross incomes over \$10,000 a year seemed to recall getting help from the Extension Service more frequently than older operators (those over 50). However, 22 per cent of these migrating farm operators reported no contact with the Extension Service.

Wives of migrating farmers also participated in Extension activities (24 per cent were members of homemakers Extension units). This was apparently equal to or a higher percentage than the membership among all farm homemakers in the state at the time.

When asked how they rated the help they received from the Extension Service, replies varied depending on age and experiences of the farm operator. Since some operators had reported no contact or acquaintance with Extension workers, they had no basis for reply. Younger operators gave Extension a higher rating than older operators. The comparisons are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Appraisal of Extension Service by Illinois farm operators leaving farming, 1960-61, by per cent of respondents.

Degree of helpfulness	All operators	Age of operators	
		Under 50	Over 50
Very helpful	26	27	24
Some help	40	44	37
No help	12	13	11
No basis for reply	22	16	28
Total	100	100	100

#### CONCLUSIONS

The farm families who leave farming represent a small but important group that frequently need certain educational assistance. Extension workers in federal, state, and county positions could provide some of this assistance; but, in doing so, they would depart from some of the traditional Extension programs usually provided to farm families. Since financial problems rank as the most important reason for farm families leaving (in this study), Extension workers should examine their programs to see if they are giving enough emphasis to farm business management, full employment of labor, and family financial management.

Since most operators who leave farming know about the Extension Service, the Extension worker has a unique opportunity in performing needed educational services for this group. He could do the jobs needed just as well as, or perhaps better than, any other educational agency. While the Extension agent might not be the authority on all the subjects in which instruction is needed, he could be the leader in organizing the program, bringing the audience together, and building confidence among these farmers and their wives.