

III. THE SOCIAL SIGNIFICANCE OF OKLAHOMA FARM TENANT MOVING

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Even the casual observer of farming in Oklahoma has seen that there is much moving from one farm to another. Recently the United States Department of Agriculture has cooperated with the Department of Agricultural Economics of the Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical College in making a calculation showing the total amount of farm moving that took place in the state in 1924. The results show that 51 per cent of all tenants and 8 per cent of all owners in the state moved in 1924. Probably few people thought there was so much farm moving taking place.

The seriousness of the migratory farmer problem appears greater upon an examination of moving in various parts of the state. In the southeastern part of the state there is an area covering about twenty counties where nearly two thirds of all tenants moved in 1924. In an area in the northwestern part of the state, including about twenty counties, from one-third to one-fourth of all tenants moved in 1924. In the remaining counties of the state lying in a broad belt diagonally from the southwest to the northeast corners of the state, around a half of all tenants moved.

The full magnitude of this vast migration can be better grasped by means of comparison. In round numbers, 60 thousand tenants joined this vast moving throng. If the tenants' families were average size farm families, over 275,000 men, women, and children were involved in this moving of tenants alone, to say nothing of the moving of owners. There were probably a hundred thousand or more school children involved.

A fourth of all land in the state was in the hands of new farmers as a result of this migration, and roughly speaking, 258 million dollars worth of the state's most precious natural resource, our farm land, changes caretakers each year as a result of this moving. The direct cost of human and horse labor used in moving this vast throng can be conservatively estimated at two million or two and one-fourth million, including owner moving. It does not take a Solomon to see that little care for soil fertility will be given by a vast throng who stay on the average only two years on a farm and whose entire care is to make it

yield its maximum for those two years, with no care for its yield in the future.

Moving has its advantages and its disadvantages to tenants. If it could be divorced of the latter, the state and the farmers of the state would receive much more net benefit from judicious farm moving, than they do at present.

The young developing farmer in this country can make economic progress in two ways. He can advance his tenure status, which is nothing more nor less than gaining of greater and greater percentage of ownership and control of the capital he uses in his farming; or he can expand the size of his farm business or develop a more efficient business organization. Either form of progress may be developed largely to the exclusion of the other; or both may go hand in hand.

Moving often offers the only avenue to progress in these two ways. A young man finds himself fully able and equipped to run a larger farm; he cannot expand the area of the farm which he is now running; but he can rent a larger farm in an adjacent community—a farm that is better adapted to his managerial capacity and to the type of his farm organization. He moves because good business dictates that he should move. Many farmers find themselves unable to make further managerial progress on the place they are on. Others find they cannot advance their tenure status while they are under a certain landlord. In either case a move where better arrangements can be made may be a good business step and result in a more efficient business.

Much of our moving in America is done with these two motives in view. Unquestionably, the ease with which American farmers can change and get a larger or better farm, or can advance their tenure has had a pronounced effect on the superior productivity of our farmers over those of most other countries. Since 1890 we have increased our physical units of farm products per farmer about one per cent a year, or a total of about 35% per farmer. Although we have less than 4% of the world's farmers, we produce 70% of the world's corn, 50% of its cotton, 25% of the world's oats, 20% of its wheat and flaxseed, 13% of its barley, 7% of its potatoes and 5% of its sugar.

But the disservicibility of our farm moving is probably of far more social significance than is its servicibility. A highly migratory farm population unquestionably introduces many of our most stubborn and vexing farm problems. The evils of moving, however, are not a necessary accompaniment of all moving; but rather the evils arise out of useless and aimless moving.

In a survey of several hundred farmers in this state, we found that during the first 10 years after these farmers began for themselves 29% of their moves resulted in a tenure advance while 54% resulted in getting a farm of greater value. During each ten year period of the remainder of their earning life, tenure advance resulted in one-fifth of all their moves, while almost half of their moves each decade of earning life after the first 10 years did not result in getting a farm of greater value. There is good evidence here that there is much wasteful moving, since only half of all moves resulted in enlarging the farm business and only one-fifth of all moves advanced tenure status.

Still more striking evidence of wasteful or purposeless moving comes out when the number of moves that resulted in no change or a reversal in tenure, and the number that resulted in no change or a reversal in value are considered. During the first 10 years of earning life, 38% of all move resulted in no change or an actual reversal of the value of farm operated; while 64 per cent of all moves did not advance tenure status or else actually reversed it. Both these adverse aspects of farm moving increased as earning life advanced. After 30 years of earning life, 45% of all moves resulted in no tenure change or else a tenure reverse; while 76% of all moves after that period of life resulted in no value advance or an actual reverse in the value of the farm operated.

Farmers were asked to assign a reason for each move they made. The motive of economic betterment was assigned for 55% of over 2,000 moves they had made. Only 7% of these moves were said to be for family, social, religious, or educational betterment. It should be remembered that these reasons were given for moves already made by the movers, and that as such some of the reasons given were probably "trumped up" excuses or justification of useless moving. It is highly significant to note that economic and social improvement was assigned as the aim in only about two-thirds of these moves.

A conclusion as to the total proportion of useless moving in the present status of our investigation can not be made without qualifications. But the probabilities are that practically half of our farm moving cannot be justified out and out on the basis of economic and social betterment. I fear we can scarcely grasp the tremendous social significance involved in the fact that over one half of all moves in the state do not result in any good, which means in the fact that in half of this vast annual migration, detriment to farming interests follows and through them, detriment to practically every interest in the state.

I have discussed briefly above the estimated direct cost of moving. But this is the smallest item of the total cost. Few men will take good care of property that they are to manage only a short time. They will let it go to waste and increase present yield, even if it robs the soil of fertility. Including moving owners, nearly 300 million dollars worth of Oklahoma farm land each year changes hands by this moving. If the system takes fifty years to ruin the land, the cost is six million dollars a year. There are now hundreds of thousands of areas in the state that were formerly producing good crops that have been made unprofitable by our landlord-tenant system, and our exploitative ownership type of farming. This land has washed away and otherwise has been robbed of its productive powers by a system of tenure and farming that keeps the user of our land from being personally interested in the soil he tills.

Nearly all farmers who move often do not have sheds to protect their machinery from the weather. This extra rusting away costs the moving farmers more than a half million of their 37 million dollars of machinery value each year.

All told, these direct costs of moving run over nine million dollars each year. This was half as much as all revenue receipts collected by the state in 1924. If half of this nine million was a useless expenditure and the state could have saved it and applied it to taxes, taxes for state purposes from all sources except oil and automobile, could have been reduced by a fourth. And yet the state would have been far better off, for this direct cost is undoubtedly only a small part of the total cost of moving.

Some phases of a profitable farm organization often require years to develop. Because of this, moving seriously disrupts certain long time phases of paying farm organizations. This indirect cost of moving possibly is far greater than the direct cost mentioned above. Frequent moving is almost a sure death to these phases of the farm business, or a sure preventive of initiating them. A special study of over 600 farmers in three cotton counties of the state reveals the fact that tenants who stayed on a farm 50% or less than the average time all tenants stayed on each farm, had 61% of all crop land in cotton. While tenants whose average stay was 50% or more than the average stay of all tenants, had less than half of all crop land in cotton.

A highly mobile farm tenantry must necessarily largely rely on a cash crop as their source of income. The following facts show that a high degree of dependence on cotton is found with the least wealthy of several hundred farmers interviewed. Farmers whose cotton receipts were 71% or more of all re-

ceipts had earned and saved from their earnings, an average of \$88 per year since they began for themselves, while farmers whose cotton receipts were 40% or less of all receipts averaged a saving of over three times this for each year of earning life.