

Independent growers organize

Farmers face uphill battle in price hike strike

By PATRICK TOUHEY and ED BAS

All morning long farmers from Plymouth Township, Canton, Northville, and the surrounding area made the pilgrimage to the Ron Hesse farm in Superior Township. At noon, they set fire to a huge pile of Christmas trees.

As the trees blazed, the farmers threw their hats into the flames. Several of those present pulled stalks of wheat from the ground and threw them into the fire.

To replace the burned hats, the farmers were given new ones, bearing the legend "American Agriculture Strike 77."

The farms and farmers in southern Oakland County are, these days, nearly nonexistent, but the farmers in the outlying reaches of the metropolitan area—even the more moderate ones—are becoming strident in their tone and demands for higher prices for agricultural products.

Ebel Garling is a transplanted city dweller who lives in a century-old farmhouse on land she and her late husband farmed near Rochester.

She is the first to admit that farms of today are not what they were a few years ago when she sold eggs for a cent apiece.

MRS. GARLING still has a fondness for city life as well as farm life, but is

unsure of the "luxurious" life styles of today. At first, she said she was against the strike, but later relented.

"It's too bad they feel they have to strike," she said. "I only wish we could have peace."

Most of the Rochester area's former and existing farmers are with the national strike efforts, in spirit if not in body. They say they feel a common bond in considering themselves the most embattled group of property owners. They agree that things have got to get better, before they get worse.

Metropolitan area farmers in and around Plymouth seem to be more committed to the strike cause.

They demonstrated last week, staging a mass rally, lighting the Christmas tree bonfire, and driving their farm vehicles through downtown Plymouth.

More than 40 farmers from within a 50-mile radius of Plymouth joined the motorcade down Main Street. Some of the larger combines and tractors took up two lanes of the road and slowed traffic in the central business district to a crawl.

The farmers left Plymouth and drove their vehicles out to an open field west of Napier at Ann Arbor Road, the site where the rally and bonfire had been staged earlier.

The rally and motorcade were part of the national protest to draw attention to the lack of "parity" between

what farmers are paid for their goods and what they are sold for on supermarket shelves.

"IT'S REALLY a rip-off for the independent farmer," said an angry Mary Hesse, one of the organizers of the demonstration and the wife of the owner of the land where the farmers gathered.

The clerk who rings up the sale at the grocery store is making more money than the farmer.

The farmers taking part in the demonstration were members of American Agriculture, a loosely-knit group of independent farmers from all over the country.

This is not the first strike that metropolitan farmers have taken part in. Stuart Braid, a wheat farmer and tax assessor with Orion Township, remembers dumping the milk from his own cows during a state dairy farmers strike.

"It was a wildcat strike," he said. "We worked to get a higher milk price. There were a lot of hard feelings before it finally fizzled out."

"We got the higher price, but whether it was the strike that did it or not, I don't know. But I guess it shook up the organization (Michigan Milk Producers)."

"This strike now is getting a lot of publicity, but they won't get their 100 per cent parity."

"You have to realize that the consumer is the largest voting bloc in this country. I read that what the farmers

are asking for would wind up adding \$13 billion per year to our food costs."

AMERICAN Agriculture, the group—or movement," said Mrs. Hesse prefers to call it—was started last spring by six people in Colorado. Since then, she said, it has grown to "the largest association of farmers in history."

Its goal is to bring about a balance between the price farmers are paid for their goods and what it costs them to produce those goods—or parity, a price set by the federal government.

"We get only 3 1/2 cents for a 65-cent loaf of bread," said Mrs. Hesse. "The farmer has to sell the wheat cheap and then turn around and pay the high price for bread. There's no way he can win."

Currently the prices farmers are paid for their crops are, set by the market as it is defined by trading on the Chicago Trade Commission, and those prices are subject to daily fluctuation.

Braid said that he is actively supporting the strike by holding back corn from the market until he can get a higher price for it.

Farmers have been demanding 100 per cent parity. This would add to present food costs, but Art Loveless, executive director for the Oakland County Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service, prefers the term "fair value" or "price support."

"It means that the government will guarantee a certain price to the

farmer," Loveless said. "Right now, it's \$2.02 per bushel of corn, \$1.40 for oats, and \$2.25 for wheat."

"WHEN A CROP is in and a farmer can only get maybe \$1.50 for a bushel of wheat, the government will buy it off of him for \$2.25."

"But," continued Loveless, "he has nine months to buy it back. The grain doesn't change hands during that time. The farmer is charged six per cent interest."

"At the end of nine months, he can either buy back his grain or go through with the deal, at which time the grain is taken from his farm. Right now, grain is selling as cheap as it did years ago, and the warehouses are filled."

Obviously, the reason the farmers want parity is that their economic futures are unpredictable when the price of their goods is determined by a free market.

"It's all governed by the Chicago market," said Canton farmer Duane Bordine. "I'd like to know how much I'm going to make an hour, like the people who work on the line at General Motors."

Carl Dobat, who has farmed in Oakland Township for 38 years, said he felt farmers had been getting a "dirty deal" for years. He said he also thought the farm strike was coming along better than he expected.

"The taxes and cost of equipment have doubled, even tripled," said

Dobat. He said farmers could hold onto grain until prices rose. He added that he had been in lately or he would have taken a more active role in the strike himself. Dobat owns 33 acres of land and rents another 600.

"THE STRIKE IS bound to do some good," said Dobat. "I think if they're looking for 100 per cent parity, they'll get something close to it."

"You have to think that there's many three cents worth of wheat in a loaf of bread. We pay sales tax for everything that goes into our homes, but then the assessor comes around to see the inside so he can increase your assessment. And 85 per cent of that tax goes to the schools."

According to Ron Hesse, the federal government could guarantee parity for farmers with a stroke of the pen. They could do it tomorrow if they wanted to," he said.

"We're getting about as much for our crops as we did in the depression while everything else has gone sky-high. Hell, a farmer is a consumer too."

Hesse said the government could increase the market price for farmers without raising the cost of retail food supplies. "Let the government put its damn thumb on the middle man for a change. They are all getting their profit. It's the farmers who don't know from one day to the next."

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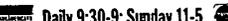
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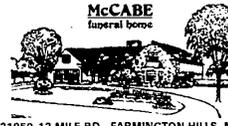


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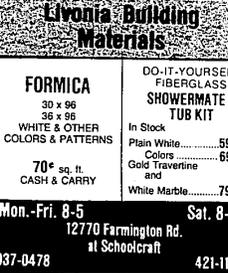
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