

"Farmer Bixler"

Carroll County Times Article for 1 October 2000

By Jay A. Graybeal

Last week's column described a mystery farm photo series sponsored by this paper during the early 1950s. A few years later in the midst of a prosperous economy, farmers in many parts of the country faced an economic crisis from rising costs and falling prices. Some local farmers, however, were not in trouble because of their farming practices. An article about a successful Carroll County farmer entitled, "Farmer Bixler: His Prosperity Belies the Prevalent Idea That all is Gloom," by John Chamberlain appeared in the February 14, 1956 issue of The Wall Street Journal:

"WESTMINSTER, Maryland – Victor Bixler, whose folks have farmed since 1780 in these pleasant rolling hills not far below President Eisenhower's Gettysburg acres, does not have the look of an economically harried man. He is fresh-faced and relaxed as he talks in a farm parlor that boasts a grand piano.

Over the radio he has listened to the growling that besets Ezra Taft Benson, the embattled Secretary of Agriculture. But Bixler, who has a small herd of Brown Swiss and Guernsey cows and a few hundred chickens (fortunately he got out of hogs before prices dropped last summer), thinks that Benson has the right idea about farm surpluses. "He's doing the best he can to get them down," says Bixler. Although he is traditionally a Democrat, farmer Bixler says he "might" vote for Eisenhower if he runs next fall.

Bixler, who is Pennsylvania Dutch and canny, is not rolling in wealth, but he has been doing all right. In this he might be taken as symbolic of the "middle condition" of the American farmer outside the corn and hog belt of the Middle West and the big wheat acreages of Montana and Kansas.

But despite his relative equanimity there is nothing Pollyannaish about Bixler's view of the farm future. He has a decision to make: Whether to buy out his brothers and sisters. "I'd have to put \$25,000 to \$30,000 into it," he says. "The question is: Could I earn enough on the investment? It's tough for small diversified operations these days."

A Big Investment

With only 12 cows, for example, Bixler has a hard time justifying a big investment in a baler, a combine and a tractor; his relative down the road, who has 100 cows, gets more out of machinery. "Maybe," says Bixler, "the best thing a small farmer can do is to keep the farm to live on, raise a few chickens and have a cow or two, and work in Towson in a tool-making shop. That's what a lot of folks are doing around here."

Meanwhile, though Bixler wonders about sticking to farming, his milk check comes in with the regularity of a dividend, and 1955 in the dairy business did not differ appreciable from 1954. As befits a proper symbol, Bixler is almost a projection from the statistics that roll in upon the U.S. Department of Agriculture in Washington not far to the south of his comfortable home.

Gigantic Growth

One reason why farmer Bixler and others like him have not hit the chutes, lies in the general prosperity of the nation, which is consuming more milk, chickens and eggs than ever. The growth in broiler consumption alone has been particularly astounding: Where the U.S. produced 275 million market broilers in 1945, it produced 1,060 million in 1955.

Beyond this, farmer Bixler and his kind have tended to benefit greatly from the fall in grain prices. Much is heard in farm circles about the nefarious “middleman spread”—meaning that a larger and larger part of the consumer’s food dollar has been going to transporters, processors and distributors of food.

But farmers like Bixler, who have been buying their feed concentrates at lower and lower prices and putting them into animal products whose price has stood up, can be considered as “processors” in their own right. They have been buying a raw material (feeds), processing it into broilers, eggs and milk, and getting the benefit of the elusive thing known as “value added by manufacture.”

Inherent Flexibility

Another thing to note about farmer Bixler is his inherent flexibility. If chickens and eggs are off, he can get out of them quickly, and if hogs decline he can liquidate any commitment here without too great a loss. He might not make much money on milk alone, but as he says, “on a farm you can always eat well.” Meanwhile he doesn’t have to compete with Baltimore and Towson machine shops for labor, for most of his daily chores are handled by himself. And if things get too bad, he might farm part time and take a city job like other farmers in his neighborhood.

It is right here, however, that it may be important to recur to farmer Bixler’s words about the surplus. He feels about the surplus the way Damocles felt about the sword hanging over his head, and to this extent he is probably like farmers everywhere. Farm politicians might win one more election by measures calculated to add to the surplus but if they do, farmer Bixler is apt to react in ways that are unforeseen, even by himself.”

Historically, Farmer Bixler had much in common with his thrifty Pennsylvania German ancestors who prospered in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. His modest farm size, flexibility and farming practices provided a good living.

Photo caption: A horse-drawn team pulls a farm wagon in this early twentieth century team. As late as the 1950s some local farmers had not yet purchased tractors. Historical Society of Carroll County Collection.