

PART TIME FARMING
ON SAN JUAN ISLAND

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"Everyone on the island has two jobs", is an oft heard phrase in and around Friday Harbor, Wash. Although it is not one hundred percent correct, the number of people employed in two or more positions is surprisingly high in comparison with farming communities of similar conditions on the mainland. This article deals only with those people who include farming as a means of livelihood. (note appendage #)

For the purpose of this study, a farmer is defined as one who lives in rural circumstances and conducts his farming activities in a manner rarely found in urban communities. More specifically, one who operates five acres or more as a farm and includes farm animals and/or crops.

A part time farmer has arbitrarily been designated as one who earns more than two hundred dollars a year thru employment away from his own farm.

The information appearing in this article was gathered by first obtaining the names of all farmers on the island and non-farming employment of the part time farmers. (Note appendage #). The next step was interviewing two to five persons of each of the following groups: full time farmers, part time farmers in each broad type of additional employment, and retired farmers. They were questioned as to the time spent working on the farm and on other employment, financial reimbursement for various labors and pertinent information as to farm size, crops, and animals.

The above information indicated that in addition to the three main categories of farmers -- full time farmers, part time farmers, and retired farmers -- one could add a fourth category by including quasi-

farmers in the form of absentee landlords. (Note appendage #). Upon closer examination, one finds that there is no typical part time farmer but rather a grading down from full time farming. A description of the various types of farmers on San Juan Island, are as follows:

1. Full Time Farming - This requires the full employment of at least one adult male each day of the year or a large enough operation to provide an adequate standard of living for one family. It may be intensive use of good land or extensive use of poor land.

2. Large Farm Operation and Custom Work - Some farmers operate a full time farm but own a combine, bailer, etc., and contract for neighbors harvesting work. They may make nearly six hundred dollars (\$600.) net on outside harvesting work. Included in this type is one farmer who hires two men to assist him in running the farm and in addition, operates a trucking line, two fish boats, and other enterprises.

3. Range Farming - Part Time Job - Sheep and beef cattle require little attention if left to range over a couple hundred acres or more. Except for two or three months out of the year, an ambitious farmer of this type can handle a full time job and keep up the farm after work and on weekends.

4. Small Area Farm - Other Employment - A farmer may only have a small area of relatively poor land with a few acres in grain or hay and a limited amount of livestock. This operation may take some of his time but does

not provide an adequate living, so it is necessary that he work on other farms doing odd jobs or engage in part time work such as logging, woodcutting, etc.

5. Subsistence farming - Full Time Job - Some men of primarily other skills may decide to live in a rural home near to their place of employment. They have a milk cow and a calf, a few chickens, perhaps an acre or two of grain, a large garden and a few fruit trees. They do not operate on a commercial basis, but rather, ^{use} using most of the farm products for their own food and selling the surplus.

6. Gentlemen Farmers - One finds a few city-bred men who yearn for a farm life upon retirement. They come up for the weekend and work on an old farmstead or are starting a new one. Included in this category are two school teachers of Friday Harbor High School. They put in a few hours each evening as well as the weekend. Their farms should be in full operation before retirement. Also included are those who have already retired but do not as yet have the skill and training to handle a large operation and so hire other farmers for part time help.

7. Retired Farmers - These gentlemen have made a career of farming and have now slowed down their farms operation to suit their ability or desire to work.

8. Absentee Landlords - On the Island, there are four men who own one or more farms each, but are not at present farming their areas. Instead, they hire farmers to work and manage their farms.

The question that arises in the minds of people visiting the Island is "If a man is a farmer, why doesn't he farm full time like the farmers on the mainland?" The reason is a result of both natural and cultural conditions which hamper profitable farm operation.

The quality of the soils of San Juan Island, as a whole, are not too good. The soils are termed "youthful", that is, thin with poorly developed horizons. The huge continental glaciers that once covered this area scrapped off the existing soil in places and left many areas of exposed bedrock. At the same time, they deposited ground moraine (a blanket of unassorted rock, sand and silt) and two recessional morraines. The latter form Cattle Point and Bald Hill.

Modifying influences have aided only in some parts of this island to make the land more suitable for farming. A correlation may easily be found between these areas and land use. (note appendage #).

Lying in an east-west direction across the central portion of the island are the high rock outcrops. Barren of soil at their peaks, they grade into Dallas, San Juan, Everett, and poor Alderwood soils. These soils are mostly very porous in nature. Precipitation run off is very rapid so they are bone-dry most of the time and suited only for limited grazing or forest land.

About one-half of the island is covered with Alderwood soil. It occurs on low rolling land and valley slopes. Since this soil has some water holding ability, the farmers use it for hay fields and pasture, leaving the poor portions for forestland. However, a glance at the precipitation distribution (Note appendage # ^{*}) shows that April thru September produces little rainfall on the average and may produce

* This precipitation chart is for Olga, Wash. It is about eight miles from Friday Harbor and has a similar climate.

virtually no rain in a dry year. In the latter case, the Alderwood soil is rather non-productive. During the 1951 season, hay fields averaged about one ton an acre while in 1952, a very good year, the yield was nearly two tons an acre. Half bogs are difficult to drain and so are also relegated to pasture land.

The Norma and Bellingham soils make the best farm land on the island, not only because of their fertility but also their ability to hold water for crops through the dry season. The only drawback is that they make up a little more than five percent of the island or one twentieth of the total area. The largest pocket of Norma soil is in San Juan Valley, located in the south central portion of the island. Smaller pockets are found in other lowlands of the island.

The over-all quality of the farming land of San Juan Island falls far short of the rich soils near La Connor, Wash. On the island, the grain crops may average about three-quarters of a ton per acre and top grade guernsey cows produce five hundred pounds of butter fat per year. In the La Connor area, the average grain yield per acre runs two tons while the same guernsey cow would produce seven hundred pounds of butter fat. As may be expected, there has been farm failures and consolidation of poorer farms. This is reflected in the declining rural population (Note graph #) and brings on a tendency towards extensive farming rather than intensive land use. This tendency is furthered by the fact that farm families are smaller and outside help quite expensive. The island farmers are more apt to range beef cattle and sheep than harvest large grain crops and tend large dairy herds.

Several cultural conditions work to the detriment of the farmer. One, a combination of both natural and cultural, is the insular position

of the island and an unnatural type of transportation to most farmers - the ferry. Actually, it is cheaper for a farmer to send his products by the trucking line than as freight on the ferry; nevertheless, the products must cross the water to reach the mainland. The ferry line charges One Dollar Twenty-Eight Cents (\$1.28) for one hundred pounds of freight moved from Friday Harbor to Anacortes. The trucking line will move the same one hundred pounds from the Farmer's house to Mt. Vernon, for Forty-Three Cents (\$.43). Even with this vast saving the farmer makes by selecting the trucking line, he must sell his produce at the same price as the mainland farmer. He is out Eight Dollars Sixty Cents (\$8.60) a ton for freight that the mainland farmer does not pay. In the case of grain that sells for Ninety Dollars (\$90.00) a ton, it represents a ten percent loss.

At present, the only operating co-operative in the whole country is the dairy in Friday Harbor. Some years ago there was an attempt to sell lambs on a co-operative basis but the idea died "abornin'".

Certain specific conditions exist in the various agrarian industries of the island which, coupled with the aforementioned general conditions, make farming a gamble with little chance of a big gain. Among the sheep flocks of the island are such breeds as Rambouillet, Oxford, Lincoln, Romney, Hampshires, Suffolk, and some Shropshire. Since the farmer derives profit from both the wool and the lambs, one favorite is the cross between the Romney (a good wool producer) and Suffolk (fast growing lambs). The good strains of both are fairly well retained. The advent of synthetics in the textile industry has brought about a decline in the price of wool. In 1951, a false market was created when two U.S. agencies bid each other up on foreign wool, pulling

domestic wool up to over one dollar (\$1.00) a pound for a short time, then subsiding to nearly seventy-five cents (\$0.75). Future prices may be nearer fifty cents (\$0.50) a pound.

In addition, if there is little precipitation in the summer time, the grazing land dries up. In turn, the ewe will give less milk and the lamb does not reach potential growth.

There has been a recent increase of the beef cattle on the island. At present there are Angus, Shorthorn and Herefords. The Angus seem to be most favored. Actually, there are no drawbacks to the raising of beef cattle and the animals being brought in are very good strains.

At one time the dairy herds of the island were considerably bigger. There are eleven grade A milk farms and about twenty-seven sour cream producers. There are faint signs of a revival of the industry. About twenty-five years ago when dairying was in its prime, the farmers sold sour cream, feeding the skimmed milk to their hogs. There was a plan to send fresh milk to Seattle, via ships with glass tanks; however, the farmers decided in favor of using the milk for raising hogs and the plan failed. Now the fresh milk produced is consumed on the island. Guernsey cows of good quality are in the majority followed by Jersey and Holstein.

The use of oleomargarine on the dinner table and in cooking has cut butter sales and is slicing deeply into the dairymen's profits. Many sour cream farmers are considering switching to grade A milk or using the cream to fatten calves for sale as beef. The change to grade A milk is difficult because of the high sanitary requirements. In the case of many farms it would mean the construction of a new barn and purchase of new equipment.

The quality of island pastures lowers the cow's productivity as was mentioned before. On the brighter side, the consumption of milk, ice

cream, and cheese has increased sharply since World War II.

The decline of the dairy herds and availability of skimmed milk brought a decline of hog production. Recent low pork prices all but finished it off. There is one major hog ranch and several farms have a few. Chester White and Hampshire are favored, followed by Yorkshire. The late increase in pork prices coupled with increasing dairy herds may bring a revival of hog raising here.

There is one large chicken farm and, of course, one finds a few chickens around every farm house. Rhode Island Reds, New Hampshires, and White Leghorns are common. There seems to be no change in sight in the chicken situation.

The aforementioned adverse conditions paint a black picture of farming on San Juan Island; yet, the full time farmers are able to clear fifteen hundred (\$1500.00) to three thousand (\$3,000.00) dollars, After farm and family living expenses have been deducted. Why then are there so many part-time farmers?

First, some farmers are unable to obtain a desired standard of living because of the small size of their farm, the poor quality of the soil, and in a few cases, lack of skill on the part of the farmer. Some farmers could make a living on their farm but are able to earn more money on other jobs doing a comparable amount of work. Working eight hours a day, six days a week for nine months on the county road crew or Roche Harbor Lime Kilm, a farmer can make two thousand six hundred and twenty dollars (\$2620.00). He would only be able to work nine months because planting^{ing} and harvesting would take two to three months. An eight week fishing cruise to Alaska (about 18 to 20 hours a day) would net him an average of three thousand dollars (\$3,000.00).

Six weeks work in the fish cannery would increase his wealth at least four hundred dollars (\$400.00). An average six week on a local fish boat may bring up his earnings two thousand dollars (\$2000). Loggers can make eight thousand dollars (\$8,000) in a good season and cutting cord wood for the Roche Harbor Lime Kilm could earn a man up to three thousand dollars (\$3000) for six months work.

Last of all, some men are part time farmers because primarily they earn their living in town and run a subsistence farm in their spare time to beat the rising cost of living.

One may earn a good living doing full time farming on San Juan Island but with the multitude of part time jobs offered, why work fourteen hours a day on the farm when you can make as much or more money working at another job for only eight hours? With such reasoning, many farmers cut down their farm operation and invade the island's urban area for part-time work. There is no doubt that the island farmers are penalized with poor soil, dry climate, freight rates, etc., which cannot be changed to any great degree.

There are certain economic changes which could substantially aid the farmer in obtaining a higher standard of living. The establishment of a farmers coop. store from which articles may be purchased for all types of farms would help compensate for the freight fare. In conjunction, a coop. for the handling of all farm products would insure a more reliable market and give the farmer a little more control over prices.

At present time some farmers harvest their grain and send it to the mainland for sale. An increase of the beef cattle herds would supply a ready market for all the grain on the island and then a more

valuable farm product would be sent to market for the same freight price.

Prudent advertising on the part of the dairy men could do much to increase their profit. During World War II, the butter fat content of milk was cut and articles appeared claiming skimmed milk was just as nutritious as cream; nevertheless, a return of five percent butter fat in milk would help alliviate the strain on the cream market caused by oleomargarine, if priced within three or four cents of regular milk. Pushing the half-gallon and gallon sizes of ice cream as the standard unit rather than the quart, would also help. If there is a supply of ice cream in the house, people will eat more than if they had to purchase it at the store each time they use it. The cheese market could likewise be increased.

By such means the San Juan farmer could help himself. The day of the rugged individualist is past. In this day and age, only by working together can any group hope to control the political and economic conditions around them.