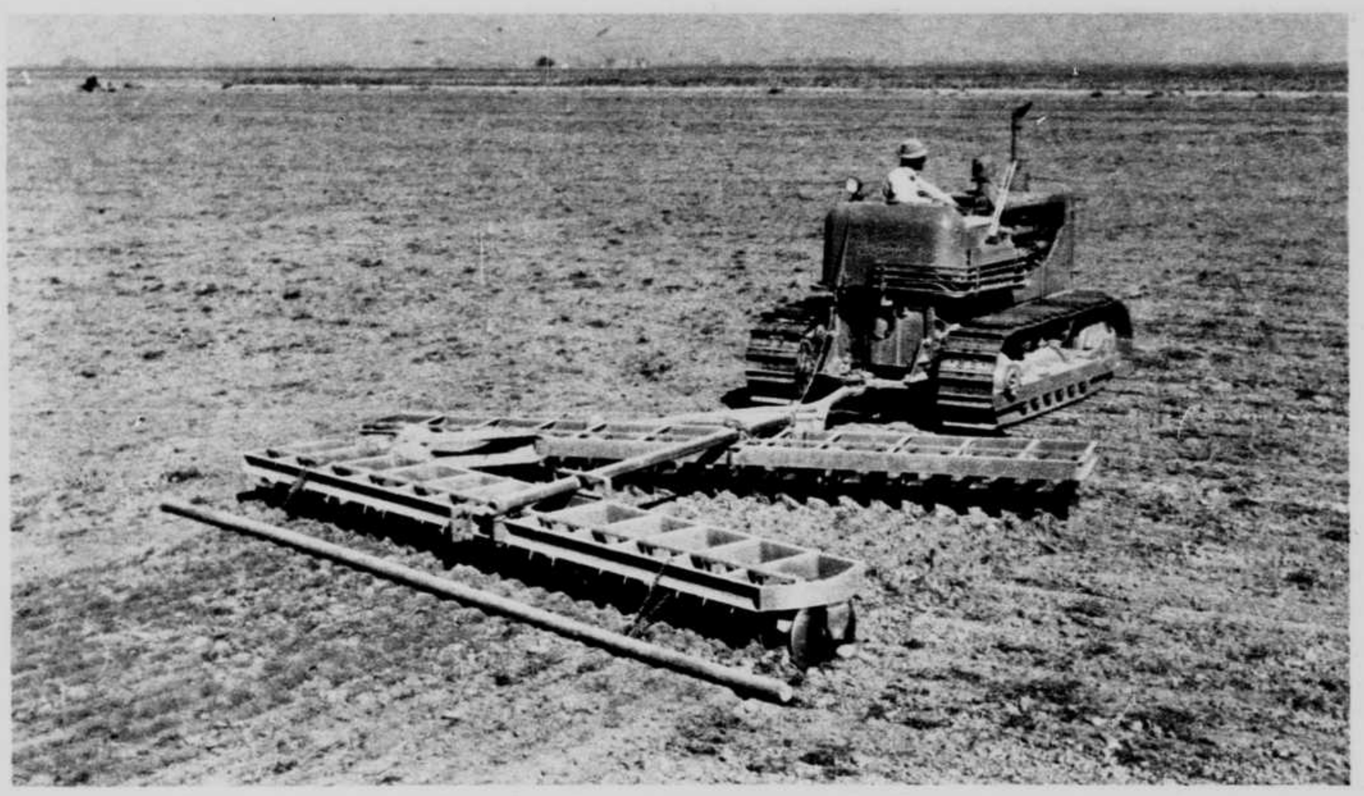
THE NEW CENSUS

. . . what it tells about agriculture



Bigger equipment is enabling farm owners to crop more land per worker than ever before. In the five short years from 1954 to 1959, the new agricultural census shows a 12% increase in farm size in the Corn Belt states. These units carry more equipment, more improvements and are cropped more intensely. Their value per acre has increased one-third.

The family farm hasn't been standing still during this age of astronauts and earth satellites. Mechanization has greatly increased the acreage of crops and number of livestock which a farm family can handle. The new census shows farmers are doing a bigger job. Even though incomes have been modest during recent years, the equity of most farm families has increased significantly. A part of this increase has resulted because of higher land prices, but a good part of it ties to greater investment in machinery, improved crop storage, livestock feeding equipment and farm homes.

The new census is for the most part directly comparable with the one taken in 1954. There is one important change, however. The definition of a farm for 1959 was more selective. Fewer units qualified as farms. Unless a unit made agricultural sales of $250 or more in 1959 or was at least ten acres or larger and had sales of $50 it was not defined as a farm. Three acres and farm production valued at $150 qualified a unit as a farm in 1954.

Nevertheless, by either definition there are fewer farms now than five years earlier. Using the new definition of a farm the reduction is 10% to 15% in farm numbers. By old definition the decline amounts to only about 10%. Naturally there has been a reduction in the number of farmers, too. Farm operators, 65 and over, are fewer in number. However, there has been a noticeable increase in part-time farming in many states.

Farms are larger. In the Corn Belt the average farm has had 18 acres added to its size in the past five years . . . an increase of about 12%. The average size now is 173 acres. In Iowa, Illinois and Minnesota, units now average close to 200-acre size. Minnesota reports 211 acres per farm. It's largely a reflection of farm consolidation. Acreage has been picked up by aggressive farm operators as others went out of business or retired.

Farms are worth more. Illinois reports an average land and building value per farm of $64,000 compared with $41,000 in 1954. The same figures for Iowa are $50,000 and $36,000. On the average, value per acre has increased 35%. In addition, these farms are better equipped. They report more corn pickers, balers, forage harvesters, trucks and autos. Power-operated elevators and crop driers are among the new pieces of equipment counted. Ohio, for instance, reports 3,344 crop driers on its farms.

One of the most interesting groups counted in the census are those farmers expanding the acreage they crop. North Dakota economists have made a special study of this group. They found an increasing trend toward a combination of owning and renting the acreage farmed. Of 78 farmers studied who were expanding their operation, only 13 purchased additional acreage. Four both rented and purchased. The largest group, 61, rented all of their added acreage.

Part-time farmers are another high interest group. Decentralization in industry has made factory work more available to farm operators. Industry has found rural populations provide a highly dependable type of worker. In 7 midwestern states, 43% of the farm operators living on farms had off-farm jobs. Five years earlier, during 1954, only 41% were employed off farms.

What can we expect in the future? USDA economists tell us the trends seen for agriculture between the 1954 and 1959 census will continue and that by 1975 family farms will be even more specialized than today. The family farm will continue to dominate our agricultural scene. The growth of the "super" or corporate farm doesn't seem to be making serious inroads on our farm economy.

Farm size will continue to increase. The number of farms will decrease. More labor-saving equipment and machinery will be added. More outside services, such as spraying, fertilizing, and professional marketing services, are likely. Interestingly enough, the greatest share of change is expected right here in the Midwest.