

# The Re-industrialization of Rural America

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Even while the small textile and electronics plants of rural America have been closing, modern agriculture has become increasingly industrialized.

Traditionally, family farms produced a healthy assortment of row crops, forage and livestock. Presently, they are being replaced with massive operations that specialize in one or two products. De-industrialization in one facet of the rural economy is being accompanied by re-industrialization in the agricultural sector.

Recent tours of the major agricultural operations in my western Alabama county have taken me to pig nurseries where two workers are raising 4,000 piglets inside large, enclosed sheds. Due to careful genetic work, each pig parlor resident looks like every other inhabitant. The ideal is a lean, meaty porker.

After about two months, these pigs are transported to other, similar facilities where they join as many as 6,000 pigs to be fed for several more months until they are ready for slaughter by a major packing company. Typically, these facilities are operated by three men. Huge amounts of waste are generated by these "finishing" plants. It is liquefied and sprayed on hay fields as fertilizer.

We visited one of many farms with as many as 10 buildings in which several thousand baby chicks are fed constantly. In about two months they become large enough to be taken to processing plants and turned into chicken nuggets, strips and planks. In most instances one or two families operate these new poultry factories.

This farm also raises cattle. The litter from the chicken houses is cured and fed to the steers as a portion of their ration. They are sold and shipped to feed lots to be finished on grain. The farmer told us that this process helps make it possible for him to stay in business. Several other operations do likewise.

Down the road we visited a dairyman, who with the help of one employee, feeds and milks 300 cows daily. The cows spend their days on concrete. Their forage and grain is brought to them. Records are kept of how much butter fat each cow produces. When she does not come up to standard, the cow is culled and sent to the slaughter house. While this may seem like a huge operation, there are other dairies where thousands of cows produce milk in the same manner.

Finally, we visited the 29 catfish ponds of an extended family. They shared with us about the efficiency with which the fish convert feed to protein. Each pond produces thousands of fish each year. The family spokesman complained about how similar fish are raised in cages in a Vietnam river. The stream is highly polluted so these scavenger fish have a diet of waste and garbage. American growers of catfish are protesting their import to the American markets where they are sold at a price with which American producers cannot compete.

I have come to know many of the farmers through these tours. I have worshiped with them in their churches. I have eaten with them in their homes. We work together on community projects. They are good and godly people. They are not greedy. They are not getting rich. They have seen many of their neighbors go under financially.

They are committed to being good stewards of God's creation. Farming is their life. Most are doing what they believe they need to do to survive.

They are caught up in the industrialization of American agriculture, where several ethical issues present themselves:

- A few giant corporations control the processing and distribution of food in our nation and in much of the world. They have become “vertically integrated,” which means they control enough stages of the production process to control prices generally.
- Most of the farms I visited are growing or producing under “contracts” with the big agricultural processors. The farmers have made large investments in facilities, and they must keep their contracts or lose the farm. Few have any options as to whom they can sell their products. They work long hours and carry deep debt. It is not an easy life.
- Industrialization of agriculture has called for standardization of plants and animals. While this may bring economies in processing, it tends to limit the gene pool, which in turn makes world food supplies vulnerable to the emergence of a disease that current varieties of plants or animals might not be able to resist.
- The industrialized farm needs a much smaller work force to produce products. But people need work. When this trend is coupled with the trend to de-industrialize rural communities, many areas are in danger of drying up and dying.
- The concentration of large numbers of animals in a confined place raises issues concerning the contamination of the environment.

Americans spend a smaller percentage of their income for food than most any nation. Unfortunately, there are many personal, social and environmental costs that do not appear on the bill when we check out at the grocery store.

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