3-1-1960

Who's Going to Farm?

Lee G. Burchinal

Iowa State University

Follow this and additional works at: http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/farmscience

Part of the Agriculture Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/farmscience/vol14/iss10/5

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Iowa Agricultural and Home Economics Experiment Station Publications at Iowa State University Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Iowa Farm Science by an authorized editor of Iowa State University Digital Repository. For more information, please contact digirep@iastate.edu.
Who's Going to Farm?

"Do the brightest, most able youths tend to leave the farm? Will the migration of youth deplete rural areas of future leadership?" The results of a preliminary study at Iowa State give some tentative answers.

by Lee G. Burchinal

ALL YOUNG MEN face the task of deciding about their immediate jobs and their life careers. Farm boys have to decide whether they wish to enter farming or to seek nonfarm employment or careers. Thousands of young men each year leave their farm homes for jobs and careers in towns and cities. And there's often speculation about differences between the young men who stay to farm and those who leave their local communities.

Put in bluntest terms, here are two typical questions: "Do the brightest, most able youths tend to leave the farm and rural areas?" "Will rural areas be depleted in future leadership by the migration of youth?"

Preliminary research completed at Iowa State provides some tentative answers to these kinds of questions. This information will be supplemented by a more extensive statewide study. But, for immediate clues, let's look at the preliminary information obtained from the 103 tenth and twelfth grade farm boys included in the study reported last month. (See "What's Your Son Going to Do?" in the March issue or reprint FS-861.) All of these boys answered questions about their plans and some characteristics of their families.

Of these boys, 27 percent said they planned to farm, another 27 percent were uncertain about their plans, and 46 percent definitely planned to enter nonfarm employment. In what ways were these three groups the same? Different?

Their Families . . .

First let's look at some of the farming and economic conditions of the boys' families.

The boys who said they planned to farm had an advantage over the other boys in terms of farm family resources; 68 percent of the fathers of the boys who planned to farm (farm oriented) were farm owner-operators. Only 30 percent of plan-nonfarm-job (nonfarm oriented) boys and of the uncertain boys lived on owner-operated farms. Also, the boys who planned to farm much more frequently reported that a farm was or would be available to them (81 percent). Only 45 percent of the nonfarm-oriented boys and 52 percent of the uncertain boys reported that a farm would be available to them.

While the percentages of ownership were similar among the families of the nonfarm-oriented and undecided boys, there were some indications that the families of the undecided boys had less farming resources. For example, more of the fathers of the undecided boys had nonfarm jobs than did the fathers of boys who planned either farm or nonfarm careers. Also, the level of farm mechanization was lower among the farms of families of the undecided boys. There was no difference on this basis, however, between the boys planning to farm and those definitely planning nonfarm careers.

Parents' Attitudes . . .

Usually we think of farm boys as being more likely to talk over their occupation plans with their fathers than with their mothers. But, in all three groups, boys more often reported their mothers as having expressed some opinion about their sons' occupational plans. Boys who had reached a definite decision about their future occupations most often reported discussions with both fathers and mothers about their occupational plans.

We found that 39 percent of the boys who planned to farm and
44 percent of the boys who definitely didn’t plan to farm reported that their fathers had never said much to them about occupational plans. A greater proportion, 65 percent, of the undecided boys reported this situation. The same trend held for mothers; 32 percent of the farm-oriented boys, 26 percent of the nonfarm-oriented boys and 50 percent of the undecided boys reported their mothers had never said much to them about future occupational plans.

Regarding future educational plans, mothers more frequently than fathers put emphasis on encouraging their sons to continue education. But the boys who planned to farm reported less frequent encouragement for additional education from either fathers or mothers. From fathers, 17 percent of the farm-oriented boys, 36 percent of the nonfarm-oriented boys and 40 percent of the undecided boys reported definite encouragement for continuing their education. From mothers, the percentages were 25, 53 and 54, respectively, for the three groups of boys.

**How Boys Compare . . .**

Boys who plan to farm had lower grades. Of the boys who planned to farm, 18 percent said they generally got A’s or B’s, 64 percent said they generally got C’s, and 18 percent said they usually got D’s and F’s. In contrast, 42 percent of the boys with definite nonfarm plans were in the A and B range, 50 percent usually got C’s, and 8 percent were in the D and F range. Of the undecided boys, 36 percent were in the A and B range, 53 percent said they usually got C’s, and 10 percent reported D’s and F’s.

Boys who plan to farm rate freedom on the job as the most important factor. The boys were asked to rate characteristics of jobs that appealed to them for their life’s work. Whether they planned to farm or not or were undecided, they all rated work which would always be interesting as of highest importance. “The amount of money” they could make and “pleasantness of working conditions” were of moderate importance to all boys. “Opportunity for physical work” was given a low priority by all.

But there were differences, too. Boys who planned to farm gave “freedom on the job, to be my own boss” the highest priority of all job characteristics listed. This was of secondary importance to boys in the other two groups. “Chance of advancement” was given a low priority by the boys who planned to farm; a moderate priority by the other boys. “Intellectual challenge” was ranked low by the farm-oriented and undecided boys but was of moderate importance to the nonfarm-oriented boys.

**Boys planning to farm rate farming over nonfarm work.** Of the boys planning to farm, 75 percent rated farming as better than most nonfarm jobs. This view was expressed by 15 percent of the boys who definitely planned not to farm and by 39 percent of the undecided boys. About the same percentage, 18 percent, of the farm-oriented and undecided boys considered farm and nonfarm work about equal in appeal, while 27 percent of the nonfarm-oriented boys held this view. At the other extreme, 7 percent of the farm-oriented boys, 58 percent of the nonfarm-oriented boys and 43 percent of the undecided boys rated most nonfarm jobs as being better than farming.

Farm-oriented boys strongly asserted the superiority of rural life. None of the boys who planned to farm felt that farm living was inferior to city life. But 13 percent of the boys planning not to farm and 11 percent of the undecided boys expressed this view. On the other hand, 14 percent of the farm-oriented boys, 18 percent of the undecided boys and 46 percent of the nonfarm-oriented boys felt that farm and city life were “about the same.” Most, 86 percent, of the boys planning to farm felt farm life was superior to city life. This view was shared by 71 percent of the undecided boys and 41 percent of the boys planning not to farm.

**How They Decided . . .**

Boys who plan to farm less often consult teachers or counselors about their occupational plans. Of the boys planning to farm, 57 percent said they hadn’t talked with a teacher or counselor about their occupational plans during the past year. For boys planning not to farm and the undecided boys, the corresponding figures were 36 and 22 percent, respectively. Percentages of the three groups of boys reporting one or two discussions with teachers or counselors were about the same; 36, 34 and 37 percent, respectively. At the other extreme, 7 percent of the farm-oriented boys, 30 percent of the nonfarm-oriented boys and 41 percent of the undecided boys reported three or more discussions about occupational plans.

Different persons influenced the decisions of the three groups of boys. The importance of discussions with teachers or counselors was reflected in the answers the boys gave as to who was important in helping them decide on their occupations.

Boys planning to farm listed fathers as the most important influence; teachers ranked next; mothers and friends tied for third. Boys planning nonfarm employment listed teachers or counselors first, with fathers, mothers and brothers ranked about equally as far less important. The undecided group rated fathers and teachers or counselors about equally and only slightly ahead of brothers and friends.

Boys planning to farm are more satisfied with their present job information. Of the boys planning to farm, 29 percent said they
needed little or no additional information about occupational opportunities other than farming. This view was held by 13 percent of those who planned not to farm and by 11 percent of the undecided boys. "Some" additional information was desired by 46 percent of the farm-oriented boys, by 15 percent of the nonfarm-oriented boys and by 21 percent of the undecided boys. Only 25 percent of the boys planning to farm wanted "considerably more" information about nonfarm jobs. This was true of 72 percent of the boys planning not to farm and of 68 percent of the undecided boys.

Boys planning to farm less often plan for education beyond high school. Of the boys planning to farm, 61 percent didn't plan for education beyond high school. This was true of 33 percent of the undecided boys and 11 percent of the boys who planned to enter nonfarm employment. College was in the plans of 25 percent of the farm-oriented boys, 48 percent of the occupationally undecided boys and 58 percent of the boys planning not to farm. Business or vocational training was planned by 14, 19 and 31 percent of the three groups, respectively.

Boys list different reasons for plans. Boys planning to farm were asked to indicate why farming appealed to them. The most important reason was that they "liked being a farmer better than anything else they could do." This reason was followed closely by the fact that a farm was available. Preferences for rural over city life ranked third. The feeling that they were better trained for farming than for any other job was fourth. Last, and barely mentioned, was that the boys' parents wanted them to farm.

Among the boys definitely planning nonfarm employment, the most important reason was that farming "didn't appeal to them." The second reason, considered much less important, was the "inability to make a decent living at farming." Still less important—but grouped closely in terms of importance to the boys—were the costs of obtaining a farm and equipment, parents' opposition to farming and the lack of community attraction to interest young people even if they might want to farm.

Farm or Not?

The questions posed at the beginning of the article must be rephrased in the light of the information from our preliminary study. The information indicates that a number of conditions combine to lead a young man to decide to farm or to seek other occupational opportunities. Much more than intellectual ability is involved. The material from this study indicates that the relative opportunities to start farming and the relative values placed on rural living and on farming as an occupation are closely related to the boy's plans.

So far we've been mainly presenting the facts as we found them in this one study. Now let's pull some of these findings together and take a look at their possible meanings.

Meaning of Findings . . .

The Grade Situation: The boys planning to farm generally received lower grades in school than the other two groups of boys. Does this mean that the prospective farmers among these boys are less intelligent as a group than the other two groups of boys? Maybe. But it could mean other things. Lower grades may have been observed for these boys, for example, because fewer of them planned to continue their education beyond high school. So they may not have worked as hard as others.

By itself, the fact that more of the boys who definitely plan to seek nonfarm jobs or who were uncertain about their careers tended to get higher grades doesn't necessarily mean the "brightest" boys are leaving their home communities. It may mean simply that boys who plan to farm place less value on formal education and are less willing to take full advantage of school opportunities.

Studies often show that intellectual ability and leadership ability are related to participation in school activities. And we found no difference among the three groups of boys in social participation. This suggests that factors other than general intelligence or ability were reflected in the differences in grades received by the three groups.

Decision Factors: Farming isn't an occupation a person can enter at any time or place he wants to. It requires access to land and equipment or to the necessary capital. An important difference between boys planning to farm and those not planning to farm was the availability of a farm. This was also closely related to the fact that many of the boys planning to farm had fathers who were owner-operators. But, again, the mere opportunity to farm isn't all that was involved in the boys' decisions.

The boys planning to farm said they generally preferred rural life over city life, liked farming better than any other job they could find and wanted work in which they could be their own boss. Being one's own boss appealed very highly to the boys who planned to farm.

Some of the decision factors for the boys planning not to farm were just the opposite—they less often reported farms available to them, for example, and fewer of their family farms were owner-operated. In addition, they and the undecided boys were often said that farming didn't appeal to them or didn't provide sufficient returns for them to make a decent living.

Still, the boys planning not to farm and the undecided boys seemed caught in a conflict between living and working in the city and living and working on the farm. Remember that 58 percent of the boys planning not to farm thought generally that nonfarm work was superior to farm work. But only 13 percent of these same boys said that city life in general was better than farm life.

The undecided boys, too, showed definite attachment to rural life and farming as an oc-
requently indicated a lack of opportunity to get started farming and were less satisfied with the returns from farming than the boys who planned to farm.

Farming by Default? A person may enter an occupational field after carefully considering his interests and abilities and the relative opportunities, rewards and training needed for one occupation in relation to others. Or, a person may enter an occupation because it's the only one with which he's reasonably familiar.

Some of the findings indicate that the last situation may apply to some of the boys who planned to farm. The boys who definitely planned to seek nonfarm employment had considered jobs other than farming; boys who planned to farm may or may not have seriously considered other occupations. Our findings suggest that at least some of them hadn't.

The boys planning to farm, for example, less frequently discussed occupation selection or job plans with teachers or counselors than did the other boys. They much more often indicated that their fathers, whose occupational knowledge may have been limited to farming, had the greatest influence on their decision. And the boys who planned to farm were much less interested than the other boys in having more information about nonfarm jobs.

One interpretation of these findings is that many of the boys who planned to farm made up their minds without much consideration of other job alternatives. This is fine when a young man has the interest, knowledge, ability and resources for successful farming. But premature commitment to any occupation can have unfavorable consequences—if the boy later finds he's not equipped to successfully carry out his chosen occupation.

The point here isn't a question of whether or not farming is a right or wrong choice for these boys. The question is whether they did in fact choose among other alternatives in line with their interests and abilities. Or did they more or less accept it without such considerations? If so, is this the best way to decide on any occupation? Both schools and parents have an important role in this respect, and, as some clubs are now showing, the 4-H vocational or career programs can be helpful in this area.

How Much Education?

In this country, the level of training necessary for most jobs is rising. This is true in agriculture as well as in technical, business and professional occupations. Young persons can obtain their basic training and some specialization in our high schools. But it's becoming increasingly necessary to plan for training and education beyond the high school level.

We found, however, that 61 percent of the boys who planned to farm and 33 percent of the undecided boys had no plans for training beyond high school. But only 10 percent of the boys planning nonfarm careers had no plans for additional training.

Two things are important here with respect to education after high school and the boys who plan to farm. (1) Today's farm operators need all of the education, training and experience they can get. Though experience alone is an excellent teacher, under today's conditions, mistakes made while acquiring experience in the absence of some training can be costly. (2) Some of the boys who plan to farm or who begin farming may not devote all of their lives to farming. They may still seek their ultimate careers in nonfarm employment. If so, they'll be competing with those who have had more training and education beyond high school.

One reason that the boys who planned to farm tended not to plan further education may lie in their parents' attitudes toward educational plans. Only a small proportion of the parents had definitely encouraged them to plan for training beyond high school. It's hard to say which is cause and effect here. Do parents minimize the importance of further education because they know their sons are going to farm and feel further training is unnecessary? Or is it because the boys haven't received much encouragement for further education and recognize that they may not get much of a nonfarm job with only a high school education and, therefore, decide to remain in farming? A little bit of both may be involved.

Rather than which causes the other, however, the important thing from our findings is that lack of further educational plans and planning to farm seem to go together.

Is the reason that considerably fewer of the boys who plan to farm don't plan additional education because these boys and their families can less well afford the cost of educational training? Not likely. Our findings indicate that the boys who plan to farm have equal or better financial resources than the other boys for college, business or vocational training. The family farm ownership was highest among the families of the boys who planned to farm. Farm mechanization level was similar for the families of the boys who planned to farm and the boys who planned to seek nonfarm employment but was lower for the farms of the undecided boys. So it's likely that family financial resources were similar for the farm- and nonfarm-oriented boys and greater than for the undecided boys.

On the basis of this study, the differences in educational attitudes of the parents and in the educational plans of the boys who planned to farm and those who don't must lie in areas other than financial resources. It seems more likely that the differences are related to the idea that farming doesn't require additional training beyond high school.

On the whole, however, it seems that, whether they plan to farm or not, young men should be encouraged to carefully consider various occupational alternatives in line with their interests and abilities and to look into training for their occupational choices. Further education is valuable in agriculture, and it's also important from the standpoint of preparation for profitable nonfarm jobs should the young man planning to farm decide at some future date to seek nonfarm employment.

15-491