

*Chapter One*

## Farmers Don't Live Here Anymore

“Do you know what I have come for?” says Jurgen, blustering and splendid in his glittering shirt and his gleaming armor. “For I warn you I am justice.”

“I think you are lying, and I am sure you are making an unnecessary noise. In any event, justice is a word, and I control all words.”

—*Jurgen, A Comedy of Justice*  
by James Branch Cabell

**A**t the end of 1971, when Richard Nixon nominated Earl Butz to be his second secretary of agriculture, the U.S. government was paying farmers over \$3 billion a year not to grow corn, wheat, rice, and several other crops. It was also using that money and various legal mechanisms to keep the price of milk, oranges, sugar, meat, tomatoes, and other food artificially high.

Butz's confirmation hearings were the most controversial in the history of the Senate Agriculture Committee. Traditionally confirmation hearings for agriculture secretaries were routine and nonpartisan, conducted in a quiet club-like atmosphere. For example Butz's predecessor, Clifford Hardin, was unanimously confirmed, and the hearing transcript was 11 pages long. The transcript of the Butz hearings before the same committee members ran 212 pages. The event even generated unprecedented television

coverage. The confirmation squeaked out of committee by a vote of 8 to 6 and through the Senate by 51 to 44.

The Senate Agriculture Committee was hostile because Butz opposed paying farmers not to grow and because he opposed governmental programs designed to keep farm prices high. His objective, he said, was "to get the government out of agriculture." The hearings introduced the public to the little-known word "agribusiness." Much was made of Butz's service on the board of directors of three *Fortune* 500 companies.<sup>1</sup> At the hearing Democratic Senator Fred Harris of Oklahoma called Butz "an agent of the giant agribusiness corporations that are driving the small farmers of America off the land." Harris said that unless the nomination were stopped, Richard Nixon and Earl Butz would successfully hand over the country's food production to big business.

But Harris and his committee colleagues knew that small farmers had been driven off the land long before, and that our country's food supply was already controlled by a few corporations and corporate-like farmers. Few senators on the committee were really concerned about Butz's presence on the board of three agribusinesses. Most received campaign contributions from agribusinesses and promoted their interests in Congress, including liberals such as Democratic Senator Hubert Humphrey of Minnesota.

Because Butz insisted on saying aloud that agriculture in the U.S. is a business, however, he provoked congressional anger and continued to generate controversy about his farm policies throughout his tenure as secretary. Congressional farm experts didn't disagree with Butz's description of reality, but they were incensed by his indiscretion, afraid that his public honesty might threaten their power. They had been making policy for decades based on the premise that agriculture was not a business. As a result, from November 1971 until Butz resigned in 1976, senators and representatives who knew better unleashed their rhetoric about the danger to the family farm.

An incident from April 1975 illustrates how easy it was for congressional farm experts to get caught up in their own rhetoric. Hubert Humphrey, chairman of the Joint Economic Committee of Congress, was holding hearings on "the entire range of agriculture questions." Senator William Proxmire (a Democrat from Wisconsin) stopped by to complain that the Department of Agriculture was dumping cheese on the market and driving dairy farmers out of business. "Last year we lost 10 farmers a day in our state," he said. An aide whispered, "Most died of old age."

Finally, after hearing nearly three hours of testimony, Humphrey delivered an impassioned speech. "I remember the Depression days when the people that really led the farmers' revolt were not some farmers that had . . . 10 acres . . . and never made a dime, but the leading farm organizer in my part of the country was a fellow by the name of Hanson, who was a pillar in the Lutheran Church and who was one of the most prosperous farmers that we had in there in the 1920s. He was out there leading the parade right down to Campbell Park in 1934. I remember the farmers going down the street with pitchforks and rakes in their hands." Then Humphrey said, "I remember a few hangings. They were Federal judges. I hope that doesn't happen again."

Agriculture Secretary Butz, scheduled to lead off the next round of testimony, was already being fitted for the noose. Humphrey's anger filled the air with excitement and it was easy to imagine how, as the young Democratic-Farmer-Labor mayor of Minneapolis, Humphrey had ignited the 1948 Democratic National Convention. It was only after he banged the gavel and said, "We have to go," that it became apparent the room was empty. Only one reporter was present. Fewer than 10 people heard his remarks.

Decades before the Butz nomination there were few farmers in the United States. By 1971 4.6 percent of the American people lived and worked on farms. More people lived in the cities of New York and Philadelphia than on

all the farms in the U.S. There were fewer farmers than unemployed people.

Consequently most Americans did not know where their food came from. By 1971 most people had difficulty locating the nearest farm, could not describe the process involved in producing hamburgers or hamburger rolls, and could not tell where the sugar in their coffee or the rice the United States shipped to East Pakistan came from. Few understood basic biological facts, such as a cow—like all mammals—must be pregnant to give milk, and as a result artificial insemination had become indispensable to milk production. An airplane planting seeds or three workers harvesting a thousand acres of wheat was outside their experience. Few had been to a corn farm in Iowa or had seen rows of machine-planted lettuce in California growing as far as the eye could see.

In 1974 a census report noted that Steele County, North Dakota, had the highest per capita income in the country, and a stand-up comedian boasted he could prove North Dakota did not exist: "Has anyone in the room ever been there?" Even in California, America's most populous state, the rich agricultural valleys were isolated from population centers, and there was little motivation to get off the freeways and visit the farms.

California's Imperial Valley illustrates the isolation. To the northeast lie the Chocolate Mountains, where in the late 1850s advertisements for the stage read, "Passengers are advised to provide themselves with a Sharp's rifle and one hundred rounds of ammunition." The road east goes to Yuma, Arizona, past the desert where Hollywood used to film its French Foreign Legion movies.

To get to the valley, one drives 115 miles due east of San Diego along Interstate 8, a multi-lane freeway. Spanish explorers called the route *Jornada de la Muerta*—Journey of Death. In winter, en route from the 60-degree weather in San Diego to the 73-degree weather in below-sea-level El Centro, one often has to follow snow plows among the

3000-foot peaks of the Peninsula Range, which separates San Diego's congressional representative from the rest of the huge and sparsely populated district. Coming down into the desert, the traveler notices chaparral, yellow-brown rocks, and the barrenness of the countryside.

After getting off the freeway and driving down two-lane Route 98, suddenly one sees a clump of trees and—poof—green! For some 80 miles, hugging the Mexican-American border along the highway marked Border Friendship Route, the All-American Canal brings water from the Colorado River, turning (as an historical marker notes) a "once arid area into an agricultural paradise." Nowhere in the United States is the importance of water more obvious than in this valley, which has an annual rainfall of 3.2 inches. The federal government helped finance more than 3200 miles of canals and irrigation ditches—the largest irrigation project in the world—that turned a half-million acres of desert into fertile land.

By 1969 Imperial had become the fourth richest agricultural county in the nation, supplying most eastern states' winter lettuce, and by 1975 it was also selling \$8.8 million a year in asparagus, \$2.9 million in watermelons, \$57.2 million in sugar beets, \$43.2 million in wheat, and \$122 million in cattle. Like the even richer counties farther north, Imperial can grow virtually every commercial crop in its irrigated soil.

"Nobody comes to Imperial County just to see Imperial County," the wife of a county agricultural official said at the Mid-Winter Fair. Few visitors just pass through.

"This farming town is the 'carrot capital' of the world," sports columnist Dave Anderson later wrote from Holtville. "Bugs Bunny should train here instead of baseball players." Except for baseball players, drug smugglers, army bomb testers, illegal aliens on the run, and people who love the desert, agriculture is the only reason for being in the Imperial Valley.

In addition to being isolated geographically, by 1971

farms had become removed from America's consciousness. Most Americans still thought of a farm according to the Old MacDonald stereotype, with some wheat here, cows there, apple trees elsewhere, and a Grant Wood family working together in bucolic bliss. Although such places still existed, it had been decades since they supplied a significant percentage of our nation's food. In 1972 there were a total of 2.9 million farms in the U.S.; the 1 million largest ones provided 90 percent of America's food. The *average* farm was 382 acres and getting larger. By 1976, according to one estimate, a farmer had to have at least 3000 acres of wheat or 1000 acres of corn to afford a tractor. Farmland in Iowa was selling for \$2000 an acre. A \$6-million operation was not what most Americans thought of when they heard about the plight of the family farm.

By 1972 deploring the corporate nature of American agriculture had become a long-standing tradition. In the 1906 novel *The Octopus*, one of Frank Norris' heroines "remembered the days of her young girlhood passed on a farm in eastern Ohio—five hundred acres, neatly partitioned into the water lot, the cow pasture, the corn lot, the barley field, and wheat farm, cosey [sic], comfortable, homelike; where the farmers loved their land, caressing it, coaxing it, nourishing it as though it were a thing almost conscious; where the seed was sown by hand, and a single two-horse plough was sufficient for the entire farm; where the scythe sufficed to cut the harvest and the grain was thrashed with flails.

"But this new order of things—a ranch bounded only by the horizons, where, as far as one could see, to the north, to the east, to the south, and to the west, was all one holding, a principality ruled with iron and steam, bullied into a yield of three hundred and fifty thousand bushels . . . troubled her and even at times filled her with an undefinable terror. To her mind there was something inordinate about it all, something almost unnatural. The direct brutality of ten thousand acres of wheat, nothing but wheat as far as the

eye could see, stunned her a little. The one-time writing-teacher of a young ladies' seminary . . . shrank from it. She did not want to look at so much wheat. There was something vaguely indecent in the sight, this food of the people, this elemental force, this basic energy, weltering here under the sun in all the unconscious nakedness of a sprawling, primordial Titan."

During the 1970s there were only 4.4 million farmers, hired hands, seasonal farmworkers, and migrants working on all the farms in the nation. The same California Norris described was producing a quarter of America's food. More than 15 percent of its farms had payrolls larger than \$20,000 a year. United Brands, a New York-based conglomerate, owned the largest lettuce farm in the country, California's InterHarvest, and farmed a total of 22,000 acres in California and Arizona. Tenneco, a corporation with interests in everything from natural-gas pipelines to automotive components, farmed 1.4 million acres in California and Arizona.

Even many farms defined as "family farms" were corporate in nature. For example, a third of all the wine the United States consumed was produced in California on the 3500-acre "family farm" owned by Ernest and Julio Gallo. Many family farmers were members of large agricultural cooperatives, which controlled the marketing and price of such commodities as rice, cranberries, lettuce, and milk. Most fresh oranges came from California and Arizona growers, 70 percent of whom were members of the Sunkist marketing cooperative.

Because so few people lived on farms, and because a farm could extend for thousands of acres, capital-intensive machinery had become indispensable. A 1976 USDA yearbook showed an eight-wheeled tractor that retailed for about \$50,000 and had an air-conditioned cab with an AM-FM radio and other special equipment. Owner Ronnie Lyons in Missouri "often spends 12 hours a day driving the tractor."

Because huge tracts of food attract swarms of insects,

agricultural economists argued that without pesticides and herbicides, capital-intensive agriculture would be impossible. Machines sprayed the land with fertilizers and the crops with pesticides and herbicides, and still other machines did the harvesting. Long before 1972 farming had come to resemble an automated factory where few people were needed to produce the product.

Consider, for example, the technology involved in planting rice in southwest Louisiana. It was morning at the Jennings Municipal Airport in Jefferson Davis Parish, which is part of the seventh congressional district, the largest rice-producing district in the country. A group of men talked about the previous night's tornadoes and hauled hundred-pound sacks of seed rice from the rear of a flatbed truck, slit the sacks, and dumped the rice into a large hopper. The loader truck lifted the hopper, with its 2000 pounds of rice, and in less than 10 minutes the seeds were inside the tank of a single-seat Grumman-American AG-Cat airplane, and the plane was aloft.

The seeds were kernels of rice left to soak overnight in a nearby canal. Already little shoots had sprouted from each kernel. Two days before, the rice could have been hulled, milled, and sold for premium prices. It was the best of the previous year's crop, carefully selected; if all went well, a high percentage of the new crop would be long, narrow kernels, white and unbroken when the husks were removed and the bran milled off. Milling tends to break inferior grades' kernels, which stick together and appear mushy. Mushy rice is not where the money is.

The farmers here said they were producing rice for the "American housewife," verbal shorthand for consumers who buy the white rice that lacks most of the minerals, protein, and niacin for which rice is famous and who insist on each cooked kernel being separate and visually attractive. To meet specifications for millable rice, research services of federal and state agriculture departments have developed special varieties, which are also adapted to the climate, soil,

and pest conditions of the region. The seed rice in the tank of the Grumman airplane was the product of this research.

It was May Day, and more than 90 percent of the crop had already been planted. The airplane, owned by farmer Ed Krielow, flew low over fields already green and high from an early March planting. The rush was on to get the final seed in the ground.

The pilot swooped low over a rectangle flooded with water, a rice paddy or "field" with tractor-made levees poking up from the water's surface. Two men stood on opposite sides of the field holding white flags in their hands to tell the pilot where to plant the seeds.

The plane flew so close to the water that there were only inches to spare. Little ripples appeared. "Do you see the seeds?" Ed Krielow asked, but in the excitement the observer didn't know what to look at. There were ripples, but the plane looked as if it was about to crash into the telephone poles and electric wires as it turned around and went back into the rice field.

Ed Krielow said, dismissing the danger, "You should see that boy flying when we spray Stam [weed killer]. His wheels graze right on the levees." This was not especially reassuring, but this time the observer knew where to look. Plane. A white shower of seeds. Ripples. "See?" he said. "That was the seed we saw loaded a little while ago." That was how it was possible to plant rice with only three people—a pilot and two fellows holding white flags.

After this factory-like mechanized production of crops on specialized farms, the raw produce often bore little relationship to the finished product. Increasingly the nation ate processed food. By 1972 most fruits and vegetables were either frozen or canned. In 1973 the country's largest cash crop was soybeans, which few Americans eat unprocessed.

In 1976 the largest cash crop was corn, about 80 percent of which was eaten by animals. "Hogs are essentially condensed corn and soybeans," Butz once explained, and he was not joking. Until the 1960s most corn farmers fed corn

to their own livestock, and they sold only a third of the crop. The changing economics of specialization required, as one observer explained, "Animals and not crops; crops and not animals." By 1970 55 percent of the corn crop was sold in the marketplace. By 1975 the figure jumped to 64 percent and was increasing at 1 percent a year.

Calvin Beale, in charge of population studies at the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), told of a corn farmer he met in a cafe in Storm Lake, Iowa. "He had gotten out of cattle because he said it doesn't pay unless you have a large feedlot operation. Now he grows nothing but crops on his farm, and with no cattle he works in winter in a job in a local plant. This is in western Iowa in the heart of the Corn Belt. Now, you don't think of that area as having large industry, but there are large meat-processing plants and other factories you wouldn't think were out there, and he said he had no trouble finding work from November until the spring. I asked him what he did and he said he makes parking meters. And he doesn't have a small farm either. With specialization, this is becoming more and more common."

In 1969 there were 985,000 corn farmers in the United States. Considering that the USDA estimated a farmer needs a minimum of 1000 acres to take advantage of modern equipment and technology, not many people had farms large enough to provide them sufficient income. Only 157,000 farmers grew corn on more than 100 acres. By 1974 there were 11 percent fewer corn farmers than in 1969, and large specialized operations increased their domination. For these capital-intensive farmers, high grain prices were necessary to stay in business. For the farmers who produced chicken, milk, beef, eggs, turkey, and pork, corn was important as a raw material. For them, low corn prices were necessary to stay in business.

The reason agricultural policy existed was to provide a balance, so that, for example, grain prices would be high enough that some farmers would produce grain, low enough

that other farmers would raise the animals that converted grain into the desired kinds of food, and stable enough that processors and retailers could market products in an orderly way. That policy had been created to prevent the corporate takeover of American farming.

Paradoxically, as corporations and corporate-like organizations succeeded at producing and marketing crops, their takeover of farming provided the balanced, stable prices government policy was supposed to create. It did so by blurring the distinction between producer and processor.

In a process called vertical integration, large companies and agricultural cooperatives took over all production and processing from farming to supermarket. Ralston Purina, for example, not only cleaned and packaged chickens, but it also owned the corn and soybean acreage that grew the Ralston Purina feed that fed the Ralston Purina-owned and -processed chickens. Companies owned farmland, and they leased it and the services of farmers; farmers essentially became managers and skilled laborers who produced raw products. In many parts of the country, if farmers wanted to sell their products, they either had to sign contracts with large companies or to join corporate-like agricultural cooperatives.

By the time Earl Butz became secretary of agriculture, vertical integration accounted for 40 percent of the potatoes Americans ate, 75 percent of processed vegetables, 95 percent of broilers, 70 percent of citrus products, and 33 percent of fresh vegetables. Americans were buying orange juice from Coca-Cola, lettuce from Dow Chemical, Wonder Bread from ITT, and ham from Greyhound. Farming as a way of life in the United States had become a museum-like curiosity, as contemporary as silversmithing, hand printing, and other crafts on display in colonial Williamsburg.

---

1. Clifford Hardin, Butz's predecessor, took Butz's seat on the board of the Ralston Purina Company—a little-noticed event because Hardin avoided controversy.