

# County Farming Runs 'Against The Norm'

BY MARJORIE MEGIVERN

Scary headlines and televised scenes of somber farmers watching the sale of their homes has painted a grim picture of American farming over the past two years.

As drought has been followed by flooding, and embargo by rising export prices, the country has seen its breadbasket at risk, the men and women who operate it suddenly unable to dig out from under financial, political and economic crises.

The situation is less desperate in some parts of the county, and Brunswick County is among those where most farmers have avoided disaster, according to Milton Coleman, director of the county's Agricultural Extension Service office.

"Fortunately, we're against the norm, for many reasons," he said.

Agriculture Agent Billy Barrow agreed, "Our people have not been hurt as bad as others."

Though there are slightly more than 2,000 farms in the county, and about 360 tobacco farmers, only a handful of foreclosure notices were sent out here last year, according to Ted Rivenbark, director of Farmers Home Administration, the chief lending agency for local farmers.

"There are not as many full-time farmers here as elsewhere, for one thing," he said, "but all farmers are suffering to some degree because of price drops in corn, soybeans and tobacco."

Rivenbark said the Department of Agriculture ordered a moratorium on foreclosures for over a year, hoping the farm economy would improve. "But it didn't," he said.

### Pain of Foreclosure

Despite Brunswick County's more favored status, there are those who have lost their homes and livelihood in the current crunch, and their pain is as real as any televised in the midwest.

One such family is that of Gary and Mary Long of Longwood, who had to walk out of their home in September of 1985 and see a lock put on the door by sheriff's deputies.

They had filed Chapter 7 bankruptcy, which means complete liquidation of all assets, with the proceeds going to the creditor, FmHA in this case.

"What hurt the most was having to leave our home," said Mary Long. "We're just about over it now, but I had a rough year, when I was real depressed."

The Longs had, for 18 years, grown tobacco, corn,

soybeans and sweet potatoes on 27 acres that included the family home.

"I was raised on the farm and haven't done anything else, except for two years in the Army," Long said. Mary helped, keeping records and working in the fields. "Many a time, I've suckered tobacco in 103 degrees," she laughed.

In 1980 the bad times began, with prices declining and wet weather and mold ruining the tobacco and sweet potatoes. "I decided in 1982 not to fight it any longer and get out," Long said. He had already filed for bankruptcy the year before.

The Longs were in a better position than many, as he went to work as a lineman for Brunswick Electric Membership Corporation, and Mary got a job with Brunswick Hospital. Also, Mary's mother let them live, free of rent, in a tiny house she owned in Longwood.

Now, five years after bankruptcy proceedings began, the Longs are beginning to look at the future with some optimism. Two years from now, their credit rating will be healthy again, with the bankruptcy removed from it. They'll build another home on eight acres deeded to them by his parents.

And they say the losses they endured have strengthened the family. "It's brought us closer, because we've fussed over money a lot," Long said.

The Longs say many of their neighbors had similar experiences. "I know five families in about five miles around here that had the same problems," Long said.

"A woman called the last year," Mary added, "and said we didn't know each other, but she knew what we were going through. She said she and her husband were faced with it, too, and she wanted to know how we got through it. I talked to her for about an hour."

Long admitted he is disappointed at having to give up farming, but said he won't go back to it, except for part-time combining for neighbors.

"It was the weather that caused our troubles, not bad management," he said.

### Roof of Farm Problems

Weather has always been the chief risk for farmers, but Barrow said those who stay with it through many years of good and bad weather can, on the average, make a go of it.

The current problems with American farming are more complicated than that, and go back to the early 1970's.

"There was worldwide economic growth then," he



A FOR SALE SIGN tells the story of this house in Longwood that was the home of Gary Long and his family until farming setbacks forced him into

bankruptcy. The house was sold last week by the Brunswick County Sheriff's Department.

explained, "and Russia's grain crop failure triggered a rise in exports. The philosophy in American agriculture was, 'We've got to feed the world. We must produce!' Demand for our products grew stronger and we got the highest prices ever in 1973-74."

Barrow said U.S. exports rose from \$2.3 billion in 1945 to \$7.7 billion in 1971, and took a phenomenal leap to \$4 billion in 1981. Then began a decline that continued to the present. Projected exports for 1986 were \$26.5 billion.

### International Scene

Wilton Harrelson, owner of Harrelson Farm Center near Shallotte, said during those years the action that ultimately hurt farmers was the embargo on exports by Presidents Nixon, Ford and Carter.

"They were using agricultural products as political tools," he said, "so we became unreliable suppliers and other countries got into it and we lost our markets. Those that used to be our customers are now our competitors."

What happened on the farm in the heyday of production was a huge investment in machinery and land by farmers who looked to a rosy future. The drop in corn and soybean prices, as well as inroads by foreign tobacco caught many deeply in debt. Then a few bad-weather years finished them off.

Brunswick County farmers, however, avoided the enormous indebtedness. Coleman said, "There's a strong pay-as-you-go attitude here, so (our farmers) haven't paid the high interest rates and don't have the big debts."

According to Coleman, diversification is another reason this region is faring better than some others.

"Some have gone into other businesses and sold or leased their land, and others continue farming part-time, but have jobs to supplement their incomes," he said. "Also, with increased development in this county, land values have remained constant."

Barrow said the tourism and development of the 80's paved the way for some farmers to go into real estate. "Land that would have become prime farmland is now being snapped up by developers," he said.

### Diversify Helps

There are many stories of diversification in Brunswick County. Wilbur and Mary Earp of Wimbrow are an example of how good management of diverse operations can overcome disaster.

Their grape vineyard, which Barrow said was one of the most profitable around, was wiped out in 1984 by Hurricane Diana. "They'd planned for that grape income to pay for expansion of their log operation," he said.

The Earps are making a comeback now, though said Mrs. Earp. "We had tough times." They're growing wheat, feeding cattle and continuing a successful swine production.

A dramatic switch in farming, Barrow said, was made by Kelly Holden who switched from tobacco farming into vegetable production for roadside stands.

### Farmers' Market

The transition to vegetable farming has been minimal here, Coleman said. Recently, Harrelson and Albert Parker, with the cooperation of the extension office, sponsored a meeting to determine how a proposed southeastern regional farmers market might be used by local farmers. Though it was poorly attended, Coleman promised another in February, "where we'll have a smorgasbord of ideas for farmers."

He said his office has tried to help with diversification, suggesting, for instance, peach orchards and cucumber production. There are now about 150 acres in peach orchards in the county.

Harrelson, who is active in the movement, said this trend, as well as the downsizing in tobacco, corn and soybean farming, has affected his business.

"I've had to diversify, too, and I've gone to garden supplies," he said.

Harrelson said North Carolina farmers are in better shape than their counterparts because they have always been more diversified. "The small family farms are on their way out, here, though," he added, "and I don't think they'll be back. We'll have larger farm units, run by fewer people."

Barrow has a different theory: "If someone had enough capital and really wanted to farm, now is a good time to get into it, when everyone else is getting out," he said. "He should start small, part-time, and raise tobacco and swine, staying away from corn and soybeans."

The county agricultural extension office has stood ready to help farmers make decisions about their future, throughout the crises of recent years, but Barrow said there has been no response.

"Farmers are a little independent," he laughed. The helping hand remains extended. That office will hold a seminar Jan. 13 on taxes and how the new tax reform bill will affect farmers.

"We're always happy to sit down with anyone and look at their farming situation and make suggestions," said Barrow.



WILTON HARRELSON shows off the colorful plants in his store, an example of merchandise that has taken

the place of farm supplies since farming has declined in the county.

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