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Farming Is Not for Dullards

FOR THE PAST SEVERAL WEEKS a young dairy farmer from upstate New York has reigned as "champion" on one of television's most popular quiz programs, "Twenty-One." Displaying a remarkable store of knowledge—and the ability to recall it on demand—he has singlehandedly erased for millions of Americans the traditional image, however inaccurate, of the farmer as a rather dull fellow who works with his hands because he isn't quite smart enough to support himself otherwise.

No one—with the possible exception of the man himself—would insist that Harold Craig is an "average" farmer in terms of intelligence or breadth of knowledge. But his performance has driven home with dramatic impact the point that the day of the slow-witted, uneducated farmer—if such a day ever was—is past.

The successful operation of a modern farm, in fact, calls for more skills and greater intelligence than most city-dwellers would like to admit. And with the trend toward the application of science to farming constantly gaining momentum, it becomes increasingly evident that this is no game for amateurs.

The modern farmer or grower has become a professional. In relatively few years, he has transformed his enterprise from a small, self-sufficient operation to one of larger and, usually, more specialized outlines. Instead of striving to produce or perform for himself and his family all the materials and services they require, he now concentrates his efforts on those commodities he is best equipped to produce, and buys from others the auxiliary services and supplies he needs. The transition, still in progress, has greatly increased the interdependence between agriculture and other industries.

Because the transition is still in progress, the modern farmer is a man on the lookout for ideas. And because of the increasing interdependence, more nonfarm groups than ever are interested in supplying ideas to him.

How does the individual farmer winnow these ideas, and decide which of the myriad new techniques can be profitably applied to his operations? Where does he first learn of fundamental and applied research findings that can help him to farm better? And once he has heard of something new, where does he turn for further information; what influences him to try or not to try?

These are questions to which many groups—governmental, educational, business, and industrial—are seeking answers.

Studies already completed have shown that strong influence is exerted at one point or another along the line by other farmers or friends, by farm papers, agricultural extension groups and their publications, county agents, other agricultural agencies, and radio and television. Commercial concerns, including dealers and salesmen, have been shown to have but little direct influence, although their ratings would doubtless be higher if their support of farm-oriented publications and radio and television programs were taken into account.

The fertilizer and pesticides industries have a big stake in the continuing adoption of improved farming techniques. And both industries have set about learning, in as much detail as possible, what influences farmers to use their products. The National Plant Food Institute is now supporting a national survey aimed at determining the factors which influence the farmer to buy fertilizers, and the National Agricultural Chemicals Association is featuring prominently on its fall meeting program a discussion of the influences that motivate him to purchase pesticides.

As more studies are completed and as more of the findings are put to use, the lag between laboratory discovery and field application will be progressively trimmed. Perhaps the suggestion that a degree in chemistry or chemical engineering will soon be a primary requirement for success in farming will turn out to be not entirely facetious.