

FOCUS ON AGRICULTURE

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American Farm Bureau Federation

Today's 'Amazing' Farms

By Stewart Truelsen

What a difference the right adjective makes. Put the modifier “family” in front of “farm” and the words mean more than just a farm that is family owned-and-operated. “Family farm” evokes warm, nostalgic feelings with farmers and non-farmers alike. You can just picture yourself as a child running across a farmyard to a big white house because mother is ringing the dinner bell.

Replace the word “family” with “factory” and see what a difference it makes. The warm smiles on the non-farmer faces are gone and farmers blanch at the term. No farmer wants their family’s farm labeled a factory farm, even if it is a large operation and uses the advantages of science and technology to produce farm products efficiently and affordably.

“Factory farm” has become a derogatory term thrown around loosely by critics of today’s agriculture. It was different, however, in the 1930s. An article published by *Scientific American* in 1937 praised modern production of laying hens and broiler chickens. “The advantages of the factory system over the open-range method have been definitely established,” said the author, Peter H. Smith. “Caged birds standing on wire are kept away from disease-carrying soil and litter; unit water-supply receptacles also prevent infection,” he added.

Smith noted that some egg farms were moved closer to cities as a result. “The egg factory,” as he called it, “makes possible production at the center of consumption, reducing transportation costs, breakage, and assuring freshness to the consumer.” Another reason for moving the hens indoors was to eliminate fluctuations in production during winter months.

The concept of a factory farm was a good idea in the 1930s, but over the years the term took on a different meaning for at least a couple reasons. First of all, the size of farms became a big political issue by the 1950s. The Truman administration tried unsuccessfully to mandate the size of farms through farm program legislation. Similar issues arose in the West over water and grazing rights. Big became bad and small became good in farm debates.

Next, the animal rights movement came on the scene and demanded rights for animals, including farm animals. Farmers today remain responsible for the welfare of animals in their care, but to equate animal rights with human rights, as some activists did, was too much to accept.

In the 1930s, the prevailing attitude about farm animals expressed in the *Scientific American* article was that the chicken’s “life work” was to provide consumers with meat and eggs. That’s why they were here, and why we were thankful for them.

The term “factory farm” will never be restored to its original meaning—a modern, efficient operation for the production of meat, milk or eggs—but it doesn’t really matter.

What matters is that farmers fed nearly 123-million Americans in 1930, and today they feed 308-million. We eat much better for a smaller share of family income than generations ago. “Amazing” seems like better adjective to use in describing today’s American farm.