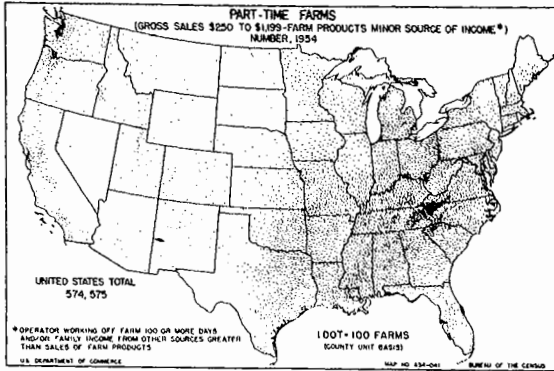


CHAPTER 7—FRUIT (PART-TIME)

Meet Axel Peterson.

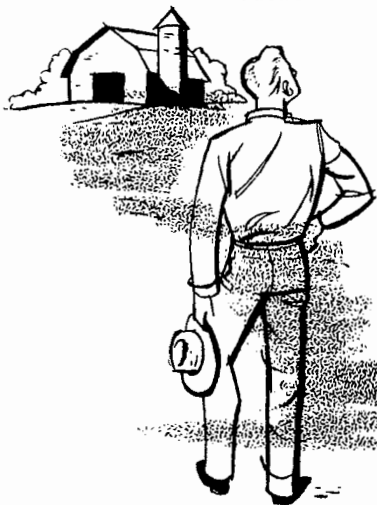
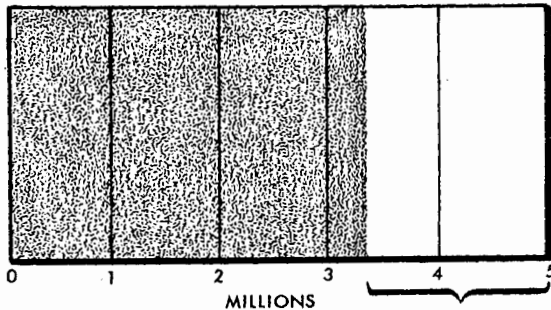


Now we are going to look in on the affairs of Axel Peterson, the youngest of the three Peterson boys who run a filling station in the San Joaquin Valley in California. Axel also runs a fruit farm though at present he makes more money selling gas than fruit. In combining agricultural and nonagricultural work he is more or less typical of some 2 million of our present-day farmers.

About 1880 this country reached a turning point in its economic development at which only half of the working population was in agriculture while half was in industry and business. The same process that brought us to that state seems now to be bringing us close to another turning point at which farm people, who today are only an eighth of the population, may earn only half their income from agriculture while the other half will come from off-farm sources—mainly wages and salaries for work in industry and business.

Off-farm earnings going up.

TOTAL NUMBER OF FARMERS



FARMERS WITH OFF FARM INCOME GREATER THAN FARM PRODUCTS SOLD.

Many commercial farmers have off-farm income.

We have not yet reached this point, but we are not far from it. Out of every \$10 of farm family income in 1954, \$5.90 was the net return from the farm operation (including Government payments and products consumed at home), and \$4.10 came from sources outside the farm. This is not true, of course, for every farm family, but it is true for farmers as a group. The total income of farm families in 1955 was about 19.3 billion dollars, of which 11.3 billion was the net return from farming while 8 billion dollars came from off-farm sources. The amount of off-farm income varied in different regions, with different types of farming, and at different economic levels, but the trend is evident almost everywhere at all levels.

Of the 8 billion dollars of off-farm income, the farmers at the two top economic levels, selling \$10,000 to more than \$25,000 worth of products a year, received over one billion dollars; those at the two lowest levels, with farm sales of \$250 to \$2,500 a year, over 1.4 billion; and the middle group, with farm sales of \$2,500 to \$10,000, about 1.8 billion. That leaves about 3.7 billion dollars, which went to families not counted as commercial producers—the part-time farmers, who received almost 1.7 billion dollars of the nonfarm income, and residential farmers, who received a little over two billion. Part-time farmers, under the Census definition, are those selling \$250 to \$1,200 worth of farm products who either work more than 100 days a year off the farm or whose off-farm income is bigger than their farm income. Residential farmers are those selling less than \$250 worth of farm products a year, many of these having a bigger off-farm than farm income.

The distinction between commercial and noncommercial farmers is useful since the former are responsible for 98 percent of the value of farm products sold and the latter for only two percent. But it is also somewhat artificial in view of the fact that the commercial producers, as we have just noted, get 4.3 billion dollars of the off-farm income and a little more than half of them did some off-farm work in 1955, while the noncommercial producers get only 3.7 billion dollars and less than half of them did off-farm work. True, the residential farmers, being limited by definition to farm sales under \$250 (when they run over that they are counted as part-time farmers) cannot contribute very much to total agriculture production, even though they are numerous—almost 900,000 of them, about

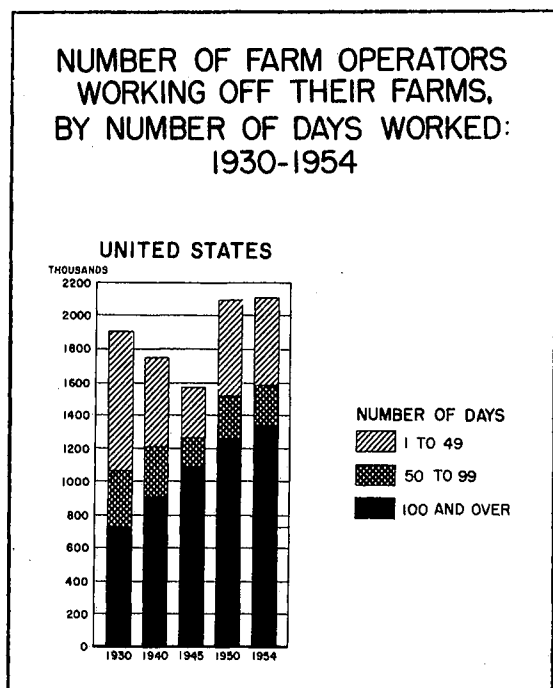
one farmer out of five. The so-called part-time farmer, however, may be very much a commercial producer in spirit, intent, and fact. But he too is limited by definition—in this case, to farm sales of less than \$1,200, which puts him agriculturally at the lowest economic level, Class VI. When he sells more than this, he is no longer counted as a part-time farmer; he has graduated to the status of a commercial farmer, no matter how many days he may work off the farm or how big his nonfarm income is. It is an odd fact that between 1950 and 1954 the proportion of commercial producers working off their farms a considerable part of the year—more than 100 days—increased from 26.8 to 32.5 percent, and the proportion with more nonfarm than farm income increased from 21.4 to 25.2 percent, while on both counts the proportion of noncommercial producers decreased.

Today city and country mingle.

In other words, four out of every ten farmers in the United States today are actually part-time farmers, not in the Census classification but in the sense that they spend only part of their time farming. In fact if time could be measured by income, which of course it cannot, they spend on the average 22 weeks a year in off-farm work and 30 weeks farming.

Perhaps nothing illustrates more strikingly how in this American civilization the city has been moving to the country and the country to the city in a steady growth of interpenetration and interdependence.

This digression was necessary to give some of the background. Now to return to Axel Peterson.



Axel and Hilda both have jobs.

Axel and Hilda have not set out on an easy road, but they are doing what they want to do. The service station business itself is an exacting one, but with three brothers working together Axel is able to stagger his hours and get stretches of time off when he needs to. His farm is not far from the station, which is on the edge of a large town. Hilda has a job in town as a stenographer; she is a good one and makes around \$1,000 a year working part-time. Axel's share of the service station earnings totals about \$3,500 a year. The Petersons have no children yet, but they want a big family. Whether Hilda will continue working after the first baby arrives remains to be seen. Probably not; but many women do nowadays, and even when they have children a considerable number of farm as well as city wives work in offices or stores or factories nearby. In 1955 more than a tenth of the total off-farm income of part-time farm families was earned by the wives, and those families reporting this source of income averaged over \$1,400.

But they are farmers too.

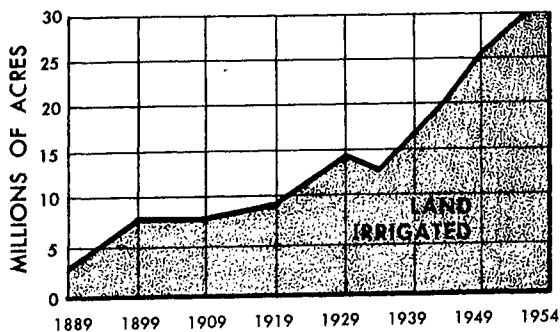
The Petersons both came from a California farm background; Axel's third brother, the oldest, inherited the home place when their father died. The young Petersons have put all the money they could scrape together into their farm. The service station too was a good deal of a strain in the early days, but the biggest share of that expense was borne by the two older brothers while Axel was still in school.

This is a great fruit area, the value of the fruit crop went up twenty million dollars between 1950 and 1954 while the number of fruit growers went down. Especially is it a great peach area, one of the best in the United States; and the Petersons' first ambition is to have a sizable peach orchard. It takes five years for peaches to bear, and their trees had not come into bearing at the time the last United States Agricultural Census was taken. But they had set out close to 500 trees in a three-year period, like a lot of other farmers in the area, where the acreage in both clingstone and freestone peaches expanded materially between 1950 and 1954—the latter, the predominant type, by 30 percent. Axel figured that if they could get around three bushels per tree, which was the average production for California's 7.5 million trees (it was less than two bushels for the United States as a whole), and if the price were somewhere near the 1954 level of \$1.50 a bushel, they should gross close to \$2,200. They plan to enlarge their farm production as their circumstances make it possible to get more free time or hire more help, and especially to bring more land under irrigation; for practically all fruit here is irrigated, as is much other crop and pasture land.

Strawberries while waiting for peaches.

Meanwhile they were using strawberry production in part of the peach orchard as a source of cash income, probably temporary. This is also an important crop in the area, where the number of farmers growing strawberries, though small compared with the number of peach growers, nearly doubled between 1950 and 1954, the acreage tripled, and production increased tenfold—a trend shared by the rest of California except that the number of growers decreased for the State as whole. Yields in California are extraordinarily high, averaging more than 8,800 quarts to the acre in 1954, compared with about 2,500 for the entire United States, and 6,200 for California in 1950. (In part the remarkably high California average is due to the practically year-round harvesting in the central coast area, the only place in the United States where this is possible.) The Petersons have the equivalent of some two-thirds of an acre in strawberries—the actual area is larger because the planting is among young peach trees—from which they got about 4,000 quarts in 1954. At \$0.30 a quart, the State average, their gross return was close to \$1,200.

Growth of irrigation.



One of the major developments in United States agriculture has been the steady increase over a long period in the amount of land under irrigation, with an especially steep rise since 1939. This is true not only in California and the other 19 Western States where rainfall is scant, but also in the East, where the use of overhead irrigation has been expanding to supplement rainfall in dry periods. Irrigation is expensive, however, especially when it is an individual enterprise, with each farmer pumping his own water, as is the case in much of California, where 7 million acres was reported under irrigation in 1954. And the cost of operation and maintenance has been rising rather than decreasing as the pumps have to reach down to deeper and deeper levels to get water.

So Axel does not have any more land under irrigation than he actually needs for his young peach trees—at present, five to six acres. He has plenty of room for expansion, however, since there are twelve acres, all irrigable, in the farm. The rest is land he is not now using because he has all he can handle for the time being; and the work of spraying, pruning, and other maintenance will increase as the trees get bigger and begin to bear fruit, which will have to be picked. Picking fruit is still a hand operation though almost every other aspect of production, including much of the handling of the harvested crop, can be mechanized. Axel and Hilda can set out and tend the peach orchard and strawberry patch themselves, but they will have to hire some help for picking peaches as they do for strawberries. This is one of the biggest items of expense.

Equipment for the fruit farm.

The total value of the Petersons' land and buildings in 1954 might be estimated at about \$20,000. Aside from the house itself, the buildings were not elaborate—a packing shed, used for strawberries but big enough for the peach crop in due course; shelter for a light tractor, small truck, power equipment, hand tools, spray materials, fertilizer; a workshop with power tools. Most part-time fruit growers do not own a tractor or a truck, but Axel did, partly because, in his business, he was in a position to get favorable prices on good used equipment, partly because he was headed for a somewhat larger operation than most part-time growers have. Under ordinary circumstances it might have been better to rent machines or get heavy work done on contract, but with a tight time schedule he preferred to have things handy for use at odd hours—or for Hilda to use, since she could run the tractor and truck as well as he could.

The Petersons had no livestock, not even chickens; most fruit growers in the area don't have, and in their case there was a special reason not to get tied down to daily chores; seasonal peaks of labor were more manageable. They did have a good vegetable garden and enough of California's gorgeous flowers to make the place colorful.

The house was a bungalow, well furnished and with the conveniences that would go with a good modern town or suburban house. Getting the more expensive items was not easy while also paying for a farm. Since the kind of living they did was on the strenuous side, it was necessary to have everything as time-saving as possible from the housework standpoint. Naturally they had a car. On the days when she went to town to work, Hilda took a bus that went by the door.

Many kinds of part-time farmers.

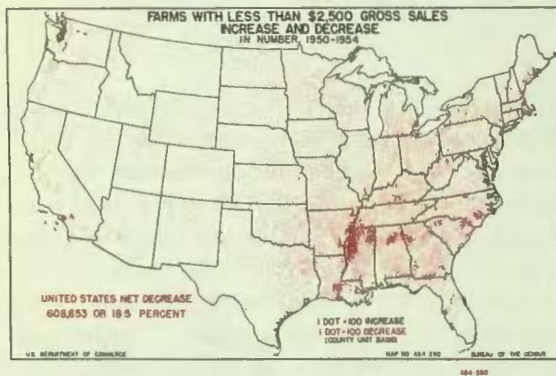
Part-time farms (575,000) by type, United States:
1954

	<i>Percent</i>
Livestock, except dairy and poultry-----	32.9
Cotton-----	14.4
Cash-grain-----	11.0
Tobacco, other field crop-----	9.4
Dairy-----	9.3
Poultry-----	8.8
Vegetable, fruit, nut-----	5.6
General, miscellaneous-----	8.6

There are many kinds of part-time farmers. Axel and Hilda Peterson represent only one type. More part-time farmers are wage earners than proprietors or partners in a business like Axel, but they come from practically every occupation. Some run a farm to supplement other income. Some work in town to supplement farm income. Some use part-time farming as a step toward full-time farming. Some stick to it only until they can get out of farming altogether. Some take other work because farming with modern equipment leaves them with spare time and energy. Some run a farm because modern business hours leave them with spare time and energy. Some just like the rich meaning and challenge and sights and sound and smells that are part of a farm.

Similarly, there are as many variations in the kinds of farming part-timers undertake as there are types of farms, with corresponding regional and local differences; but some types are less suited than others to small-scale part-time operations.

The marked decrease in the number of small farms.



New light on part-time farming.

Until recently the number of part-time farmers fitting the Census definition had been steadily increasing, together with the number of residential farmers. Between the 1950 and the 1954 Censuses, however, this trend was suddenly reversed. The number of part-time farms in the United States dropped from 639,000 to 575,000, a loss of 10 percent, and the number of residential farms from a little over one million to 878,000, a loss of more than 14 percent. You will remember that under the Census definition both these groups are very small-scale farms. The third group of very small-scale operations is the Economic Class VI commercial farm. The number of farms in this group decreased even more between 1950 and 1954, from 717,000 to 462,000, a loss of more than 35 percent. Thus in a five-year period, 470,000 of the smallest farms dropped out of United States agriculture, either raised to a better economic level by expanding operations or abandoned; or perhaps the operator quit farming because he had a nonfarm job.

In the same period the number of commercial farms at the next higher level, Economic Class V, decreased by nearly 15 percent, the number in Class IV, by 8 percent, and the number in Class III, by 2 percent. This adds up to an aggregate loss of 222,000 middle-size farms.

The only farms that increased in number were the biggest, those in Economic Class I, up 30 percent, and in Economic Class II, up about 18 percent, making a combined increase of 99,000. The net decrease in the number of all farms was 596,000, or about 10 percent.

These are striking phenomena, though it may be said that they merely carry to a further stage two trends that have long characterized United States agriculture—a steady reduction in the number of farms and a steady increase in the magnitude of the operation of those that remain. The total amount of land in farms has not decreased; it is only divided into fewer and bigger units.

But another striking phenomenon not so evident or expected showed up between 1950 and 1954—a decided increase in the number of commercial producers, in all the four higher economic groups, who with their families made more money from off-farm work than from farming, and a corresponding increase in the number working off the farm more than 100 days in the year.

These developments are analyzed and interpreted in detail in another Census Bureau publication, *Part-time Farming*, which puts situations such as that of Axel Peterson in an interesting light. Axel seems to be in a group that is diminishing in number and importance—the part-time-farmers-according-to-current-definition. But actually he is in a group that is increasingly important in the agricultural picture—the commercial farmers who are enlarging the size of their farm business and at the same time earning more and more from off-farm sources. If all goes well, Axel will be selling enough fruit in another year or two to put him in Economic Class V or Class IV, with farm sales around \$2,500 or more. The next Census enumerator may not be able to list him as a part-time farmer. Yet

he will still be farming probably less than half his time and he and Hilda will be making more money off the farm than on it.

What is a part-time farmer? Perhaps the conception or definition needs to be changed. Perhaps part-time and commercial farming are not two entirely different things. Maybe each is shading more and more into the other. Maybe there are getting to be as many hybrids as purebreds.

A large percentage of fruit farms are part-time.

The Census publication mentioned makes an interesting analysis based on the assumption that an Economic Class V farm, with sales of \$1,200 to \$2,500, is also a part-time farm if the family gets more than half of its income from outside sources. On that basis, almost 54 percent of all the farms in this economic class in the western part of the United States are part-time farms, and only about 46 percent are "commercial". But many of these "commercial" farmers may also earn a good deal from other work—though not enough to make half their income.

In the case of fruit-and-nut farms, the situation is even more surprising. Practically three out of four fruit-and-nut farms in the Western Region are part-time farms in the \$1,200 to \$2,500 income bracket; and "curioser and curioser," as Alice in Wonderland put it, so are more than two out of three in the United States as a whole.

Is there a new agricultural ladder?

People like Axel and Hilda Peterson, working so hard to make a success of two major occupations, may have a rather special significance in the current American scene. Mobility—freedom to move from one place to another, one job or occupation to another, one economic level to a higher level—has been one of the most outstanding characteristics of American life. In the old days it was represented in agriculture by the Westward frontier, homesteading, and the "agricultural ladder," which a man climbed by first getting a job at the bottom as a hired man, then climbing one step by renting a farm, then another step by buying one. Today the first two of these great types of opportunity have disappeared, and the last may be flickering out because of the high cost of buying, equipping, and operating a farm. But it is still possible in many cases for a determined man to get the necessary capital by holding down another job while he is acquiring and building up a farm.

Maybe it means no more hard work and less actual hardship than the other ways. At any rate, the Petersons are trying it.