



Small Farm History

Did you know that small family groups invented agriculture and the first small farms? Learn how small farmers evolved civilization over thousands of years and the role you play in agricultural history.

by Rick Gush

American Small Farm History The American Indians were accomplished farmers and used a sustainable agriculture system that is envied by organic farmers today. The first colonists, both the Leif Erickson groups in Newfoundland and the 1609 groups in Maryland, were small farmers who failed. The non-farming Pilgrims came later, starved for years and then finally celebrated learning how to farm by having a Thanksgiving feast. Small farmers made up the bulk of the revolutionary-era population, but also bore the brunt of the injuries in the wars with the French, the English and the indigenous peoples. Even early commercial agriculture was self-sufficient, as practiced by the gentlemen farmers like George Washington, who farmed 8,000 acres with hundreds of workers in multiple locations. The Grange was formed in 1867 and soon became the center of small-farm social activities across the country, most notably in the Farm Belt that had developed between the coasts. This occurrence marked the beginning of the strong ties between elected politicians and large-farming lobbyists. The Land Grant College Act of 1862 funded agriculturally based institutions of higher learning by giving federal land to the states so that they could sell the land and raise the required money for the college. The Land Grant Colleges eventually led the charge in developing modern scientific agriculture. The Homestead Act, also of 1862, structured the transferring of ownership of vast federal lands into private hands. By 1900, about 600,000 farmers had received clear title under the act to lands covering about 80 million acres. In all, 270 million acres, or 10 percent of the area of the United States, was claimed and settled under this act. The Dust Bowl of the 1930s, when thousands of small farmers abandoned their ruined farms, finally burst the bubble of small-farm enthusiasm that had gripped the United States for 300 years. The Taylor Grazing Act of 1934 authorized the Bureau of Land Management to rent federal lands at very low rates to farmers for the purpose of grazing livestock. By 1930, one average American farmer produced enough food to feed ten people. By 1960, notably with the use of artificial fertilizers, that same single American farmer was producing enough food to feed 25 people. The Agricultural Act of 1956, otherwise known as the Soil-Bank program, authorized federal payments to farmers if they reduced production of certain crops. This marked the beginning of subsequent agricultural subsidy excesses.

Top The history of small farms is more than a list of key historical dates; it is best considered as the winding central theme that appears throughout all human history, responsible for expanding populations and making possible the evolution of civilization.

As such, small farming has been perhaps the single most important activity in the history of human existence.

Through this activity, we humans learned to feed and therefore propagate ourselves in a manner that continues to distinguish us from other creatures on the planet.

Even today, small farms are controversial and one of the hottest topics in world politics because they are so intimately connected with basic issues such as food availability, land reform and government support programs.

Nonetheless, the experience of small farming remains remarkably the same today as it was for our Stone Age ancestors.

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Hunter-Gatherers

Small family groups invented agriculture. The first small farmers were hunter-gatherers who played with plants around the campfire, trapped a few goats in the canyon, and made water flow from the creek into the swampy area. This husbandry activity allowed mankind to set out on the road to civilization.

The concept of domestication, for both plants and animals, was a concept started by the Stone Age version of the small family farm. Extended family-based groups were the key demographic involved in the transition from hunter-gatherers to home builders. It was these family groups who performed the personal farming experiments that led to the greater understanding as to how humans could manipulate the growth of food plants and animals to their benefit.

The first hunter gatherers to discover that they could encourage the growth of favorite plants and animals were gypsy farmers who interacted with plants and animals in the lands through which they wandered.



These pioneers left little testimony, but today's scientists are regularly pushing back the dates for the first plant domestications.

For example, it was once assumed that the first permanent settlements in Ecuador were built about 5,000 years ago and that therefore this must also be when agriculture was discovered there. But evidence now shows that squash plants were probably domesticated over 10,000 years ago.

Similar new thoughts are occurring across the globe, and estimated first dates for plant and animal domestication now stretch back 14,000 years in some areas, though the first permanent settlements in these zones appeared around 8,000 years ago.

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First Plant Domestication and Cultivation

This means that plant domestication and home building did not develop at the same time. The hunter-gatherers evidently knew how to breed plants long before they learned to build permanent homes. For thousands of years farming was just another of the many survival skills in the successful hunter-gatherer's repertoire.

The first plants cultivated on a large scale were certainly grains, but it was more likely to have been leafy greens that acted as the first horticultural experiments. While seeds scattered in a patch of damp soil will take months to grow and produce new usable seeds, a small green plant, uprooted during the harvest of edible greens and then tucked back into the soil, might revive within a day and again become a harvestable food item. Bit by bit, the wild, wandering hunter-gatherers discovered that other creatures in the world were controllable and that they could direct a great many fantastic reactions among their food sources, which they could use to produce much larger quantities of food for themselves.

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Small Farms Appear

As their agricultural skills increased, hunter-gatherers became proficient in supporting entire families.

After several thousand years, some hunter-gatherers began staying in permanent locations. For families with young, injured or elderly members, the constant movement of the hunter-gatherer lifestyle was difficult and the opportunity to stay in one place must have been very appealing.

The period from 10,000 BC to 3,000 BC was the first period of agricultural explosion. Small farms spread across most of the inhabited planet, and everywhere farming became more sophisticated. Huge numbers of humans began settling permanently in areas where they could farm. The agricultural arts blossomed in these years, and essentially all of the important food and animal crops were domesticated. The first domesticated sheep were in Iraq around 9,000 BC, and goats were domesticated soon thereafter in Iran. Pigs were kept in Thailand around 8,000 BC and horses were domesticated in the Ukraine by 5,000 BC. Flax was used to make cloth around 9,000 BC and by 6,000 BC, every one of today's major grain crops, such as wheat, beans, peas, barley, rice and corn, was already artificially bred to produce new and better varieties. Sticks evolved into shovels, sickles and hoes during this period. Different agricultural techniques such as slash and burn farming, using animal waste as fertilizer, grafting and artificial pollinating were discovered.

All of these refined farming skills were invented on small farms.

A wooden plough connected to a domesticated animal was a particularly important invention, and by 4,000 BC most small farms around the world were using animal-pulled ploughs. This method allowed a small farmer to produce more grain than their family could eat in a year, and it was this accumulation of surplus grain crops among small farmers that permitted real civilization to develop.

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Water-Control Devices Appear on Small Farms

The next revolution in agriculture, from 10,000 BC to about 3,000 BC, occurred when large groups of people banded together to construct water-control devices.

These waterworks usually served both a protective and an agricultural purpose; it sought to prevent flood damage from



seasonal river flows as well as to direct and save water for irrigating planted fields. The line between personal and communal farming blurred as many small farmers engaged in communal projects such as grain raising as well as working on their own farms.

Along major rivers, irrigation systems were likely to be communally owned; it was along these big rivers that the first large civilizations formed. Improved control of water and the fertilizing benefits of the annual floods allowed humans to raise grain crops in much larger quantities.

The agricultural arts continued to evolve through time. While large-scale, communal irrigated farming focused on grain production, new plants such as grapes and olives began to be cultivated widely, particularly by small farmers.

Onions, melons, cucumbers, dates, apples, pomegranates, peaches, cotton and hundreds of other useful vegetable crops were grown by small farmers by 3,000 BC.

Farmers were increasingly sophisticated and knew that seed grown on land other than their own would often produce larger crops. The invention of metal tools and farming equipment added to the explosion in agricultural efficiency during this period, and storage methods for oil and grain also improved.

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Land Ownership and Small Farms

The problem of asserting personal control over a piece of land against the claims or desires of other humans has existed since at least 10,000 BC.

As hunting territories were defended against the incursions of other hunters, so were farming areas jealously sought and defended. The most easily farmed lands--flat locations with good soil close to a water source--were always the most coveted. But whereas hunting territories could allow a certain flexibility in some border territories, the relationship with a specific piece of land being cultivated is considerably more intimate, and the levels of territorial jealousy increased significantly once farming started.

This jealousy, along with an increasing capacity to accumulate stockpiles of stored food, gave birth to the concept of large landowners.

Early thugs who wandered among the small farmers discovered that instead of killing small farmers and taking their foodstuffs, they could more cleverly extort regular payments in exchange for the right for small farmers to not be attacked.

As generations of thugs used the payments from multiple small farmers to accumulate wealth, they also accumulated the power that made the "right" to collect extortive payments hereditary.

As regional identities were born, the extorted payments from small farmers formed the basis of wealth that allowed landowners, nobles, kings and conquerors to rise to power.

This pattern of powerful men deriving their sustenance and their power from the payments of many small farmers is still the basic social phenomenon upon which world societies and politics operate.

The ebb and flow of this extortion has measured the passage of time over the history of small farms.

The power that was Rome was originally possible because of the productive farming activities of thousands of small farmers. But by the end of the Roman era, the small farmers were practically non-existent in Italy, and food was produced principally on huge corporate farms that used millions of slaves captured in military combat.

Time and time again, when political chaos subsides and small farms are allowed to determine their own destinies, great success stories are found. Many historians credit the agricultural land reforms in England with having made possible the Industrial Revolution.

When the Enclosure Acts of the late eighteenth century reorganized the small parcels that resulted from the previous century's redistribution of the old pre-Cromwell hereditary estates, agricultural productivity rose overnight in such a way that abundant wealth was created.

This wealth enabled the intellectual experimentation that pulled us into the modern age. Land reform was not a mass



rearrangement, but rather a case by case, year after year trend in which ownership disputes were decided in favor of smaller citizens as opposed to nobility or clergy.

A similar inspirational story played out when the American colonies made land available to small farmers by the millions. The resulting revolution for independence and respect for individual liberties is still the most powerful social concept on the planet, and it was all made possible by the energetic actions of small farmers.

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Wars Fail to Deter the Creation of Small Farms

Fortunately for mankind, history shows that the activity of small farming is a spontaneously occurring event. Left to their own devices, humans will naturally begin to create small farms because food production makes it a natural survival choice.

Small farms have reappeared after every war that has destroyed them. The fall of Rome saw a huge increase in the activity of small farming in Italy as the population dispersed from the large cities and hid among mountain valleys to raise what plants and animals they could to feed themselves.

In the United States, the twentieth century saw a consistent increase in the size of farms until many people were worried that the small farm would disappear altogether.

This worry was unfounded; we now realize that medium-sized farms, those that were trying to compete head to head with the large agribusiness outfits, were the farms that would disappear.

Small farms, usually marketing to a different demographic and with more varied and complex income patterns, were in fact preparing for the current robust revival that today sees many small farmers operating successful businesses with a genuine love of the small-farming life rather than a single-minded desire to support their families.

Notwithstanding the claims of some commercial analysts, the viability of the small farm is anything but dead. According to USDA statistics, nearly 40 percent of the value of farm products in the United States is generated by small farms. Half of the world's working populations are employed in agriculture and the largest groups of those people are those who work on small, family-based farms.

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Hunter-Gatherers Still

Small farmers started out as hunter-gatherers and have always retained those characteristics. Gathering the wild greens, nuts and berries that grow around their farms is as ancient a practice as any cultivation or husbandry. Many small farmers today augment their diet choices by hunting or fishing as well.

The small farmers of early Rome were proud of the magnificent mushrooms they collected in the hills around them. Mushroom availability dropped during the height of Imperial Rome because there were less small farmers who remembered how to find the succulent wild morsels. Today, the small farmers of Italy once again reign supreme in their green mountain valleys and they harvest enormous quantities of delectable mushrooms from the hills.

Whether it is mushrooms, wild hay for animal feed, or even leaf mulch to sell to the local garden centers, small farmers should always keep an eye open for valuable food or natural products available for the taking in their environment. That is the way small farmers are: always alert, always working and always looking for the extra bits they can wring from the earth.

Today's small farmers also share another characteristic with their hunter-gatherer forbearers, and that is the fascination with the mechanics and relationships possible with crop plants and farm animals. It is no less wondrous today that a hard seed, shoved into the soil, will swell with water and burst forth in a glorious new living form that continues the cycle of life. Each farmer, as they plant their fields or feed their goats, are re-enacting and re-experiencing the drama of discovery that took place so many thousands of years before.

About the Author: Rick Gush is a small-farming enthusiast and freelance writer based in Italy.

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