

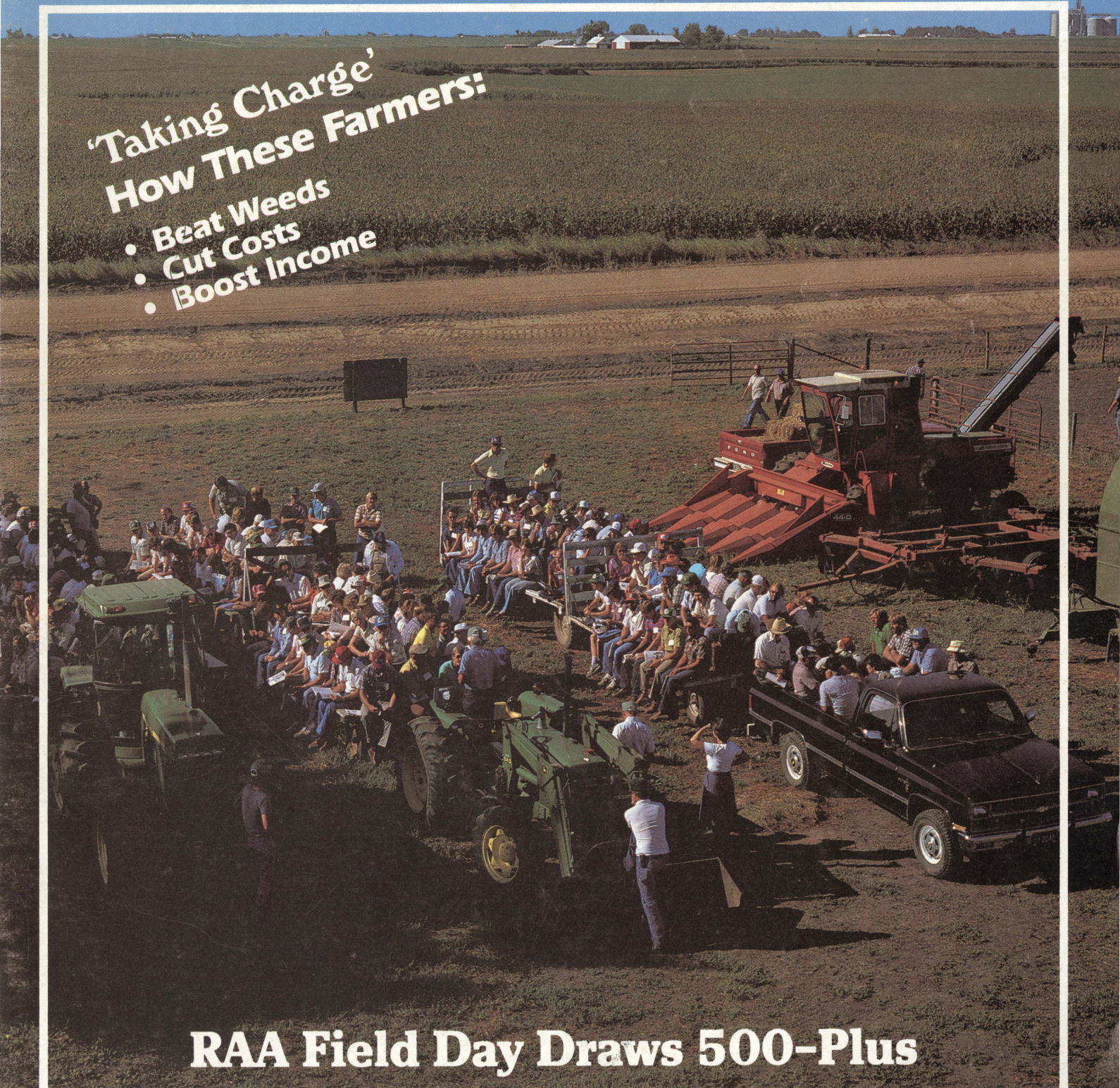
# The New Farm

Nov./Dec. 1984 \$2.25

Magazine of REGENERATIVE AGRICULTURE

**'Taking Charge'  
How These Farmers:**

- Beat Weeds
- Cut Costs
- Boost Income



**RAA Field Day Draws 500-Plus**

# The New Farm

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## About the cover

A capacity crowd—more than 500 farmers from nine Corn Belt states—attended the Regenerative Agriculture Association's first field day at Dick and Sharon Thompson's Iowa farm. Cover photo shows just part of the crowd at the morning tour. A caravan of 15 cars, pickups and vans trailed six hay wagons into the fields. See "Class Begins At 'Nature's Ag School.'" New Farm Color Photo by George DeVault

## OUR POLICY

The New Farm is dedicated to putting people, profit and biological permanence back into farming by giving farmers the information they need to take charge of their farms and their futures.

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# Class Begins At 'Nature's Ag School'

First RAA field day draws 500 farmers  
from nine Corn Belt states.



BOONE, Iowa—The first major field day at Dick and Sharon Thompson's farm wasn't supposed to start until 9:30 a.m., but visitors began arriving about 4 o'clock—the afternoon before.

After driving all the way from Indiana, the three couples who arrived early wanted to make sure there would be no problem finding the Thompsons' 300-acre hog and beef farm the next morning. They didn't want to miss a thing.

As it turned out, the Hoosiers weren't alone. The Thompsons' phone never stopped ringing, as people from around the Midwest called to confirm directions, times and other details.

To be on the safe side, Dick and Sharon told folks to try to show up a little early in the morning. That way, they figured, visitors would have plenty of time to register, leaf through the 45-page book prepared especially for the Aug. 30 field day, and look over the detailed display on ridge-tillage, manure handling, rotations, non-chemical weed control and drug-free livestock raising that Dick had set up in the large, well-equipped shop at one end of the white metal machinery storage building.

By 8 a.m., a steady stream of traffic was turning into the nearby hayfield that had been set aside as a parking lot. Ninety minutes later, when the first hay wagon tour was scheduled to start, the registration line stretched clear across the gravel driveway. And the crowd around the 140 photographs, diagrams and charts inside the machine shop stood wall-to-wall. Instead of taking a quick look and moving on, people were actually studying the display, jotting down notes and even taking a few snapshots.

Finally the crowd climbed aboard six hay wagons. There came brief introductory remarks by Dick, Jim Morgan, executive director of the Regenerative Agriculture Association, and John Haberern, RAA vice president and senior vice president of publishing services at Rodale Press. Then, powered by the Thompsons' two tractors and pickup truck, the wagon train pulled out of the cool early morning shade and headed for the fields under a cloudless blue Iowa sky. Behind the wagons trailed a caravan of 15 cars, pickups and vans.

"It causes a big lump in your throat," Dick recalls. "It was a good thing we

had about half a mile to travel (to the first field), so I could get myself collected.

"I would have been happy with 200. If 50 people had shown up . . . I guess I would have been a little disappointed," he adds.

All told, slightly more than 500 people—most of them farmers—signed registration sheets during the day. Probably 100 more never bothered to sign in.

"I was overwhelmed by the extent of the effort people put out to get here," comments Sharon.

The visitors came from nine states: Iowa, Kansas, Illinois, Indiana, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Missouri, Ohio and Nebraska. John Howison, a farmer from Ostrander, Ohio, said he got up at 11:45 p.m. the night before and drove for 13 hours straight to attend the field day. During much of the day, the hayfield parking lot looked like it belonged at a county fair. An early afternoon vehicle count totaled 139 cars and trucks and one Greyhound-style bus. The bus had been chartered just for the field day by some 40 farmers from throughout the eastern half of Kansas. Most had risen well before dawn and driven for several hours to St. Joseph, Mo., to catch the bus at 7 a.m.

The large crowd was a surprise, although a most pleasant one to field day organizers. No one involved in planning the event really knew how many people to expect. For example, only 250 copies of the Thompson book were printed for the field day. Despite giving only one copy to each couple to register, the books were gone before noon. People who registered afterward were mailed books from a second printing a few weeks later. (Unfortunately, a few people just put their name and hometown on the sign-in sheet. If you attended the field day and did not receive your tour book, please let us know.)

In addition to farmers, visitors included three top officials of Pioneer Hi-Bred International, administrators, researchers and instructors from Iowa State University, Soil Conservation Service agents, vo-ag teachers, Extension personnel and the press. Newspaper reporters came from Boone, Ames and Cedar Rapids, Iowa. Also riding one of the hay wagons was *Successful Farming's* Mike Holmberg, associate editor for crops and soils. A recent survey of *Successful Farming* readers showed that at least 60 percent of them would be interested in an article on organic farming, sources say. *Successful Farm-*

*ing* reportedly plans to publish a package of stories on organic farming in its January issue.

About mid-morning, a camera crew arrived from WHO-TV in Des Moines. They spent more than an hour filming the crowds in the Thompsons' fields and taped a long interview with Dick and Sharon between tours. The field day rated a two-minute spot early in WHO's 6 o'clock news that evening.

Also well-represented in the crowd were Iowa State students. A stream of graduates and undergraduates arrived after classes. A more adventuresome group spent nearly the entire day at the Thompson farm, skipping the second day of university classes to attend nature's ag school.

One student who arrived later in the day excitedly told how his instructor had begun class that day by reading a letter from a Colorado State University student who complained about her teacher ignoring—in fact, making fun of—low- or non-chemical farming. It was Mary E. Callan's letter from the July/August '84 issue of *The New Farm* (see "No Laughing Matter" in that issue's Rural Delivery column). "That's not the way we're going to do things here," the student quoted his instructor as saying. "We'll give you both sides."



Early arrivals study new book (lower left) on the Thompson farm and the portable display set up inside machine shop.

### 'Wanted To Learn'

What brought so many people from so far away to the Thompson farm?

"They really wanted to learn. People were serious," explains Sharon.

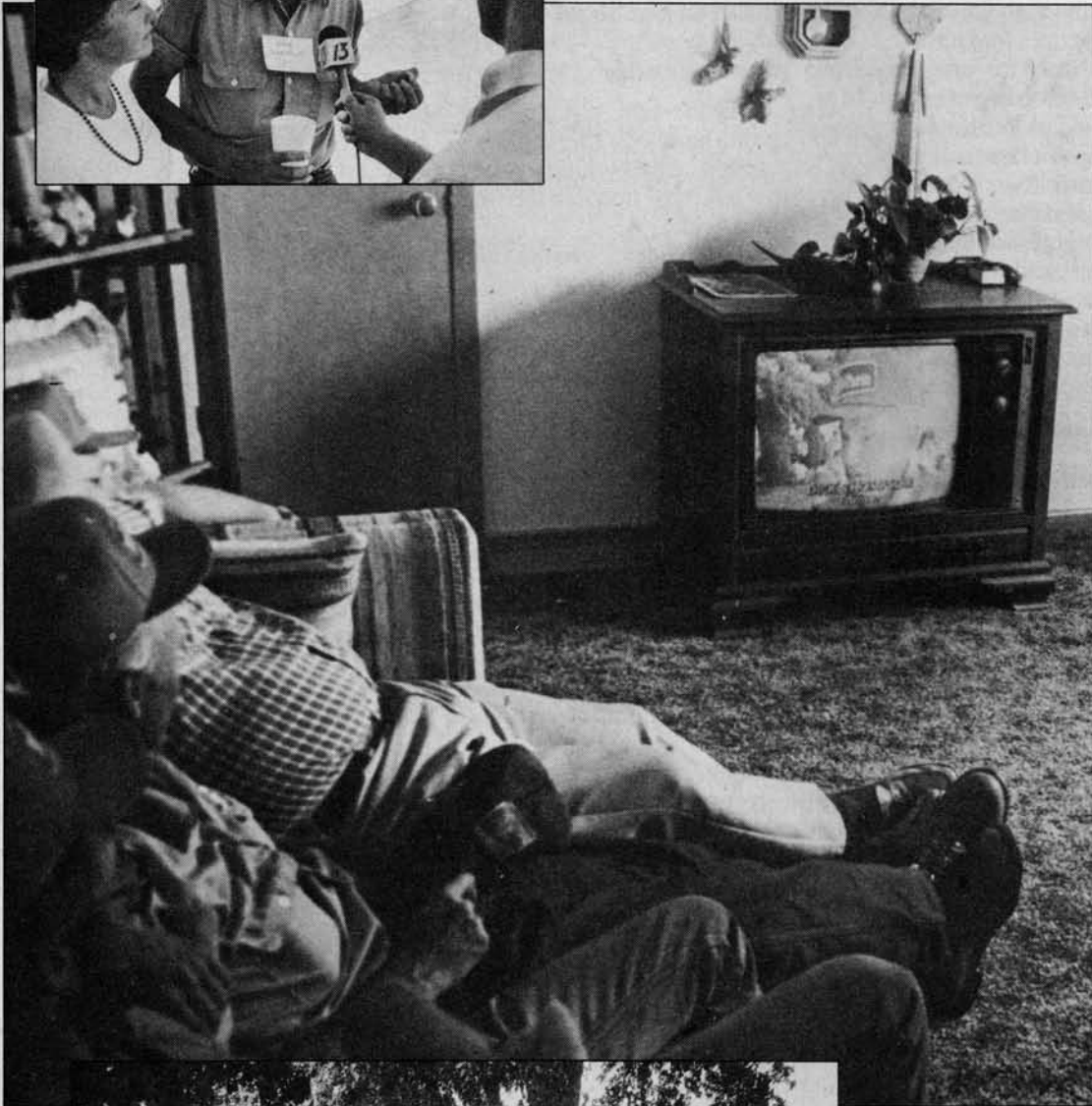
"Curiosity," adds Dick.

There was plenty for people to be curious about. In addition to fields in normal rotation, the Thompsons, in cooperation with the RAA, now have a total of 160 experimental plots on their farm. Their research includes comparisons of synthetic fertilizer, green manure, stockpiled animal manure,



New Farm Photos by George De Vault

*WHO-TV camera crew films field day crowd as Dick Thompson (far left on tractor) explains his rotations.*



*Relaxing after a long day of answering questions, Dick Thompson and son, Rex, watch WHO-TV's 6 o'clock report on the field day at their farm.*



composted animal manure, fish emulsion, sewage sludge, a trace element product and a soil conditioner. They're constantly experimenting with preventive livestock health practices that have all but eliminated the need for drugs in their 90-sow farrow-to-finish hog operation and 80-head cow-calf herd.

But where the Thompson farm really shines is in weed control, or "weed management," as Dick and Sharon prefer to call it. In the nearly two decades since they gave up herbicides, these farmers have learned to outmaneuver weeds so well that most years they don't have to walk their beans.

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## The Thompsons consistently produce good yields—120- to 145-bushel corn and 40- to 45-bushel beans—for about \$90 less per acre. The farm works on a pay-as-you-go basis, with no borrowed capital.

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In addition to rotations, the Thompsons' non-chemical weed management arsenal includes a finely tuned program of ridge-tillage, rotary hoeing and cultivation. Still under study are soybean varieties that quickly produce thick canopies to shade out weeds, and cover crops and even weeds that make their own natural herbicides.

In all, they've managed to consistently produce respectable yields—120- to 145-bushel corn and 40- to 45-bushel beans—and cut production costs by about \$90 an acre. The farm now operates on a pay-as-you-go basis, with no borrowed capital.

Most of the questions fired at Dick and Sharon during the day concerned cutting costs, but there were almost as many dealing with the finer points of ridge-tillage, cultivation, and livestock breeding and feeding.

"People had questions everywhere we stopped. They were really looking for answers," Dick says. "That puts quite a responsibility on you because you don't want to lead anybody astray. This is not fun and games and show biz. This is the real world."

Of course, not everyone found answers to all of their questions. But most farmers left with the comment that Dick and Sharon and other farm-

ers they met at the field day had given them an ample supply of new ideas to take home and try out. The field day finally came to an end about 6 p.m.

### Mark Your Calendar

"After everyone left, you couldn't tell 500 people had been there. Somebody had picked up everything, or they didn't throw anything down in the first place," says Dick.

Adds Sharon: "The place looked like nobody came."

Maybe that's part of the reason Dick and Sharon are already starting work on next year's field day. Here are the dates:

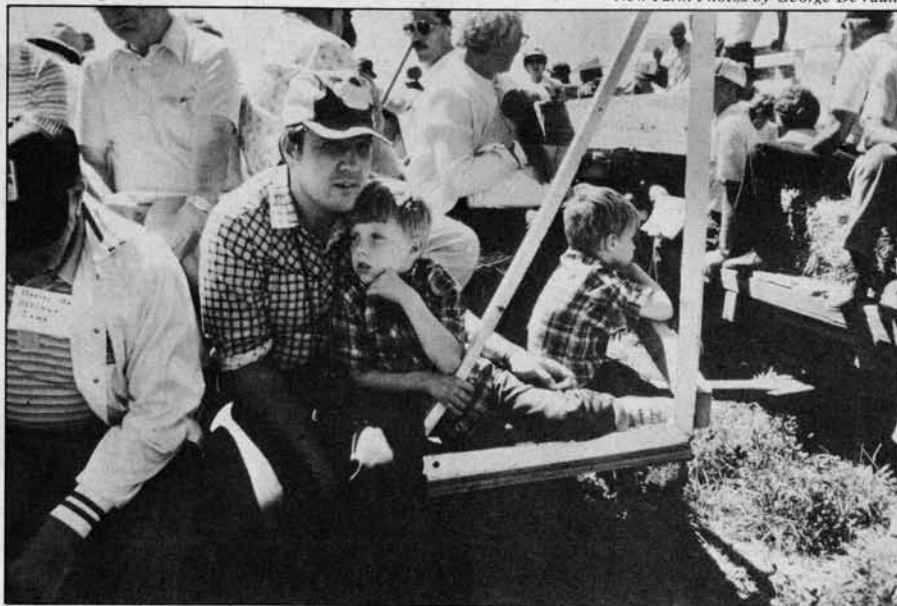
- Sept. 6, a Friday, will feature a hay wagon tour at 9 a.m., and another tour at 1 p.m.
- Sept. 7, a Saturday, one hay wagon tour at 3 p.m.

To make the trek to Boone more of a family affair, the second annual RAA field day at the Thompson farm is being held in conjunction with the city of Boone's increasingly popular Pufferbilly Days, a three-day celebration centered around old-time steam locomotives, concerts, pioneer activities, arts and crafts displays and more.

Of special historic interest in Boone are Mamie Eisenhower's birthplace and rides across the longest and highest double-track railroad bridge in the world aboard old No. 1385, a former Chicago and Northwestern steam locomotive.

For a free map and detailed directions to the Thompson farm, write: Thompson Field Day, *The New Farm*, 222 Main St., Emmaus, Pa. 18049.

"Can we go home now, Dad?"



New Farm Photos by George DeVault

## Visit Nature's Ag School—At Home

If you couldn't attend the RAA field day at Dick and Sharon Thompson's farm, don't fret. You won't have to wait until next September and the second annual field day to tour nature's ag school.

Now the Thompsons can come to you, through a new, 40-minute slide show that details every aspect of their 300-acre hog and beef operation. The slide show may be rented for a showing to your local farm group, or it may be purchased for classroom showings and reference use by schools, libraries and other educational organizations.

The slide show comes with a professional-quality cassette tape recording of Dick and Sharon describing their farm. The tape is cued for automatic slide projectors. For manual showing, a transcript of the narration is included. Each order comes with three copies of the 45-page book on the Thompson farm. The book ordinarily sells for \$4.95 each. Substantial discounts are available on bulk orders.

Rental costs \$55, which is deductible from the sale price if you decide to buy the slide show. Sale price is \$150. Send check or money order payable to the Regenerative Agriculture Association to: *Nature's Ag School*, Regenerative Agriculture Association, 222 Main St., Emmaus, Pa. 18049.

# A Farm That Works

Ever since Rachel Carson wrote "Silent Spring" 22 years ago, people have been trying to change the way American farmers farm.

Environmentalists, allied or confused with vegetarians, animal rights types, migrant worker supporters, antibusiness folks and other antiestablishment groups have sought to reduce or eliminate pesticides, herbicides, fertilizers, the advance of farm technology, the livestock industry and agribusiness in general.

The response of many farmers to all this has been to ignore it.

Many farmers, with a fair amount of justification, look on this as an attack on farming by non-farmers who didn't know what farming was really all about.

Slowly but surely, though, real farmers around the country are beginning to believe that there may be something to the idea that the conventional way of doing things is not necessarily the best.

Recently, Richard and Sharon Thompson invited 500 fellow Midwesterners to their farm east of Boone.

The Thompsons farm 300 acres, producing 120-bushel corn and 40-bushel beans along with hogs and cattle. By using a combination of techniques including ridge tilling, crop rotation, manure spreading and cover crops, the Thompsons have reduced or eliminated herbicides, pesticides and fertilizers. Thompson estimates he saves \$100

an acre in fuel and chemical costs.

In other words, Richard Thompson makes a pretty good case that what he calls "regenerative farming" works for him.

He also explained that it took him a number of seasons to learn how to make it work, and he's still learning.

The Thompsons are not alone. There are others around the country with the same or similar ideas. They are exchanging information, and their numbers are growing.

Despite the Thompsons' success, there are still a lot of unanswered questions about "organic farming" in many farmers' minds.

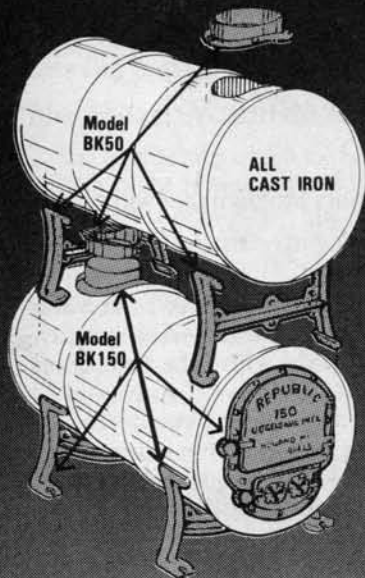
As pioneers of the Thompson type continue, however, many of these questions are going to be answered.

We certainly don't predict any overnight revolution in America's farming practices. Too many farmers are, shall we say, cautious or even stubborn.

Don't forget, though, that willingness to change is what has made America's farmers the most efficient in the world.

We would not be surprised to see a number of the Thompsons' revolutionary farming practices becoming commonplace in the coming years.

**Robert C. Schaub, Publisher**  
*News-Republican*  
 Boone, Iowa  
 Sept. 16, 1984  
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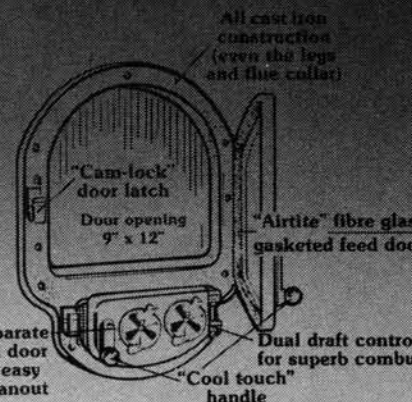
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