

The Amazing Farmer Jones

There's a new look at Beth's Cafe in Corntown, South Dakota. While the cafe hasn't changed in appearance, the people who come in for their morning coffee sure have. Gone are the days when most of the customers wore bib overalls and their favorite tractor or seed caps and talked about rain, drought, and cattle prices.



Today, although most of the faces are the same, the customers at Beth's Cafe wear business casual, Gateway caps, construction aprons, or service uniforms. Many of them carry cell phones, and some wear the smiles of easy-going retired people. The discussion topics have changed from falling prices for grain and cattle to opportunities in the equities markets and the latest high-tech company to locate in town.

One retired farmer brings in a newspaper clipping that describes the Maize Craze. "What in the world is this all about?" he asks his old friend, Farmer Jones. Farmer Jones, one of the few farmers left in Beth's Cafe, explains: "Oh, that is the best use of my corn."

Some of the farmers are adjusting to low prices for grain by seeking alternative uses for their cropland. Some have left their fields full of grain for bird habitat, particularly for pheasants, while others have designed field-corn mazes for the tourists. The maze idea requires that farmers design the maze before planting and then thin the plants early in the season while the plants are still small. Although this reduces the per-acre yield, it yields other benefits. The Maize Craze has spurred the development of Maize Daze in some communities. These events attract many visitors, and the visitors shop in local stores, eat in local restaurants, and stay in local motels. In some communities, the local businesses pay farmers to create mazes. Also, farmers charge fees to people who want to enter their mazes. Farmer Jones says that his maze has really brought in the money. The Maize Craze, he thinks, will make farming profitable once again.

When the coffee break is over, one ex-farmer says as he leaves Beth's, "Maybe I'll dust off my old John Deere cap and try farming one more time."

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION (25 word minimum each)

- A. Why did so many farmers leave farming to go into other careers?
- B. When many producers leave a market (as in the case of farming), what is likely to happen to the quantity produced at any given price?