

ROOTS IN THE EARTH

The small farmer-- often thought of as backward and inefficient-- seems an unlikely savior for a hungry world.

But as the dream of the Green Revolution fades, the small independent farm-- with its strong ties between farmer and land-- may now offer the breakthrough in the world food crisis.

Contrary to popular assumption, studies show that the so-called little guy who farms less than 12 acres and makes up to 80 percent of the world's rural producers, consistently outproduces large mechanized farming operations. And recent World Bank studies in Malaysia, Malawi, Nigeria, Taiwan, and Korea demonstrate that the productivity of small farms can be significantly advanced.



Another World Bank analysis of farm production in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, and Guatemala showed that small farms are three to fourteen times more productive per acre than large farms.

In Thailand plots of two to four acres produce almost 60 percent more rice per acre than farms of 140 acres or more. In India, the value of output per acre is more than one-third higher on the smallest farms.

Such comparisons are significant in explaining the low productivity of underdeveloped nations. A

World Bank study of 83 countries revealed that persons owning 124 acres or more make up only three percent of the landholders but control 80 percent of the land.

Thus while the largest landholders control most of the farmland, and receive most of the development aid, studies from all over the world show they are the least productive. Even in the U.S., the biggest farms realized a net income per acre greater than the family farm in only two of the 14 years from 1960-1973.

One need not romanticize the peasant to explain the greater productivity of the small farmer. The peasant farmer plants more closely than a machine would, mixes and rotates complementary crops, chooses a combination of cultivation and livestock that is labor-intensive, and above all works perceptibly limited resources to the fullest.

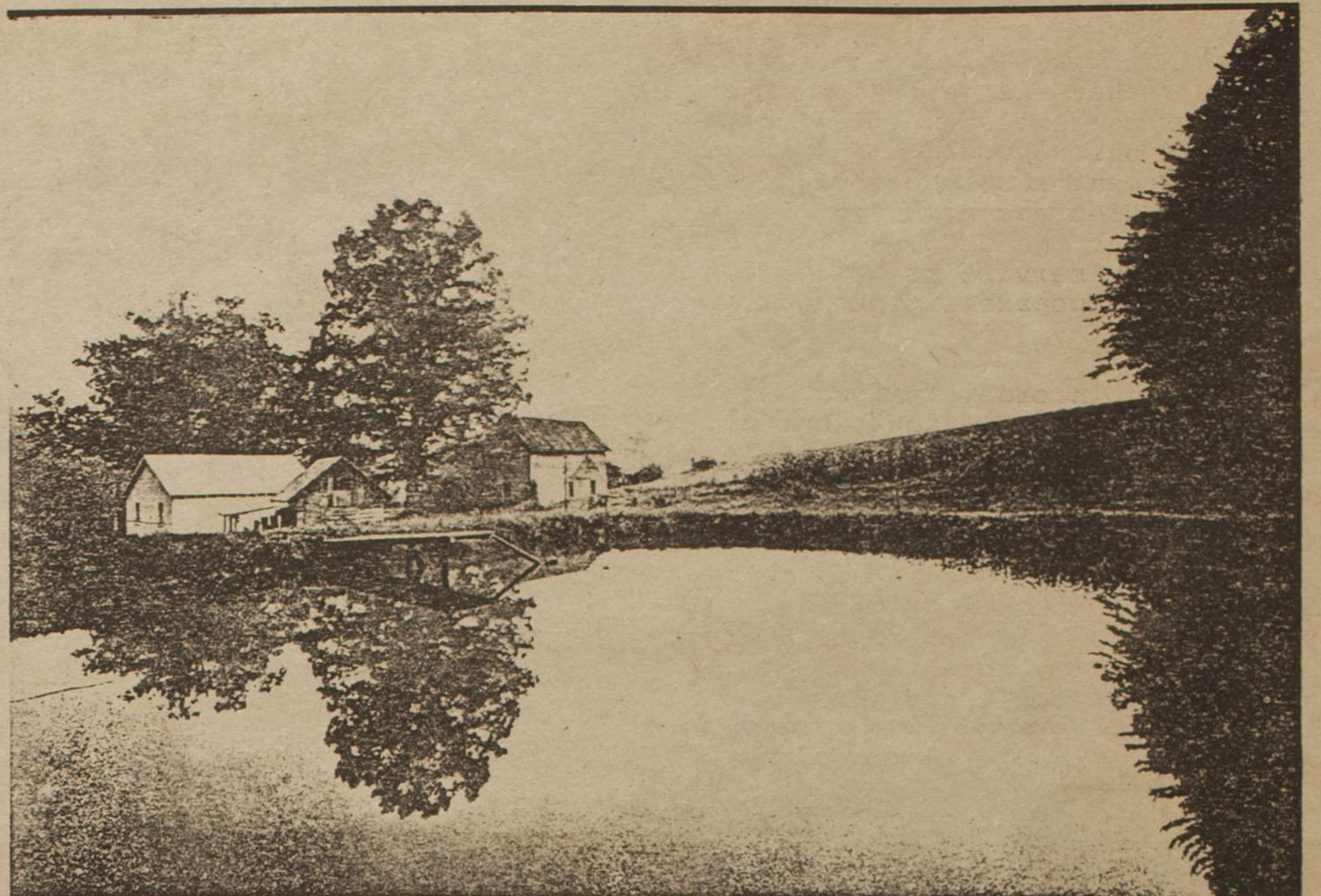
While small farmers generally reinvest profits, however meager, into their operation, large landowners tend to diversify their investment into other business ventures and luxury goods.

But the crucial factor in farm productivity is land use, and large landholding interests often waste valuable land. The UN's Food and Agriculture Organization reports that in Central America, for example, farmers who own up to 10 acres cultivate 72 percent of their land, but farmers who own over 86 acres cultivate only 14 percent, using 49 percent for pasture and leaving 37 percent idle.

"I have a lot of respect for the small farmer," says Green Revolution pioneer Norman Borlaug. "Almost invariably when you look at what he's doing with his land, you find he's producing the maximum under the situation he has to work with. The thing is that he usually doesn't have much to work with."

Compared to the large landowners, small peasant producers do not have equal access to credit for important agricultural inputs such as water, fertilizer and tools. Quite often loans from government agencies stipulate a minimum holding that cuts out the family farmer.

In Pakistan, for example, to get a loan for a well from the Agricultural Development Bank a peasant must own at least 12.5



Farm pond, North Carolina, 1966. BURN UZZLE

acres, a stipulation that excludes over 80 percent of Pakistan's farmers.

In Africa, The World Bank estimates that only about five percent of the continent's farmers have access to institutional credit.

Sudhir Sen, an Indian commentator on the Green Revolution, estimates that roughly one-half of India's small farmers lack any recorded right to the land, without which they are unable to obtain crop loans.

While research has shown that small farmers working under extreme handicaps often outproduce the large holders, development experts warn against concluding that the small farm is inherently more productive than the large.

As studies by demographer Helen Ware show, the size of a parcel of land matters less than the relationship of people to it.

Small farms can be very productive, as in Japan and Taiwan, where the farmer benefits directly from the productivity; or small farms can have low productivity, as in Bangladesh and parts of the Philippines, where debt and tenancy patterns erode the farmers' motivation.

The same is true for large landholdings-- size doesn't necessarily govern success. In Mexico, for example, while the large, independent produce growers of Sonora were raking in profits in the early 1970's, 80 percent of the large farm operations on the Hermosillo coast, also privately owned, were operating in the red despite heavy government subsidies.

And while disappointing farm production figures were reported from the Soviet state-owned farms in the mid-70's, China's communal farms were producing close to 2,000 pounds of grain per acre, double the pre-Revolution yield.

Unlike farmers in the Soviet Union's heavily bureaucratic farming system, those who work the fields in China's decentralized system directly control both the land and the necessary inputs. Food production has climbed consistently, and there has been no famine in China since the early 1960's.

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Pictures from *The American Farm: A Photographic History* by Maisie Conrat and Richard Conrat.



Oklahoma farmer, 1946. HAROLD CORSINI

Without institutional credit, small holders are left to the mercy of private moneylenders and merchants who often charge usurious rates of interest. Agricultural economist Keith Griffin reports that in one area of the Philippines 15 percent of the borrowers had to pay an interest rate of 200 percent.

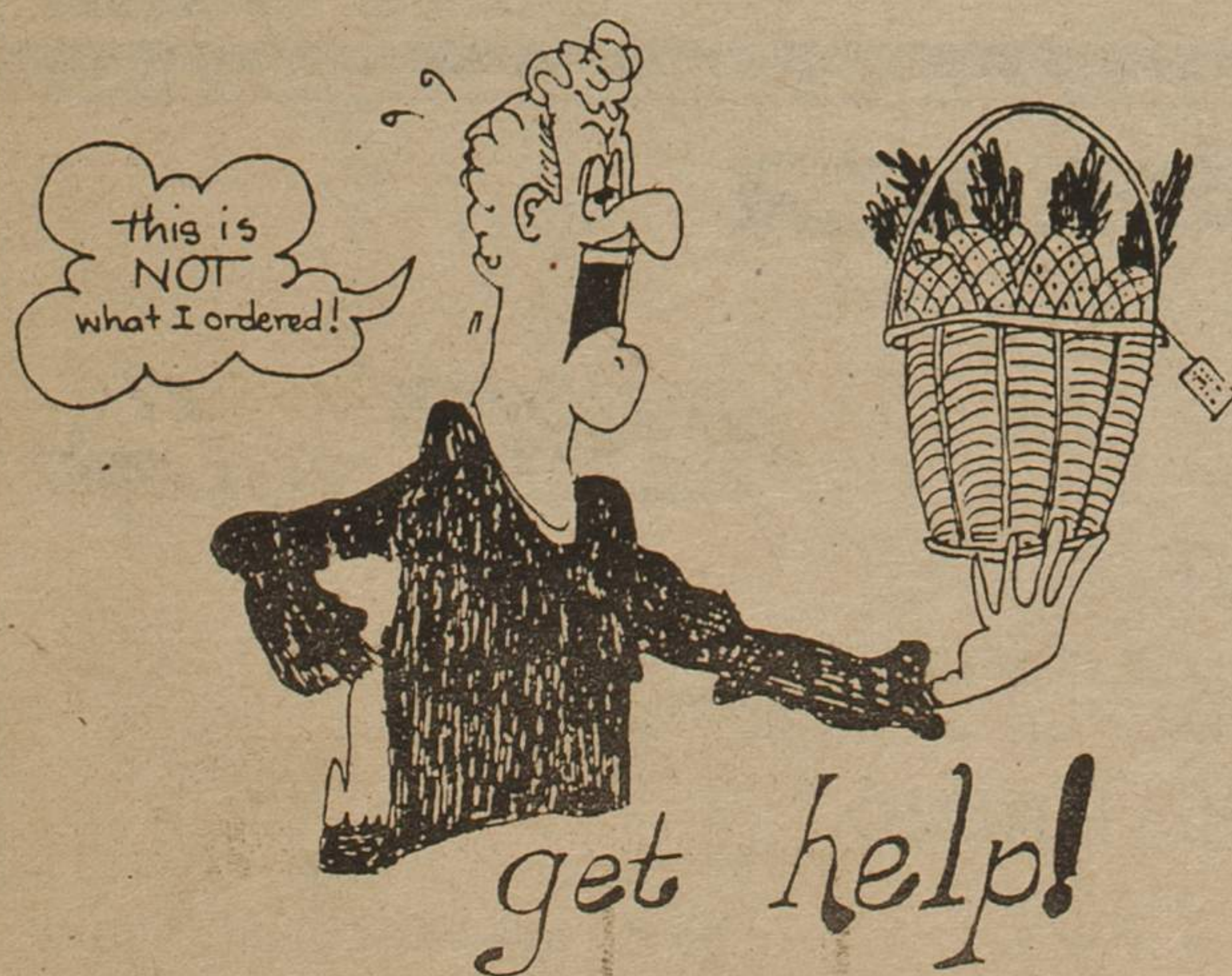
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