

From Prairie Farmer to Entrepreneur: the Transformation of Midwest Agriculture

Mark Friedberger

ISSN 0003-4827

Copyright © 2005 State Historical Society of Iowa. This article is posted here for personal use, not for redistribution.

Recommended Citation

Friedberger, Mark. "From Prairie Farmer to Entrepreneur: the Transformation of Midwest Agriculture." *The Annals of Iowa* 64 (2005), 390-392.

Available at: <http://ir.uiowa.edu/annals-of-iowa/vol64/iss4/17>

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](#)

to our larger understanding of the formation and history of the great road. This is not a casual read for general readers but an indispensable guide for travelers. Tracing the various routes through cities is helpful, but for many rural areas the book lacks much of the flavor of local history surrounding the route and its impact on communities. The focus is mainly on the route itself, but as a national guidebook there is much that cannot be covered. In the rush to treat more popular artifacts, such as markers or roadside food and lodging facilities, there are few references to many structures of local significance, such as college campuses and courthouses. For example, the Iowa section makes no reference to the three early colleges on the route—Iowa State, Coe, and Cornell. Butko mentions the Seedling Mile west of Mount Vernon and adds some fine comments but fails to note that it is the *only* one in Iowa, thus overlooking part of its true significance. The size of the work may limit how much local detail can be integrated into its highly generalized approach. References to the economic influence of the route are often made in the context of route changes but are not otherwise developed.

Butko provides an informative, entertaining guide that encourages anyone to make the trip from wherever one wants to start. Those seeking to make the whole trip will want to gather more detailed documentation provided by works such as G. W. Franzwa's state-based series. The bibliography and further reading sections are inviting and well selected.

From Prairie Farmer to Entrepreneur: The Transformation of Midwest Agriculture, by Dennis S. Nordin and Roy V. Scott. *Midwestern Culture and History Series*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005. xvi, 356 pp. Tables, notes, bibliography, index. \$65.00 cloth.

Reviewer Mark Friedberger is adjunct professor of history at Texas Christian University. He is the author of *Farm Families and Change in Twentieth-Century America* (1988) and *Shake-Out: Iowa Farm Families in the 1980s* (1989).

This book is a bit of a puzzle. First, it is a jointly authored, comparatively short volume of 205 pages. Its seven chapters follow a historical sequence in the twentieth century interspersed by a treatise on technological and scientific developments in farming. The first two chapters—on farming at the turn of the century and on the “Golden Age of Agriculture”—were probably written by Scott, while the remaining five chapters were Nordin's responsibility. Second, in addition to 60 pages of notes, the book has a 77-page bibliography, surely the most comprehensive bibliography ever compiled on the subject: it contains a huge section devoted to technical Experiment Station bulletins,

memoirs, and interviews, and an extraordinarily comprehensive bibliography of secondary sources. Third, the emphasis on documentation – footnotes often a half-page long – seems to bear little relation to the text: works are liberally cited, but have little influence on the text itself. Fourth, the final two chapters unmask the ideological thrust of the book when the authors attempt to emphasize the contribution of farmer entrepreneurs to the transformation of the Midwest. Rachel Carson is predictably labeled a muckraker, while corporations such as Monsanto are judged uncritically. Fifth, the authors define entrepreneurship as the “specialization, expansion and the adoption of better methods and appropriate technology” in farming. To them, successful farmers were specialists who “mastered both the agricultural and entrepreneurial aspects of their primary production” (157). Hard work had little to do with survival. Rather, the careful research that went into the purchase of an expensive item such as a tractor was a good indicator of an individual’s potential for success. The successful entrepreneur employed cost-analysis figures from agricultural economists in one’s decision, thus ensuring that the tractor one bought was both the optimum size and cheap to operate.

The heroes of the book are not only the entrepreneurial farm families who made the right decisions with their expansion plans and managed to beat the odds while neighbors failed, but also the many “farm boys who made good.” They were educated at midwestern land grant institutions and joined the Extension Service, agribusiness firms, or university faculties. From those positions, they pushed entrepreneurship down the reluctant throats of a skeptical farm population. Like other analysts of agriculture who laud the entrepreneurial thrust of the sector, Scott and Nordin believe that ends justify the means in modernization. In other words, they lament the loss of the livelihood of millions of farmers over the century but suggest that the loss was inevitable and justified. It cleared the way for an efficient farm sector that produced cheap food for urban America. The drift to cities and suburbs and non-farm sector jobs ultimately was the best course for those who did not possess the drive and entrepreneurial spirit needed to thrive in the world of modern agriculture.

Iowa is well served in this book. Each chapter makes reference to Iowa counties, personalities, and operating procedures. This is especially true of the first chapter, which provides a satisfactory discussion of farm life in 1900. This is one of the best descriptions of the open country Midwest that I have read. The authors make use of literary sources here as well. There is a useful discussion of the organizational thrust of farming in the “golden age” chapter. Government legislation

provided money for county agents, the farm bureau was founded, and many cooperatives sprouted all over the Midwest. Much of this modernization activity was resisted at the grass roots; on the other hand, a minority of "progressive entrepreneurs" thrived in the favorable conditions around World War I. The twenties were bitter years for midwestern farmers. Many left farming after the sharp recession of the early 1920s. The authors show that the McNary-Haugen legislation in which so much faith was placed was inappropriate for the times. Rather, tariff reduction, especially after 1930, would have helped solve the economic difficulties of the countryside. Despite the deep resentment rural midwesterners showed for urban America, the 1920s saw rapid modernization in education, communications, leisure, and road building, which bettered the living standards of rural folk.

The last three chapters of the book are dominated by the role government played in the modernization of midwestern agriculture. The authors are critical of government policy towards agriculture. Here they make a useful contribution in sorting out the mountain of complex legislation, particularly after World War II. At the same time, they approve of the close relationships forged between agribusiness and the land grant college complex. A special place is reserved in the narrative for the men and women who espoused the gospel of the land grant college, who logged in every day to university and agribusiness Web sites to search for the prognostications of the experts and applied them to their farm business.

In sum, the authors are cheerleaders for corporate agriculture. They seem to refuse to recognize that other roads to the modernization of U.S. agriculture might have produced better results. They tout cheap food as the most important result of corporate-sponsored change in agriculture. Yet U.S. food is no longer particularly cheap or very wholesome. One only has to compare the shelves of a European grocery chain to its American equivalent to see that Americans have been short-changed by the partnership between agribusiness and the food industry. In addition, the authors give scant attention to the potential of alternative agriculture, which even in the Midwest, with its reluctance to jettison mainstream ideas, had some impact in the last decade of the twentieth century. Reading this book, one cannot help asking whether the typical midwestern township is a better place occupied by 20 farm families or by one huge corporate hog farm. To most people the answer is obvious. To Scott and Nordin the entrepreneurial spirit that built and controls the hog farm counts the most.

Copyright of Annals of Iowa is the property of State of Iowa, by & through the State Historical Society of Iowa and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.