

Introduction

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Introduction

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THIS ISSUE of *The Annals of Iowa* explores agricultural history and the significance for that history of a major Iowa agriculturalist. Agriculture is, of course, a major part of the Iowa story—and of the American story as well, and Henry A. Wallace played roles of gigantic importance in both. Furthermore he merits special attention in 1983, for fifty years ago he became secretary of agriculture in Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal cabinet.

The essays and commentaries that follow were first presented at a conference in Des Moines, held June 3 and 4 of this year. Made possible by a grant from the Iowa Humanities Board and the National Endowment for the Humanities and contributions from the Living History Farms, the conference was sponsored by Iowa State University and its graduate program in Agricultural History and Rural Studies. That program, like the conference and this issue of the *Annals*, seeks to enlarge interest in and understanding of the historical approach to the study of agriculture.

Agriculture and rural life need to be examined historically. Technology, politics, and other forces have changed them dramatically since the establishment of the United States and of the state of Iowa, and change in human affairs gives historical

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study its focus. Once a rural, agrarian country, the United States has become predominantly urban and industrial, and, although Iowa remains more rural and agricultural than the nation as a whole, this transformation from farm and village to factory and city, which has been called "the major process of American history,"¹ has affected the state in major ways.

The discussion contained in this issue of the journal focuses on a man who was involved significantly and at several points in the agricultural and rural parts of the process. A person of great range, Wallace began in Iowa, developed a large, well-informed interest in its rural life and expanded the scope of his interests to encompass the nation and then the world. An Iowa native and a son of Henry C. Wallace, an agricultural journalist who served a term as secretary of agriculture, Henry A. Wallace was a 1910 graduate of Iowa State College, a frequent participant in its scientific activities, the editor of *Wallaces' Farmer* from 1921 to 1933, and the founder in 1926 of the Hi-Bred Corn Company (now Pioneer Hi-Bred International, Inc.). He went on to become the secretary of agriculture from 1933 to 1940, vice-president of the United States from 1941 to 1945, and a candidate for the presidency in 1948. In the agricultural phases of his wide-ranging career, he was both a person of great importance in the development of America's highly productive agriculture and the leading policymaker in the most creative period in the history of American farm policy. He helped mightily to enlarge the roles of science, technology, and the federal government in the lives of American farmers.

Concerned chiefly with the years from 1921 to 1940, the contributors to this volume bring out several sides of Wallace's many-sided career and their relevance for today. The first part of the issue explores an important aspect of the context within which he functioned: rural Iowa during the 1920s and 1930s. The three essays and two commentaries demonstrate that we must employ social history as well as the points of view of political and economic history in order to comprehend fully the

1. Peter H. Argersinger, "The People's Past: Teaching American Rural History," *The History Teacher* 10 (May 1977), 420. See also, John Shover, "On the State of Agricultural History," *American Quarterly* 28 (Fall 1976), 504-511.

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severity of the farm crisis of the period and the behavior of rural people at the time. The presentations also remind us that, although there are links and similarities between "the farm problem" of today and that of the 1920s and 1930s, rural Iowa a half century ago differed in major ways from what it is now.

Shifting the focus from Iowa to Wallace and recognizing that he was an intellectual, the second part focuses on his ideas. It emphasizes his assumptions about the importance of agriculture and rural life but deals also with the large place that religion occupied in his thinking. The debate provoked by the essay and commentaries centered on the reasons for the triumph in American farming of "modernization" over the "agrarian tradition," both of which resided in Wallace's mind when he came to power in 1933.

The third and fourth parts move on to Wallace's scientific, business, and political activities. The third examines him as both scientist and businessman and defines and explains his large contributions to one of the major themes in the recent history of Iowa agriculture: the development and use of hybrid corn. The paper and the two commentaries explore an important part of the background to the enormous—and often troublesome—productivity of present-day Iowa agriculture.

The fourth part of the issue deals with politics and policies, which were influenced by the fact that even before the era of hybrid corn Iowa farmers had become highly productive. Here, the essay and the commentaries look at Wallace as farm editor and secretary of agriculture and express large differences of opinion as to how his policies should be interpreted and evaluated. Translating those differences into their meaning for Iowa farmers, one can suggest that the debate focuses on how to define Wallace's impact. Did he *save* the corn belt, gripped as it was by crisis? Or did he *transform* it? In part, the debate revolves around the issue of structure. Should we emphasize the family farms that his policies preserved or the new organization that they gave way to in our agricultural system?

Wallace, his ideas, their development, and their impact are viewed in the pages that follow from several vantage points. Those who present the major essays represent quite different specialties. Three are leading students of Iowa's history; one is a specialist in recent American history; another is a geneticist and

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a business executive; another is a man trained in journalism and agricultural economics who became one of the major writers on farm matters in the American press. Those commenting on the papers add to the intellectual diversity. They represent different historical specialties and also journalism, economics, science, farming, and farm politics. And the summary of the discussion from the floor, which is the last part of this collection, points to other differences of opinion and vantage points. Some contributors to the conference and this publication are concerned mainly with Wallace's significance for his time; others are interested more in his relevance for today and tomorrow.

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