

Farm Families and Change in Twentieth-Century America

ISSN 0003-4827

Copyright © 1989 State Historical Society of Iowa. This article is posted here for personal use, not for redistribution.

Recommended Citation

"Farm Families and Change in Twentieth-Century America." *The Annals of Iowa* 50 (1989), 301-304.
Available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.9402>

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](#)

devotes some time to the conservation movement and the land ethic. The book has a frustrating presentist tone to it, for the author continually leaps forward in time to the eighties as if to remind the reader what a mess a land policy guided by the profit motive has become.

Opie is not afraid to offer his readers suggestions that might correct this sorry situation. He zeros in on the impropriety of the rectangular survey system for an efficient late twentieth and twenty-first century agricultural enterprise, but he fails to note Diller's study of a Nebraska farming community which exhaustively explored the possibility of scrapping the grid system in the 1930s, and found that although the landscape of the grid system had many disadvantages, substituting something else was utterly impractical. Perhaps more important, Opie suggests that the family farm as an economic organization requires reevaluation, but again he fails to take into account the well-worn argument that in America's heartland, where grain and livestock producers still retain some importance, the so-called dialectic of the family farm makes substituting some other entity unrealistic. The staff and line model of corporate agriculture, where managers sit at computers and employees haul manure, is not a practical alternative to family labor. The unstructured nature of cornbelt farming, where the weather, the needs of livestock, and the management of the farm all compete for the time of the hard-pressed operator, make the family form of organization secure against other alternative forms. Family farming is self-exploitive, and is a hard, risky, and dirty way of life. As such it holds little attraction for those not brought up in a farming environment, and is partly why agriculture is an ascribed rather than achieved occupation.

I found this book disappointing, for besides the rhetoric it includes little that is new. Yet perhaps the author has had the last laugh, for in an age when historical monographs that document events in excruciating detail have miserably low sales, Opie's text is already in its second printing.

Farm Families and Change in Twentieth-Century America, by Mark Friedberger. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1988. x, 282 pp. Tables, notes, index. \$28.00 cloth.

REVIEWED BY ROBERT P. SWIERENGA, KENT STATE UNIVERSITY

The farm crisis of the 1980s rivaled the 1930s in intensity and severely threatens the survival of the family farm. *Farm Families and Change* provides a historical perspective on changes in American agriculture in the twentieth century, particularly the impact of industrialized agri-

culture on mid-sized family farms. The book's purpose is to show the characteristics of successful farm families. Despite the ravages of misplaced government farm programs and tax policies, the bottom-line mentality of corporate farms, and the proclivity of traditional farmers to overexpand in boom times, many intergenerational families have surmounted the difficulties. Indeed, Friedberger concludes that the family farm will survive, as it has in the past, by diversification, fiscal conservatism, and a renewed commitment to the old "frugal farmer" mentality.

Mark Friedberger is a longtime student of the social history of Iowa agriculture, especially farm inheritance practices. The traumatic farm depression of the 1980s prompted him to expand his reach beyond Iowa and to explore structural changes in agriculture generally since the 1920s. Due to "logistics and record availability" (253), Friedberger selected only two areas as case studies: Fayette and Benton counties in eastern Iowa and Kings and Tulare counties in the southern Central Valley of California. The California area involves irrigated farming in cotton and soft fruits that is common throughout the central valleys. Several Iowans were also among the pioneer settlers there. The choice of the Iowa counties is less compelling, even though they have been the focus of the author's previous research. Fayette and Benton counties are in the eastern hilly region of dairy-hog operations, rather than in the more typical corn-hog-beef farming of the central and western Iowa prairies. Whether reasonable models or not, the two regions offer obvious contrasts between traditional and modern farm systems. Although both include family farms, California agriculture is more industrialized, with vast corporate farms, complex water-use rules, imported labor, and serious environmental concerns.

Given the case study approach, the book's organization is predictable. It opens with an overview of the boom and bust cycles in the farm economy since the 1890s, leading up to the "glory years" of the inflationary 1970s and then the unexpected collapse of the 1980s. While the current crisis bore the marks of earlier debacles, Friedberger concludes that farmers today have engendered more public sympathy and a wider support system than their predecessors, largely because of their skillful use of the mass media and government "safety net" programs. The next two chapters sketch the evolution of farming in Iowa and California respectively, from self-sustaining low-tech agriculture to high-tech, diversified, scientific practices. Iowans may take issue with the author's statement that Hawkeye farmers modernized more slowly and were more skeptical of innovation than their California counterparts. Friedberger cites the Iowa farmers' overdependence

on corn and soybean production, their reluctance to specialize in more profitable hog raising, and their unwillingness to abandon dairying, for which the prognosis is "not promising" (27-28). Central California ranchers, by contrast, readily adapted to hydraulic agriculture, specialized fruit and nut crops, and massive dairy operations by Portuguese and Dutch immigrants.

Given the profound structural and ecological differences between Iowa and California, however, one wonders whether Friedberger's comparative approach is meaningful. The chapters on tenure, inheritance, and credit patterns highlight the contrasts. While Iowans used simple wills for intergenerational farm transfers, Californians engaged in estate planning and established family-controlled corporations. Similarly, California farmers had a voracious appetite for commercial credit, while cautious Iowans relied more on family sources. Both groups, however, "farmed the government" in recent decades.

The chapter on land tenure suffers from an indiscriminate mixing of such topics as federal land policy, which Friedberger inconsistently both praises and condemns (47, 67), the workings of the "agricultural ladder," tenancy, farm mortgage foreclosures, and opportunities for new farmers. Several of these subjects relate only tangentially to landholding. The statement that Iowa chattel mortgages before the 1930s "have largely been destroyed" (100) is overstated: Allan Bogue found a complete set in Lucas County (1856-1900), and I found chattel records in a number of central and western counties.

The theme of familism is central to the book. One of the most interesting chapters offers vignettes of a dozen successful farm families: a German Catholic and Lutheran in Iowa, and in California a South Dakota-born Yankee, an Oklahoma "Okie," and an Azorian Portuguese, Dane, and Dutch Calvinist. Friedberger acknowledges the downside of familism—disharmony among members and its risks to ownership. In the least satisfactory chapter, entitled "Community," he traces the history of the Iowa towns of Auburn and Kane, and the California cities of Hanford and Corcoran, but he fails to draw clearly the links between community building and family farm survival.

The final section of the book offers a detailed account of the crisis of the 1980s in Iowa and in California, together with the response of farmers, lenders, lawyers, grass-roots organizations, and governmental agencies. Although this is more sociological than historical, the treatment is perceptive, sensitive, and reasoned. Iowa farmers suffered more than California ranchers because they were less diversified. Friedberger concludes that the economic and structural changes of the 1920s and 1930s are "largely irrelevant" to understanding the

current crisis, but lessons might be learned from the mechanics of recovery (246). The major lesson is "consciousness raising." Farmers must resist the siren call of speculation and return to the old virtues.

Friedberger relied on an extraordinary variety of sources: interviews, personal observations, county land and court records, tract indexes of title abstracting firms, census lists, Iowa Agricultural Experiment Stations bulletins, federal documents, newspapers, and secondary works. To weave such diverse sources into a coherent narrative is a noteworthy accomplishment. However, the research data is stronger for the Iowa story than for California, because Friedberger has spent fifteen years in Iowa courthouse records and archives, compared to a year or so in California collections.

In its approach, this book most resembles John Shover's *First Majority-Last Minority: The Transformation of Rural Life in America* (1976). But Friedberger's focus on familism is narrower and his prognosis for the future of the family farm is more sanguine. Shover wrote in the context of the Club of Rome's *Limits of Growth* report and used published sources, while Friedberger absorbed at first hand the dogged optimism of American farm families in the more positive Reagan era. Gilbert Fite's *American Farmers-The New Minority* (1981) also explores the decline of family farming since 1981, but Fite concentrates on economic and political aspects. In short, Friedberger's social history of modern agriculture and his analysis of the troubles of the eighties offers the first scholarly treatment of family farming. It took courage to venture into this complex subject. Friedberger's case study method has its limitations, but overall he succeeds in explaining how and why family farmers have survived the repeated shocks of an increasingly complex world.

The Iowa Precinct Caucuses: The Making of a Media Event, by Hugh Winebrenner. Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1987. x, 173 pp. Tables, illustrations, references, index. \$15.95 cloth.

REVIEWED BY THOMAS G. RYAN, UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA

Two events catapulted Iowa to national attention during the 1980s: the farm crisis and the state's presidential precinct caucuses. Recent improvements in farmland prices, in farm income, and in the debt-to-asset ratio of Iowa farmers appear to signal an end to the agricultural depression of the 1980s. Although many contend that the farm crisis is far from over, by 1987 and early 1988 the national media no longer regarded the economic condition of either Iowa or American farmers as worthy of attention. The 1988 Iowa precinct caucuses, on the other

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.