

American Farmers: the New Minority

ISSN 0003-4827

Copyright © 1983 State Historical Society of Iowa. This article is posted here for personal use, not for redistribution.

Recommended Citation

"American Farmers: the New Minority." *The Annals of Iowa* 46 (1983), 553-555.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.8923>

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](#)

American Farmers: The New Minority, by Gilbert C. Fite. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981. pp. ix, 265. Photographs, notes, index. \$19.50.

The American farm and rural life evoke warm and nostalgic images from our past, harkening back to the oft expressed Jeffersonian view of the early nineteenth century that the real virtue and substance of America were to be found in the countryside rather than the city. Like many popular notions, this ideal proved less than perfect by the beginning of the twentieth century. With the conclusion of World War I, the long suspected fear regarding the decline of the nation's population was conclusively documented in the returns of the 1920 census, indicating that America had become an urban nation with a majority of its population now living in cities and towns rather than in the countryside.

A leading American agricultural historian and a specialist in twentieth-century agrarian development, Gilbert C. Fite traces the role of rural America from 1920 to the present in this study appropriately subtitled "The New Minority." He provides a short but useful summary in the first chapter entitled "The Vanishing Majority," showing how and why this trend had been long in the making since the closing decades of the nineteenth century. While the Progressive Era years of 1901 to 1917 witnessed basic legislation designed to improve the quality of farm life such as Rural Post Roads Act, Smith-Lever Act, and Smith-Hughes Act, farmers still failed to organize themselves into a cohesive political force.

What was the problem? According to Fite, farmers have always traditionally been victims of their own rhetoric. Theory held that farming was a basic industry founded on a desirable and superior way of life which enabled farmers to be free and self-sufficient and thus to avoid the vice and corruption of cities. Yet, farmers were increasingly deserting the countryside and fleeing to towns and cities. "The reality was that agriculture," declares Fite, "could not compete with industry and urban life. . . ." (p. 10).

Shortly before the results of the 1920 census were revealed, concerned farm leaders began organizing. The emergence of the American Farm Bureau Federation (AFBF), representing county-level farm leaders, occurred in November 1919 at Chicago, dedicated to improving the business, marketing, and transportation aspects of agriculture, and fostering a national farm policy. The AFBF's lobbying in Washington for farm legislation influenced the appearance in 1921 of a bipartisan group of rural based congressmen who became known as

the Farm Bloc. This group spearheaded the fight for federal supportive programs benefitting agriculture during the 1920s and 1930s. Federal legislation pertaining to agriculture went through several stages. The emphasis in the 1920s was primarily on legislation which was designed to have farmers help themselves. The Capper-Volstead Act of 1922 and the Agricultural Marketing Act of 1929 encouraged farmers to seek better prices and improve their marketing of commodities through voluntary associations or cooperatives. But the problem was the farmer's successful ability to produce more than what the market could absorb, which translated into surpluses driving prices ever downward.

The Republican administrations of the 1920s were basically insensitive to the farmers' plight and vigorously opposed the various McNary-Haugen Bills of 1924 through 1928 which would have put the federal government into the business of subsidizing farm products through price supports and thus guaranteeing a minimal standard of living for rural America. This federal assistance did not evolve until 1933 when Franklin D. Roosevelt began to fulfill the campaign pledge of a "New Deal" with the Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA) of 1933. The AAA approach, inaugurated amidst the despair of the Great Depression, set in motion the price support program to maintain the existence of the American farm and to reduce surpluses. This subsidy or price support program continues today in varying degrees and with even greater bureaucratic complexity.

The topic of farm legislation, covering five decades from 1920 through the 1970s, is naturally viewed by many readers—historian and non-historian—as potentially dull and tediously complex. Fite masterfully guides those with little or no knowledge of agrarian history through the labyrinth. His clear descriptions and incisive analysis of farming, farm life, and farm policies, from 1920 to the present are genuinely enjoyable and informative reading. The farm program of price supports at 90 percent parity loomed as a potential political minefield in the decades following the end of World War II. For consumers and non-agrarian taxpayers, farmers were seemingly subsidized so as to guarantee high prices, while the federal government was accumulating costly stored amounts of ever increasing commodity surpluses. The potato scandal of 1947-48 was merely a tip of the iceberg. Fite's study is especially important at this juncture in tracing the political decline of the farm lobby in Congress. Drawing extensively from the *Congressional Record*, government documents, various polls, leading newspapers, farm press, and national periodicals of the 1950s through the 1970s, Fite pinpoints the urban

consumer reaction and the diminishing political clout of farmers.

The decline of political power was paralleled by another basic phenomenon which had full impact after 1945: the rise of agribusiness. Farming was in the process of consolidation in which the small American family farm unit was economically absorbed into larger units. The development reflects the fewer numbers of farmers each year who as marginal operators either fail or sell their land which is worth more in asset value than in terms of operating cash flow. The net result, observes Fite, is the "ever-shrinking minority" by the 1970s. At the end of that decade, farmers constituted less than 5 percent of the population. He concludes his analysis with the often unsuccessful protests of this declining minority through the American Agricultural Movement, the National Farmers Union, and the tractorcades which marched on Washington during the Carter administration years.

American Farmers is a masterpiece that is researched and written with skill, talent, and insight so reflective and typical of Gilbert Fite's distinguished list of publications. Fite modestly notes in the preface to this volume that his observations are designed mainly for the general reader of a non-agricultural background; but the fact is that this seminal work has defined the main interpretative points which twentieth-century American agricultural historians will follow closely for a considerable time to come. Fite has produced a classic work that should be read in the White House, in congressional offices, by urban consumers, and last and most important, by the agrarian minority itself.

TEXAS A & M UNIVERSITY

DAVID E. SCHOB

Farmers, Bureaucrats, and Middlemen: Historical Perspectives on American Agriculture, edited by Trudy Huskamp Peterson. Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1980. pp. xvii, 357. Photographs, maps, notes, index. \$19.95.

For a number of years the National Archives has sponsored conferences on historical topics ranging from American Indians to statistics in order to show the wealth of source material in the National Archives, its branches, and the presidential libraries. Trudy Huskamp Peterson, an Iowa native, directed a conference on agricultural history in 1977 and she edited the proceedings, a handsome, easy-to-read volume. Many of the participating scholars have studied or taught in Iowa.

The subject as a whole and specific papers by Iowa State Univer-

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.