[In Progress] Kansas history: a journal of the central plains

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and chains. During the course of their measurements, they found that many farmers had exceeded their authorized acreage, but the over planting usually had not been intentional. Officials thought, however, that willful noncompliance would have been a problem had the drought not been as widespread or as severe. Because the drought ruined the feed crops in 1933–1934, the AAA permitted contracting farmers to seed additional wheat acres for winter pasture and hay, provided they promised in writing to plow or cut that wheat for hay or feed before the regular harvest time to maintain their compliance with the wheat adjustment or reduction program.[17]

Surveys by the AAA indicated that many farmers used their benefit payments to meet essential needs and pay bills, bank loans, and taxes, thereby improving their credit ratings. Farm women played a major role in determining the expenditures of these checks, which farm families considered a windfall. Even so, the wheat program benefit payments could not meet all basic financial needs of a farm family because a large part of the benefit checks was needed to purchase seed wheat and pay planting expenses, such as the cost of gasoline for tractors and feed for horses. Moreover, due to bureaucratic delays in 1933, the wheat adjustment program caused an additional and immediate financial problem because the 1934 winter wheat crop needed to be seeded before farmers received their first benefit check. Consequently, farmers had to purchase seed, gasoline, and horse feed on credit, and wait for their payment to arrive before they could settle their accounts.[18]

Even so, wheat farmers welcomed the AAA benefit payments. In 1933 the wheat crop in Finney County averaged only three bushels per acre. For most of the 650 wheat farmers the future looked grim, but the $325,000 scheduled for payment gave them some hope that they could endure until the economy improved and the drought ended. With 95 percent of wheat farmers in Finney County participating in the program, they stood to receive checks averaging more than five hundred dollars each for reducing their acreage by 15 percent. L. E. Crawford, the county agent, reported: "This county has been almost bankrupt. The only light the people have seen is the wheat allotment. Otherwise it would be a dark, dismal picture for the winter." By June 30, 1934, wheat farmers in Hodgeman County had accepted $286,248 for participation in the wheat reduction program. A year later 20 percent of the wheat crop had failed in Seward County with the best lands yielding only three bushels per acre. There eight hundred farmers participated in the wheat allotment program and accepted benefit checks totaling $460,889. Similarly, by March 1936 Gove County farmers had reduced their wheat acreage by nearly 31 percent due to drought and the AAA allotment program, the latter of which supplemented their income by $843,962. In each case, AAA funds served as the major source of income for wheat farmers.[19]

Despite the income enhancement, however, the AAA wheat program made only an insignificant reduction in the planted acreage. Overall, the adjustment program provided for the retirement of 1.8 million acres in Kansas for the 1934 wheat crop, 1.2 million acres for the 1935 crop, and some 652,000 acres for the 1936 crop, the latter of which reflected a change in agricultural policy. Indeed, the wheat adjustment program did not necessarily mean a reduction in production by participating farmers. Wheat farmers in Meade County, for example, attempted to rent as much land as possible to plant more wheat and make up for their losses to drought and the adjustment program. In the meantime, they received AAA payments for reducing the acreage seeded to wheat on their own lands. In the summer of 1934 the Meade County register of deeds believed that not a quarter section of crop land in the county remained unrented for the 1935 crop. By putting their own wheat lands under acreage reduction contracts then renting additional lands for wheat, Meade County farmers clearly worked against the purposes of the AAA's wheat reduction program. While they schemed, these wheat farmers accepted $333,562 for the 1933–1934 crop year and $135,000 as the first payment for the 1934–1935 crop year

17. Davis, *Wheat and the AAA*, 121–25, 133, 138.

18. Ibid., 165–66; P. H. Stevens, "Report of the Executive Council on the Federal Relief in the Drought Area of Southwestern Kansas, Northwestern Oklahoma, Texas, and Southeastern Colorado," 1933, Drought file, General Correspondence, Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, RG 16, National Archives, College Park, Md.

19. U.S. Department of Agriculture, *Agricultural Adjustment* (1934), 268–70; K. H. McGill et al., "A Survey of Hodgeman County, Kansas, June 1934," viii, 72, Bureau of Agricultural Economics, Rural Problem Reports, August 1, 1934, RG 83, National Archives; Hazel Bland, "Survey of Current Changes in the Relief Population, Seward County, Kansas, June 1935," 4, 23, Records of the Bureau of Agricultural Economics, Rural Problem Reports, May 9, 1936, ibid.; Kenneth J. Ekdahl, "Survey of Current Changes in Relief Population, Gove County, June 1935," 9, 25, Records of the Bureau of Agricultural Economics, Rural Problem Reports, March 31, 1936, ibid.

for reducing their own acreage planted to wheat. Put differently, Kansas farmers seeded an average of 13.2 million acres to wheat from 1927 to 1931, but in 1934 they planted 12.6 million acres and 13.4 million acres a year later. The AAA, however, substantially helped increase the income of wheat farmers. Although wheat prices rose from thirty-three cents per bushel in 1931 to eighty-four cents per bushel in 1934 and earned Kansas farmers an estimated $70.8 million, AAA benefit payments enhanced that income by about one third, or $25.6 million.[20]

The Roosevelt administration encouraged full farmer participation in the AAA program, believing it was a strong plan for agricultural aid. In this 1932 photo, taken near Colby, Roosevelt campaigns for the farm vote during his initial bid for the presidency.

By 1935 AAA officials believed that wheat farmers generally favored the program. At first, however, farmer opinion divided over the acreage control program. Some favored it immediately because they were so hard pressed for cash that the AAA seemed to be their only salvation. Other wheat farmers favored acreage reduction but feared the program would become a permanent solution to the problem of low prices and over production. Most farmers also strongly disliked government regulation of their lives. One Kansas wheat farmer, for example, wrote President Roosevelt that no producer wanted "to be tied down on what he plants or how much stock he raises." Many absentee landlords or suitcase farmers, however, favored the program because they had poor prospects for a harvest, and they preferred to abandon as much of their acreage as possible and still earn a profit while reducing operating expenses. Some Kansas farmers favored expanding exports as the best way to increase prices and reduce the wheat surplus, a suggestion that showed no understanding of foreign market conditions. Most farmers no doubt agreed with a Hutchinson observer who, on April 15, 1933, reported to Rexford G. Tugwell, assistant secretary of agriculture, that "the acreage leasing plan [under consideration] appears to be the wise plan to cope with this situation that requires quick remedy." Grain dealers and commission men and their lawyers usually opposed the wheat allotment program on the principle that the federal government should not interfere with the capitalist system of supply and demand and that the program was socialistic as well as unworkable. Once the program began functioning, however, wheat farmers complained only because the AAA was slow to approve their contracts and to mail their benefit checks, and the food

20. "Rental and Benefit Payments by Commodities, States and Program Years, Through December 31, 1937," folder 11, Figures on AAA Programs, Agriculture, box 65, Departmental Correspondence, 1937–1938, Clifford Hope Collection, Library and Archives Division, Kansas State Historical Society; "Estimated Numbers of Acres Retired Under Agricultural Adjustment Contracts By States and by Commodities From Which Withdrawn, 1933–1935," ibid.; K. H. Mcgill et al., "A Survey of Meade County, Kansas, June 1934," 30–31, 70–71, Bureau of Agricultural Economics, Rural Problem Reports, August 11, 1934, RG 83; U.S. Department of Agriculture, *Agricultural Statistics, 1936*, 9, 19; ibid., *1938* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1938), 13; Davis, *Wheat and the AAA*, 366–67.

processors accepted it and passed on the excise tax to consumers.[21]

The acceptance of the AAA program by Kansas wheat farmers is best illustrated by their vote of approval. On May 25, 1935, the AAA held a nationwide referendum on the question: "Are you in favor of a wheat production—adjustment program to follow the present one which expires with the 1935 crop year." Farmers who had signed wheat adjustment contracts as well as those who did not participate voted by secret ballot. In Kansas 82,059 farmers voted; 71,768 supported continuation of the program while 10,291 opposed it. Of the 73,068 contract signers, 65,516 favored continuation of the program in some form. Officials in the agency used these and similar returns from other wheat-producing states to draft a new four-year program to run through 1939.[22]

By 1936 income from the AAA wheat program proved substantial to the agricultural economy in Kansas. Wheat farmers used this income to pay delinquent taxes and bank loans as well as purchase daily household and farm necessities, such as food, clothing, seed, and equipment. Although the benefit checks provided only a few hundred dollars for participants, that money proved substantial, particularly when the total contributions are considered. By December 31, 1933, for example, Kansas wheat farmers had received $7.4 million in benefit checks. On the eve of the U.S. Supreme Court's decision that held the AAA unconstitutional, Kansas wheat farmers had received more than $93.1 million in wheat benefit checks. During the first four years of the program the AAA paid $23,384,031 in 1933; $25,674,120 in 1934; $28,397,581 in 1935; and $15,733,202 in 1936. For many Kansas wheat farmers the AAA checks were the only cash income that they received during 1933 and 1934.[23]

Opponents of the AAA, however, cared little for the monetary boost that the program gave to wheat farmers and the agricultural economy. During 1935 they increasingly challenged the constitutionality of the Agricultural Adjustment Act, particularly regarding the processing or excise tax. Ultimately, the attack by conservatives on the agency proved successful when, on January 6, 1936, the U.S. Supreme Court held the act unconstitutional. The Court did so on the grounds that the processing tax was not a real tax but rather an agricultural production control system that was voluntary in name only. In the court's six-to-three decision Justice Owen Roberts, writing for the majority, held that the benefit payments were intended to "co-

The Agricultural Adjustment program of 1938 provided benefits to farmers who practiced soil erosion control. These contrasting photographs in Morton County illustrate the problems and solutions to soil erosion. ABOVE: *Abandoned land with four feet of soil loss from wind erosion.* RIGHT: *Formerly cultivated and severely eroded land now seeded to native grass to help stabilize the soil.*

21. Davis, *Wheat and the AAA*, 369, 381–82; Gilbert C. Fite, "Farmer Opinion and the Agricultural Adjustment Act, 1933," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 48 (March 1962): 664–66, 669.

22. U.S. Department of Agriculture, *Agricultural Adjustment, 1933 to 1935*, 13, 155–56; Perkins, *Crisis in Agriculture*, 192.

23. U.S. Department of Agriculture, *Agricultural Adjustment* (1934), 261–62, 297, 303; ibid., *Agricultural Adjustment, 1933 to 1935*, 296; "Rental and Benefit Payments by Commodities," Hope Collection; "Estimated Distribution Among Commodities of Gross Payments to Farmers . . . Under the 1936 Agricultural Conservation Program by States and Regions," ibid.

erce" farmers to accept regulation of the agricultural economy. Consequently, the processing tax and the exercise of federal power to control production by paying farmers to reduce their acreage for certain crops, such as wheat, were unconstitutional. Even so, the wheat control program of the AAA lasted longer than any other commodity production-control program.[24]

Despite the Supreme Court's ruling, the Roosevelt administration was unwilling to allow the AAA to expire because many wheat farmers had become dependent on allotment checks for daily living expenses and to pay bills, and because the presidential election would be held that November. Consequently, the administration moved quickly to achieve congressional approval of the Soil Conservation and Domestic Allotment Act, which became law on February 29, 1936. Although policymakers still placed emphasis on increasing the wheat farmer's income, AAA payments now became based on their agreement to plant soil conserving crops rather than on acreage reduction for production control. Essentially, while USDA officials intended the Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1933 to achieve parity prices for farmers, the Soil Conservation and Domestic Allotment Act of 1936 sought parity income by reestablishing "the ratio between the purchasing power of the net income per person on farms and that of the income per person not on farms" that existed between 1909 and 1914. This shift in the basis for payments proved more equitable because it enabled small-scale farmers to share in the distribution of funds since they now could receive income for practicing soil conservation techniques on any part of their crop and pasture lands, in contrast to the reduction of wheat acreage alone. This policy contrasted sharply with the first AAA, which primarily aided the large-scale wheat farmers who received most of the allotment money because they had the most acres to remove from wheat production.[25]

Senator Arthur Capper had voted for the Agricultural Adjustment Act, and he supported the Soil Conservation and Domestic Allotment Act. On February 14, 1936, Capper told the nation over NBC radio that:

> The pending measure lays the ground work for a national land utilization program. It provides a means that farmers can use to preserve the fertility of the soil, for the benefit of the entire nation. It provides a means for conserving the soil. It provides a method for preventing soil erosion. The method for adjusting production to give producers the benefit of the law of supply and demand, thru state AAA's, is rather cumbersome, but it is at least worth trying.[26]

24. *United States v Butler*, 297 US 1 (1936); Saloutos, *The American Farmer and the New Deal*, 126; Michael W. Schuyler, *The Dread of Plenty: Agricultural Relief Activities of the Federal Government in the Midwest, 1933–1939* (Manhattan, Kan.: Sunflower University Press, 1989), 139.

25. Fite, *American Farmers: The New Majority*, 60; Stewart, "Changes on Wheat Farms in Southwestern Kansas," 11.

26. Homer E. Socolofsky, *Arthur Capper: Publisher, Politician, and Philanthropist* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1962), 174, 182; "Address by Senator Arthur Capper of Kansas," National Broadcasting Company, February 14, 1936, Soil Conservation folder, box 37, Agricultural Correspondence, Arthur Capper Collection, Library and Archives Division.

Kansas wheat farmers agreed. Under the 1936 program, 101,375 wheat farmers accepted $18,187,158, or $179.40 per farmer, for reducing their wheat acreage by planting soil conserving crops. In 1937, 103,858 farmers accepted $15,281,000, or $143.13 each, for participating in the program. Yet, these funds merely helped Kansas wheat farmers endure. In mid-February 1937 Ed Watkins, a Sublette County resident, told Representative Clifford Hope that drought and wind erosion still wrought havoc on the wheat crop. He wrote that it was "buried with dirt and not a chance in 1000 of raising a bushel in the county as well as most of the counties west of Dodge and it is starting to blow badly on east of here." For him, the allotment program provided insufficient aid. "These farmers," he wrote, "are hard up. Very few of them . . . have money to repair their tractors and buy gas and oil. Most have never rec[eived] their conservation money and when they do owe it for groceries and living expenses, some have bought gas on time and owe for that."[27]

Roger Stewart of the Kansas Resettlement Administration, however, criticized the federal government for doing too much rather than too little. In late February 1937 he contended that "The AAA has subsidized reduction of wheat on land where wheat should not be produced." He estimated that 52 percent of the farmers in the Elkhart area were tenants and that government programs had encouraged landowners to release them. Landowners could then farm their own land and receive the entire benefit payment rather than share the AAA checks with their tenants proportionately according to the crop share agreement.[28]

The AAA benefit checks, of course, whether from the 1933 or 1936 programs, only met immediate financial needs, and the drought, not the allotment program, primarily reduced wheat production. In March 1937 George Anspaugh, president of the Ness County Farm Bureau, told Congressman Hope that "Crops are either destroyed or in danger of destruction. Last year's soil erosion program has been followed diligently and the present condition exists through no fault of the people themselves, but through the fate of unfavorable weather." Little more than a month later Hope received a letter from the Liberal Chamber of Commerce saying that while "honest and conscientious" farmers were doing their best to apply the best soil holding techniques to their land, the AAA program was working against them. "These farmers," the chamber reported, "are seriously handicapped by the chiseler who farms primarily for the benefit checks and who farms every available acre with little attempt to prevent blowing." The chamber also noted that "Others are financially unable to properly farm their land even with the assistance of the benefit payments, and others are too stubborn or indifferent to realize the seriousness of the situation but depend entirely on some act of God, nature, or time to correct all troubles."[29]

Hope, however, was at work trying to expand the breadth of the AAA program by proposing, with Congressman Phil Ferguson of Oklahoma, that the agency make extra payments to Dust Bowl farmers who carried out a listing program at the rate of twenty-five cents per acre and fifty cents per acre for planting cover crops on lands not already diverted or withdrawn from production under AAA contracts. M. L. Wilson, assistant secretary of agriculture, supported Hope's efforts. Wilson had advocated a systematic conservation plan under the AAA for several years, and he believed that wheat farmers should join the AAA's production control associations and develop countywide plans for soil conservation. Wilson contended that "Establishment of a plan of systematic crop and soil management is the foundation of wind-erosion control."[30]

Hope's efforts soon proved successful. On April 5, 1937, Howard R. Tolley, administrator of the AAA, announced an emergency wind erosion control program for ninety counties in the five-state Dust Bowl area. This special program provided payment of AAA funds ranging from twenty to fifty cents an acre for tillage and seeding of cover crops that helped control wind erosion, except on AAA diverted acreage that presumably had already been planted with soil conserving crops.

27. "Estimated Distribution Among Commodities of Gross Payments to Farmers," Hope Collection; Ed M. Watkins to Clifford R. Hope, February 17, 1937, folder 7, Dust Bowl, Agriculture, box 65, Departmental Correspondence, 1937–1938, ibid.
28. *Elkhart Tri-State News*, February 25, 1937.
29. George Anspaugh to Clifford R. Hope, March 9, 1937, Hope Collection; Liberal, Kansas, Chamber of Commerce to Hope, April 29, 1937, ibid.
30. Clifford R. Hope to George Anspaugh, March 19, 1937, ibid.

Where farmers conducted this work prior to the beginning of the program on June 1, 1937, the AAA would reimburse 85 percent of the costs after completion of the work. This AAA program would be administered by county committees with local administrative expenses deducted from the payments, similar to the operation and funding of the wheat allotment program.[31]

Reciprocal Tariff And AAA Are Attacked And Defended Today

They're Tuning In On Desires of Kansas Farmers

Four Kansas Congressmen Open Hearing

Senator Capper Also Tunes In On Kansas Wants

Disagreement as to th of the AAA, a demand fo sing taxes, criticism of t reoal trade treaties an around blast at red ta farm administration fe congressional investiga Agriculture's woes here ing.

Several hundred far farm leaders gathered t views at the hearings w resumed this afternoon be continued tomorro Chamber of Commerce

Kansas politicians who worked especially diligently throughout and after the Dust Bowl years to advance farm assistance programs included U.S. Senator Arthur Capper (center) and U.S. Representative Clifford Hope (second from right). Remaining members of this special congressional committee on agriculture are (left to right): U.S. Representatives Thomas D. Winter, Frank Carlson, and Edward H. Rees. Hutchinson News, *December 12, 1939.*

In 1938 Congress passed a new Agricultural Adjustment Act that continued to emphasize production control through acreage allotments and payments for specified conservation practices. It also provided for an "ever-normal" granary plan that enabled farmers to store their surplus at government expense through loans from the Commodity Credit Corporation and thereby help control prices by keeping the crop off the market until needed. The AAA of 1938 also introduced crop insurance for wheat farmers. This Agricultural Adjustment program expanded government efforts to get relief funds to wheat farmers as quickly as possible so they could plow and plant their blowing lands. Farmers who participated in the 1938 program were allowed to apply to the Farm Security Administration (FSA) for an advance loan against their benefit payments. According to this plan, the FSA would loan 60 percent of the maximum amount that a farmer expected to receive in AAA benefits to carry out soil erosion control practices before the AAA checks arrived. Although this feature of the federal relief program was beneficial, it also provided punitive measures for wheat farmers who did not work their blowing lands. In 1938, according to the adjustment program, if the land of any participating farmer blew because he did not carry out approved soil conservation practices, he would be penalized one dollar per acre for the land that contributed to the wind erosion problem. Moreover, he would not be eligible for any payment under the agricultural conservation program.[32]

By 1939 near-normal precipitation had returned to most counties, particularly in the Dust Bowl area of southwestern Kansas. The wind had not been as severe com-

31. U.S. Department of Agriculture, Office of Information Press Service, "AAA Announces Emergency Wind Erosion Control Program for 'Dust Bowl' Area, April 5, 1937" (photocopy, private collection of R. Douglas Hurt, Ames, Iowa).

32. U.S. Department of Agriculture, *The AAA—What It Is* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1941), 5; Saloutos, *The American Farmer and the New Deal*, 242, 254–56; Roy I. Kimmel, "Activities of Federal and State Agencies in Solving Agricultural Problems of the Southwest," address, February 10, 1939, folder 15, Resettlement, Agriculture, box 76, Departmental Correspondence, 1938–1938, Hope Collection.

pared with previous springs, and strip cropping and listing, among other conservation techniques, helped hold the soil. Only the sandy lands and denuded pastures still contributed to the wind erosion problem in the Dust Bowl portion of the state. By 1939, 13.7 million acres had been seeded to wheat across the state, and farmers harvested nearly 114.8 million bushels that summer. As a result, farmers had less need to participate in the wheat reduction program: they preferred to plant and take their chances with the market price, which averaged sixty-six cents per bushel that year. In 1940, 157,831 Kansas wheat farmers received $11.4 million, or $72.22 each, for participating in the wheat allotment and conservation program under the Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1938. Although the average payment per farm had declined substantially statewide, in the Dust Bowl area conservation payments designed to reduce wheat production remained relatively high. In March, for example, 620 farmers in Morton County received $97,910, or about $158 each, for participating, and in early May 910 farmers in the county received $188,071, or about $260 each, for limiting their wheat acreage and practicing certain conservation techniques.[33]

The AAA had helped wheat farmers endure the drought and economic hard times until the rains returned and World War II increased both demand and prices. Once again bountiful harvests were part of the Kansas rural scene.

In retrospect, from 1933 to 1936 the results of the AAA proved far different from the agency's intent. Instead of helping small-scale wheat farmers diversify, the AAA encouraged large- and small-scale farmers to raise wheat at the expense of other crops or livestock production, and it did not substantially decrease production. During the base period from 1930 to 1932 Kansas farmers planted an average of 13.5 million acres in wheat that yielded an average of 186.1 million bushels annually. By 1936, the last year of the program under the original legislation, farmers planted 14.2 million acres that produced 120.2 million bushels at an average price of one dollar per bushel. The AAA program encouraged expansion of the wheat acreage, and the drought, not the AAA, played a greater role in reducing production than did the allotment program. It also stunted the usually hardy crops of grain sorghum and substantially reduced the yield per acre thereby preventing farmers from emphasizing cattle production, even though the acreage planted increased. Kansas farmers reduced their livestock but continued to plant large acreage in wheat because the AAA benefit payments for participating in the program ensured at least some income. By 1936 wheat production had been little changed by the adjustment program.[34]

33. Kansas State Board of Agriculture, *Sixty-seventh Annual Report*, 236; U.S. Department of Agriculture, *Agricultural Statistics, 1942* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1942), 759; *Elkhart Tri-State News*, March 15, 1940.

34. Kansas State Board of Agriculture, *Sixty-seventh Annual Report*, 236; U.S. Department of Agriculture, *Agricultural Adjustment* (1934), 57, 59; ibid., *Agricultural Statistics, 1936*, 361; ibid., *1938*, 13, 93, 283; U.S. Department of Agriculture, "The Dust Bowl: Agricultural Problems and Solutions," 21; Stewart, "Changes on Wheat Farms in Southwestern Kansas," 24; Saloutos, *The American Farmer and the New Deal*, 240.

Moreover, the Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1933 aided large-scale farmers more than small-scale operators. In Clark, Finney, Ford, Grant, Gray, and Meade Counties, for example, farmers who received less than $500 annually in AAA payments saw their net worth decline by $1,044 annually from 1933 to 1936. Farmers whose benefit payments averaged at least $2,000 annually saw their net worth increase by an average of $3,644 each year. These large-scale farmers were able to use AAA benefit payments to meet operating expenses, expand their operations, and accumulate capital during a time of low income due to falling prices and decreased production. By providing working capital, the AAA encouraged farmers to expand their acreage and thereby continued the demand for land and helped keep real estate prices from falling drastically. Put differently, gross AAA payments expressed as a percentage of the net worth for farmers in these counties between 1933 and 1936 averaged 7 percent for farmers with fewer than 300 crop acres, 20 percent for farmers operating 300 to 899 acres, and 31 percent for farmers with 900 or more acres in crops. Overall, AAA officials estimated that 30 percent of these farmers would have become insolvent without the benefit checks.[35]

The AAA wheat program, however, gave wheat farmers in Kansas some much needed financial support when they desperately needed it because the drought had ruined their crops while the economy prevented them from making an adequate living on minimal production. At the same time, the USDA also recognized that too many farmers remained on the land for all of them to be able to prosper, and the agency was committed to encouraging many small-scale farmers to leave agriculture through programs such as those sponsored by the AAA. The benefit payments that tenants shared with their landowners were too small to improve their standards of living or to keep many of them on the land. Moreover, the problems of drought and economic depression could not be solved quickly. No one had ever grappled with the difficulty of providing monetary aid to farmers for decreasing production. Even so, when aid provided to farmers was linked to other support programs such as the Federal Emergency Relief Administration, Works Progress Administration, or Farm Security Administration, the AAA helped wheat farmers endure the drought and economic hard times until the rains returned and World War II increased both demand and prices. In this context, the AAA proved one of the most significant and popular agencies in the lives of wheat farmers during the 1930s. Most important, the AAA marked the beginning of the federal government's active role in regulating the agricultural economy. Certainly, the AAA laid the foundation for an agricultural policy that affected nearly every farmer until the late twentieth century. Whether they approved of such government intervention in agriculture, they became dependent on AAA-inspired policy that built on the income generation, allotment, and marketing methods introduced during the 1930s. Kansas wheat farmers would be wedded to the farm policy built on the foundation of the Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1933 for the remainder of the century.[36] KH

35. Stewart, "Changes on Wheat Farms in Southwestern Kansas," 35–37.

36. Perkins, *Crisis in Agriculture*, 192; Saloutos, *The American Farmer and the New Deal*, 256.

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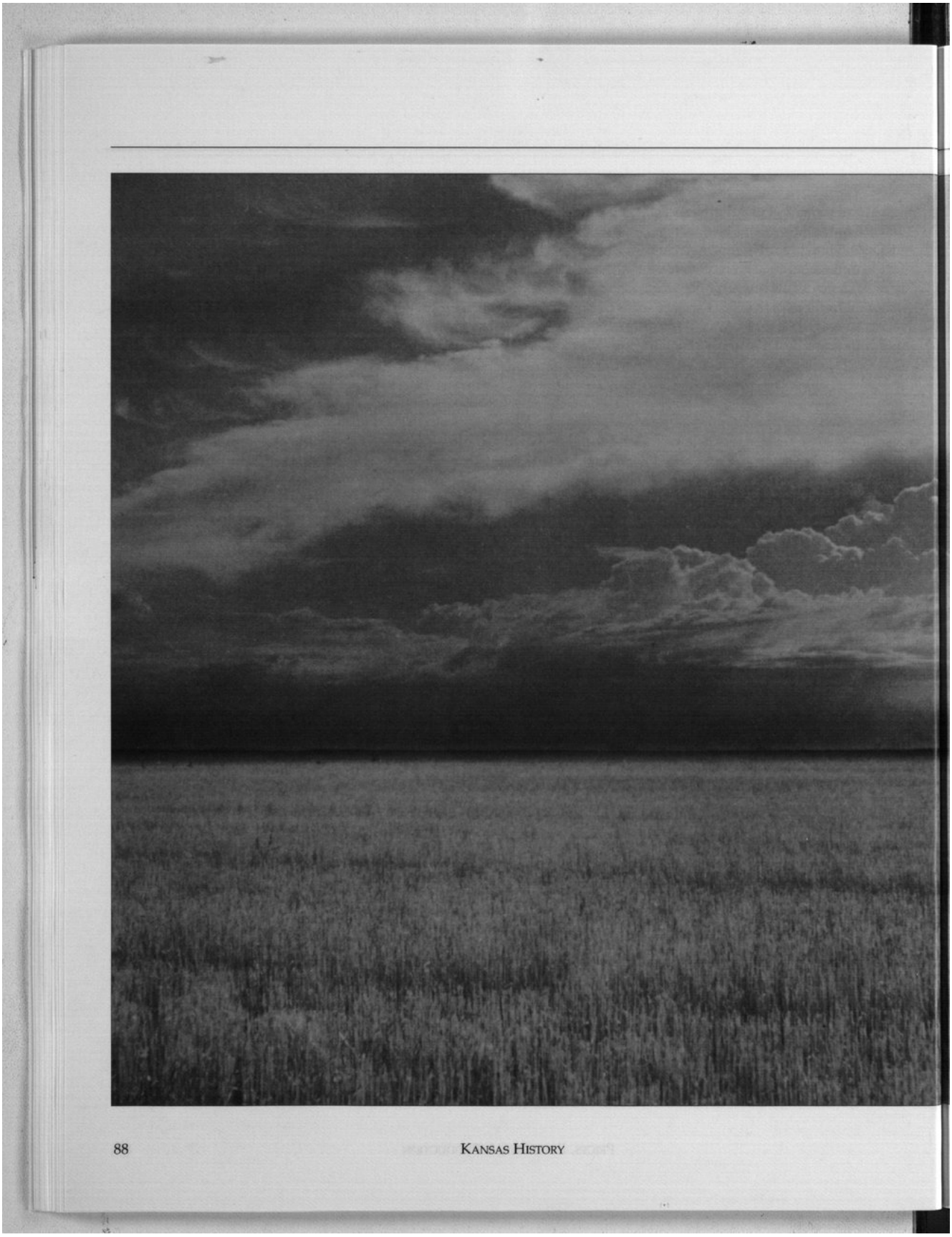

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The Wheat Empire of R. H. Garvey, 1930–1959

by Craig Miner

Ray Hugh Garvey

Ray Hugh Garvey was not the typical, representative, or ordinary person historians lately have delighted to emphasize. He was not exactly a bull in a China shop, but in his wheat farming operations in western Kansas and eastern Colorado in the 1930s and 1940s, he was an unusual presence in a traditional industry, one might even say folkway. The average farm operator did not own one hundred thousand acres in two states; coordinate farming with several other businesses (a string of gasoline stations prominently); study the land and grain markets on a large scale for

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Garvey began buying and selling farmland around Colby in 1918. Land sold best, Garvey believed, when it was planted in wheat. In this Thomas County scene, ca. 1920, fields are being plowed following the summer harvest.

investors in his Amortibanc mortgage investment company as well as on his own account; and build two hundred million bushels of elevator storage capacity. Garvey did all that while growing wheat between 1918, when as an attorney in Colby, Kansas, he started investing in land, and his death in an auto accident in 1959, by which time he was one of Wichita's most active millionaires.[1]

Like others of his kind, Garvey was *cupidum rerum novarum*—eager for new things. He was an inductive reasoner, a pragmatist, an opportunist who had plenty of choices for the investment of his capital and who regarded farming as a business based on costs, margins, and careful study of conditions, circumstances, and the impact of techniques over time.

Garvey was not typical, nor was he one-of-a-kind. Both Robert H. Baughman of Liberal, Kansas, and Henry C. Wear of Brandon, Colorado, for example, owned more land in western Kansas and eastern Colorado than did Garvey at his peak in the 1940s, and they were both breaking sod for wheat growing as he was in defiance of the Soil Conservation Service dictates for preventing another Dust Bowl.

Garvey was not even particularly original. His personal maxim was "copy the best." He simply applied to farming what had worked in other twentieth-century businesses. His summer fallow practices, meshing environmental sensitivity and self-interest, were not new in the 1930s and have since been widely accepted in semiarid areas. He was an absentee landlord for a part of his career but had deep local knowledge, current and historical. He grew mostly wheat. But he created diversity not only in wheat monoculture through, for example, the introduction of fall sheep grazing operations, but in his overall enterprise through diversification and cross-fertilization of businesses. He took advantage of the economies of scale. He used foremen and crews instead of his family as labor, and he expected to compensate them through salary and profit-shares. He recorded and tracked his costs carefully and tried to anticipate his crop to maintain a desirable fixed/variable cost ratio, giving him flexibility to survive the lean years. He used the corporate device when it was legal in Kansas and it suited conditions. He had a banker as a partner and a friend and appreciated the importance of capital and of borrowing to seize current chances. He calculated maximum efficiency in the use of his equipment and farmed large acreages as flat as he could find. He took government subsidies, while opposing them in theory, on the grounds that even he could not compete unsubsidized in a subsidized industry. He regarded profit as a test long beyond his need for money, and he used his farm business to provide managerial challenges and money-making opportunities, not only for his sons and sons-in-law but daughters. There was nothing remarkable about those things: most were gospel in the corporate world. However in the value-laden business of agriculture in the Dust Bowl and post-Dust Bowl era on the American High Plains, those actions were plenty controversial and required a forceful personality to implement.

1. The most useful published source for Garvey's general biography is Olive White Garvey, *The Obstacle Race: The Story of Ray Hugh Garvey* (San Antonio, Tex.: Naylor Co., 1970). Garvey's widow and researcher Virgil Quinlisk used Garvey documents as well as her recollections. Other sources treating Garvey and the Garvey family are Billy Mack Jones, *Olive White Garvey: Humanitarian, Corporate Executive, Uncommon Citizen* (Wichita, Kans.: Center for Entrepreneurship, 1985); Craig Miner, *Harvesting the High Plains: John Kriss and the Business of Wheat Farming, 1920–1950* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998); *Expectations to Equity* (Wichita, Kans.: Garvey, Inc., 1992).

Garvey was unforgettable as a person, like him or hate him, and there was little in between. Nervously energetic, totally unassuming, constitutionally extroverted, he was an information omnivore with a prodigious memory, and he was an obsessed man-driver, sometimes unrealistic and inconsistent, overwhelming his people by turns with detailed instructions and grandiose visions. Average people could not work for Garvey, and he was reluctant to pay extraordinary people what they were worth. He could be brutally frank and explode in colorful rages. He was cocksure in his opinions, repeating his one-line maxims ad nauseam. But he was a believer, an enthusiast in the game of capitalism, and the excitement for him was learning, "paying tuition," and developing himself as a human being through the discipline of nature and economic reality. To Garvey "operations [were] interesting," and production was fun. "It is not too easy to make any business pay Willard," he wrote one of his sons in 1945.

> In normal times it is a strain to see whether it loses money or makes a little money. I guess it should be that way, humans being human beings, and it is necessary to channel them, and the nicest way is perhaps the law of supply and demand and loss and profit, and so arranged that life is mostly a chain of averages for the most part with an occasional bulge and quite frequent dips. Therefore people must keep on their toes all the time to try to keep it up to average.[2]

The Garvey family, he wrote, knew how to farm, "and most businesses cost a person quite a bit to learn how, and sometimes they cost a bit after a person thinks he knows how."[3]

Like most interesting people, Ray Garvey was a bundle of contradictions, no saint, and some of his strengths were also his weaknesses. But he and his enterprises were at the time and should be to us now unfailingly interesting. For he was an innovator. Maybe the world does not need maximum agricultural production anymore, despite its demonstrable hunger. People told him it needed neither production nor him much in the 1930s or 1940s. But to Garvey it was production that mattered, and he was a monomaniac about it. Thanks to his having left a complete collection of his correspondence from 1930 to 1959, and to his habit of thinking in single-spaced pages dispatched to all his managers nearly every day, there is an unusual opportunity to examine his type—certainly an American type—and the stakes for which he played in the wheat business during one of its low and high cycles.

There is every evidence that Garvey went against the grain of his times, countered trends again and again. That he was temperamentally suited to that role does not mean that the total explanation was psychological. Time, the bitterness of the jealous losers, and the coin of the realm in his accounts demonstrated in hindsight that his actions were rational and prescient, however unexpected and unpopular. What, then, made him effective?

The force of great personality, combined with keen intelligence, is undeniable. The voluble Garvey, dressing so casually people visiting his office building in Wichita sometimes mistook him for the janitor; dictating fifty to sixty long, single-spaced letters a day, sometimes dispatching two a day to the same manager; and driving around western Kansas "putting the pump handle" on people of all classes and stations to find out how a man might make some money in their town, was a special personality.[4] It is axiomatic that one must meet such a person, not just read written remains, to get the effect. But there is a vividness, humor, and pragmatic complexity in most Garvey letters, whether he is chiding a politician, instructing a subordinate, or encouraging a family member, that point to daily realities in the living man. In his correspondence he amazed while he overwhelmed each recipient knowing only a fraction of his total activity.

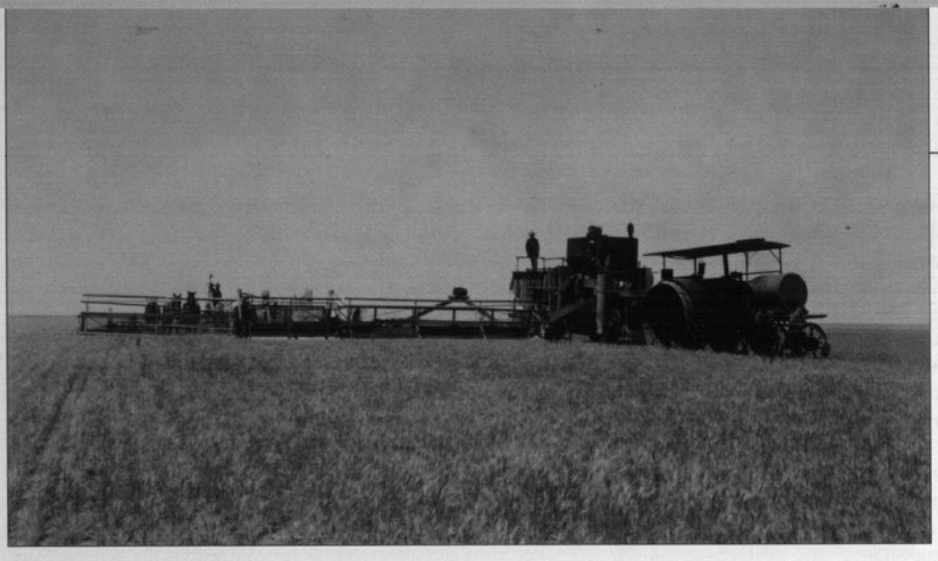
Like most entrepreneurs he was an optimist but with the usually pessimistic accountant's and attorney's attention to detail. He drove several farm and ranch managers to distraction with his detailed instructions, always followed by a suggestion that each needed to delegate to "ramrods" and be himself the "ramrod of ramrods," focusing on the "big picture."[5] Garvey was philosophically opposed to micromanagement but could compete with any New Deal bureaucrat in collecting statistics from the field and attempting to control everything. He had a high estimate of how much ground should be covered and how much responsi-

2. R. H. Garvey to Willard Garvey, June 2, 1945, folder 5, box 21, R. H. Garvey Collection. The Garvey Collection is in the possession of the Garvey family and not available for general research. It has, however, been organized into its present series, cataloged, and an inventory and finding aid created by Tony Brusca for the Ablah Library Special Collections, Wichita State University. All correspondence to or from R. H. Garvey hereafter cited is from the Garvey Collection and is referenced by folder and box number.

3. R. H. Garvey to Willard Garvey, June 2, 1945, folder 7, box 21.

4. Willard W. Garvey, interview by Craig Miner, June 18, 1998.

5. R. H. Garvey to Ernest Fogleman, June 26, 1943, folder 15, box 16.



Garvey, whose farming empire grew during the 1920s, hired foremen and crews to handle his large enterprise. Here crews harvest wheat in Thomas County, 1925.

bility should be taken by hired men, paid four dollars a day, working twelve-hour shifts six days a week and living in makeshift bunkhouses and trailer homes.[6]

Of managers more still was expected. "On this weed situation," he wrote his farm manager Ernest Fogleman in 1943, "you must be a prophet and look into the future and anticipate when the weeds are going to start. You can't get them with a spring-tooth cultivator or a rod-weeder after they have attained any size. It would require one-waying, and one-waying is only half as fast as spring-toothing. . . . This is your important job, and don't let anything interfere with getting over the ground with all machines during all available working hours."[7] Fogleman tried keeping a diary recording everything he did. Garvey loved it and sent it to other managers, but Fogleman could not keep it up. Fogleman suggested an airplane: Garvey did not think so.[8] Instead he should delegate more to subordinates. "I think you had better step on Ryser's tail," he wrote, "as he should be getting out more work. And, of course, we can't afford to leave a tractor down at the Zanzibar [ranch] unless they produce results. . . . any of these ranch foremen who expect to get rich quick will probably be disappointed."[9] Garvey noted that "the foreman, as a foreman is not a candidate for public office. He is there to get a job done." He outlined to Fogleman from memory the nature of the wheat crops in the area and its rainfall for the past thirty years. He specified how many cowmen it should take to supervise one thousand steers and how many bushels of wheat were required to put one hundred pounds on a young pig.[10] Like every other manager, Fogleman eventually rebelled at this. He had twenty-three thousand acres cultivated and nineteen thousand in grass to supervise, he noted, and his only previous experience had been a desk job at the Federal Loan Bank in Wichita. "This thing is entirely too big," he wrote.[11]

> I realize that I am not a super human man yet I never admitted that a thing could not be done and so am trying to be foreman, general director, and chief ramrodder all in one. I cannot cover that much ground efficiently and know no more than I do about the business. Writing me 12 months after I took over and did not know anything about farming and sheep at a time when I am buried in troubles didn't help much either [but] . . . you are furnishing the money and giving the general orders so you can say or do anything you choose. . . . I want to make money and I am not afraid to work for it but I believe I know when a thing is not going right.[12]

At that, Garvey would back off. "Your letter of February 13," he wrote Fogleman, "was apparently written when you were too disturbed to be quite rational. . . . Let's not worry about past errors. Let's just try to learn from

6. Ibid., February 12, 1944, folder 21, box 18.
7. Ibid., March 19, 1943, folder 4, box 16.
8. Ernest Fogleman to R. H. Garvey, August 2, 1943, folder 15, box 16; Garvey to Fogleman, August 3, 1943, ibid.
9. R. H. Garvey to Ernest Fogleman, June 21, July 6, 1943, folder 15, box 16.
10. Ibid., September 27, December 8, 1943, folder 16, box 16.
11. Ernest Fogleman to R. H. Garvey, December 26, 1943, ibid.
12. Ibid., February 13, 1944, folder 21, box 18.

them and take care of the same thing better in the future. Just get your chin up and run your job and your crew, and the profits will probably take care of themselves."[13] Garvey noted that his instruction were only suggestions and that his managers must think first about how things ought to be done and not how R. H. Garvey wanted them to be done.[14] Under the circumstances, that was difficult. Fogleman wrote:

> Have you ever realized that the class of men we are working here will kiss our feet when jobs are not plentiful but just as soon as they get a couple inches ahead of the hounds them same fellows become resentful of all who have made a success financially and try to gig him in small ways . . . Because I don't know a thing I am not sure of my self and when not sure of myself I hesitate to try to tell you when you are wrong. I think you are wrong in thinking that we are going to be able to get a farming crew to go out and farm in a cook shack . . . I realize that you want this deal to go over and that you are trying to help in writing your letters, but it seems to me that you either over look the problem facts or refuse to recognize them and therefore instead of your letters helping they just discourage me more. It is easy to say do this and do that to hell with what you are up against but try doing it a while and you get another slant on the picture.[15]

Fogleman said that he was not a "Bolshevik or Communist," but he did have to disagree with some of Garvey's directives.[16]

No problem, Garvey responded. Stop brooding. "I believe if you can visualize a little simplification that you will get along much better. You seem inclined to get things too complex. . . . I am pulling for you and hope and expect you to be able to run this layout." That advice was followed in the same letter by a detailed tractor assignment list by field number and a suggestion that "you should make a typewritten list of all of the machinery, and you had better make it in triplicate and number each item and put the sheet where it is located."[17]

That push seems mostly negative. But it showed both Garvey and his managers what their limits really were and often set those limits well beyond what either would have imagined. The intense daily interaction with the aggressive Garvey created self-confidence in managers when it did not destroy them. His frankness about people's faults made them sure that he really meant his compliments: "You are a good cattlemen but hell on trucks."[18]

He did have a sense of humor and could kid in dark moments. "Your statistics on wind velocity are very interesting," he wrote W. D. Ferguson in Colby shortly after the move to Wichita. "While I was not there as much in 1930 as in the previous 14 years, I hope there was no personal allusion in this comparison."[19]

Forced to justify their decisions to Garvey, the managers came to know exactly why they were doing something a certain way. And when they did gain independence and confidence, as John Kriss did as a farm manager, Garvey harassed less and delegated more. And everyone who dealt with him, including his real peers, had to defend themselves against domination. Henry Wear gave Garvey's overbearing instruction short shrift when he wrote in 1944: "So do not give me any more fireside chats—I am too damned busy and there comes a time when too much advice is resented. Do not over do it. . . . I TAKE IT I AM NOT WORKING FOR YOU."[20]

There were incentives too. Claude Schnellbacher, John Kriss, and Ernest Fogleman, Garvey's three farm managers before his son James took over in 1948, received a modest salary (one hundred to two hundred dollars a month), some off-season work with Service Oil, and a 10 percent share of the farm profits with no downside risk. That was not much of a living for Kriss during the depression, but by 1945 he was earning close to one hundred thousand dollars a year. After the one million bushel wheat crop in 1947, Kriss, who then had a 25 percent profit share on ventures with Garvey, had to come to him for tax advice and to invest in Garvey's Petroleum, Inc., as a tax shelter. In the 1990s the Kriss family farmed fifteen thousand acres on its own, much of it bought in the 1930s and 1940s with and on Garvey's advice. Kriss, whom some thought was taking a job as Garvey's manager in 1933 that would amount to virtual serfdom, found the reality quite different over time. Garvey was a character whom it paid to tolerate.[21]

13. R. H. Garvey to Ernest Fogleman, February 14, 1944, ibid.
14. Ibid., March 5, 1944.
15. Ernest Fogleman to R. H. Garvey, March 3, 1944, ibid.
16. Ibid., March 5, 1944.
17. R. H. Garvey to Ernest Fogleman, March 4, 1944, ibid.
18. R. H. Garvey to W. D. Ferguson, November 2, 1931, folder 31, box 2.
19. Ibid., February 9, 1931, folder 30, box 2.
20. H. C. Wear to R. H. Garvey, March 12, 14, 1944, folder 4, box 20.
21. R. H. Garvey to Willard Garvey, September 19, 1945, folder 7, box 21; Miner, *Harvesting the High Plains*, 150, 177,

Among Garvey's managers was local farmer and landowner Claude Schnellbacher, shown here with his team of "horsepower."

And there was more to it than a temperament. There was a rational system involved.

Garvey had diversity of the kind that allowed him to survive bad times in one business by finding a margin in another. In the 1930s, for instance, he held on to the farm land he had because not all years were a total loss, because he cut costs, and because he had profits from the Service Oil business he had purchased in 1924. The "black legend" about Garvey has it that he bought his land at desperation prices from family farmers dusted out during the Dust Bowl. In fact, he bought little in the depths of the depression, knowing that even if it were free he could not afford the taxes and the planting costs on it. When he did begin buying big again in the early 1940s in Colorado he bought pasture and rangeland, mostly from speculators already holding sizeable pieces of the blocks he wanted for large-scale wheat farming, not isolated grain farms. It was true, as his critics emphasized, that he could hold what he had accumulated, unlike some others. Having studied local history, he knew that weather on the High Plains was cyclic. It was "next year country," and the only way to succeed was to be able to survive the bad years. Anyone who thought otherwise was not thinking straight.

He claimed that diversity was forced on him. "All of the business which I have entered," he wrote, "have been merely the results of optimism."[22] He needed a better source of fuel for his tractors in the 1920s, so he bought bulk oil depots and gas stations from a bus line. He needed elevators to store his own grain in the 1930s and 1940s, so he bought them in Kansas where he could and built them in Colorado where there were no elevators since no grain had been shipped from the areas he worked in fifteen years. The desire to educate his children caused his move to Wichita; that move steered him into the mortgage investment business, something related to what he already knew. That business led to house mortgages, and eventually, by steps and enhanced by the World War II housing shortage and heavy defense spending in Wichita, to house construction, rental, and sales. The construction experience with Builders, Inc., combined with his farm experience and the tax advantages of a government program, led him into the construction of his terminal elevators. Tax considerations, too, forced him into the oil production business, investing in Petroleum, Inc.[23] But whether it was a push or a pull, the benefits of diversity to Garvey, and particularly to his wheat farming operation where timing was everything both within and across seasons, were clear. He ran his farms like a business, and he knew how to run a business.

Anticipation was essential always. It was related to memory and local knowledge in that study of history, and all aspects of present operations of others was the key to predicting the future. Garvey was no more a prophet than any other person, although even his enemies credited him with supernatural prescience when what was preparation to him appeared magic to them. It was no more than the focus of any business trying to rationalize conditions on having as much predictability and therefore stability as possible.

"Remember this word, ANTICIPATION," Garvey wrote to a manager once.[24] On another occasion in 1930, just as he himself was anticipating the deepening depression and preparing for it, he quoted a slogan he had seen on the wall of a business office in Wichita: "Nine-tenths of wisdom consists of being wise in time." He told Wear that he showed "damned poor judgment" in purchase of cattle

22. R. H. Garvey to Willard Garvey, November 20, 1945, folder 7, box 21.

23. The scope of business is well covered in Garvey, *The Obstacle Race*.

24. R. H. Garvey to Ernest Fogleman, June 25, 1943, folder 15, box 16.

John Kriss managed the Garvey operation during the Dust Bowl years, adjusting well to the problems of drought and limited production. On Garvey's advice Kriss began buying his own land and eventually amassed fifteen thousand acres.

in 1943, although the price seemed good, in that "you did not have the foresight to foresee the rollback that came two months later."[25]

He understood that it was not circumstances that mattered so much as how management dealt with circumstances. When wheat was thirty cents a bushel, there could still be profit provided costs could be contained accordingly and provided that bets could be hedged in dry years by grazing sheep on fall pasture, not seeding into overdry ground, summer fallowing more territory in the worst years, saving labor expense mostly for harvest, and, most of all, being patient to wait for the cycle to turn without losing one's assets in a panic. Not only did Garvey have to give up his corporate organization, and thus a source of capital and limited liability during the depression, but he had to change farm managers. Claude Schnellbacher, who had been with him for several years, was an outstanding producer in good years but could not adjust to the severe cost disciplines that Garvey saw were necessary during the depression. However pleasant the association had been, Garvey felt he could not afford to be sentimental about changing horses before it was too late. "The chances are greatly in favor of the Farming Company going broke," he wrote in the fall of 1931. "We are not working on the basis of 60 cent wheat or $1.00 wheat and we cannot make our expenditures on that basis. We are working on a basis of the lowest prices for commodity products that this generation has known, and when a company runs out of money it had better quit spending it. . . . I didn't realize we were in such a serious situation, and I don't believe you folks realize it yet."[26]

Schnellbacher would not anticipate modified conditions and change accordingly; therefore he had to be replaced quickly. It was necessary, he wrote, to make "Claude see that we all make mistakes, but those who insist on continuing to make them, on the theory that they are infallible and the mistakes are not mistakes are the ones who go broke first. The rest of us may go broke also but it will take a little longer. We have all made lots of mistakes and we are having to pay through the nose for same, but non-recurring mistakes and non-recurring losses are probably the difference between going broke and continuing operations."[27]

A primary discipline Garvey used in planning and accurate anticipation was his personal memory and broad reading in history. He was regionally famous for his encyclopedic recall of his own farming experience, both financially and climatologically, and his penchant for applying those patterns to the next crop. And his historical study went beyond the region and beyond the time of his personal involvement. "It is probable that we do not know it," he wrote the manager of his oil company in 1931, "but we are in as serious a situation as in 1820, 1857, 1875, or 1893."[28] He read the *Chicago Tribune*, corresponded with congressmen, took the pulse of his various businesses, and then sought historical parallels, whether the current situation suggested the applicability of the lessons of past financial panics or of deflationary periods that tended to follow wars.

His local knowledge, historically as well as in the present, and his ability to correlate it with broader trends was impressive. He never forgot and never tired of remember-

25. R. H. Garvey to Kenneth Crumly, April 19, 1930, folder 7, box 1; Garvey to H. C. Wear, October 3, 1944, folder 5, box 20.
26. R. H. Garvey to Kenneth Crumly, October 29, 1931, folder 27, box 2.
27. Ibid., November 21, 1931.
28. Ibid., December 12, 1931.

Garvey and Kriss found ways to survive during the 1930s, such as grazing sheep on fall wheatlands, gaining some profits from the crop that might not withstand the winter winds and summer drought until a July harvest.

ing his great losses in the cattle business in 1918–1919 and again in 1920–1921 in the postwar price collapse. "It is rather peculiar," he commented in 1943, "how the crops line up in Thomas County." He analyzed the clusters of good and bad crops by decades in that county since 1914 and looked for patterns.[29] His managers were to send him a telegram every time there was a point of rain anywhere for his records. One of his resultant bromides was that when it stopped raining on the High Plains it was likely to stop for some time, and the reverse was true when the wet years returned. But the cycles were of varying lengths. In 1935 he noted that "In [Grover] Cleveland's last administration, there were no worthwhile rains to warrant the planting of a crop, but I question whether this is the starting of another thirty year's drought."[30]

He recognized and allowed for changes in historical patterns. "With the income tax like it is now, even with profitable years like 1940 to 1943, I question whether a person can keep a sufficient amount above income tax to stand two to three years like the ones we experienced from 1933 to 1939."[31] He recognized that farming was revolutionized "when they began to use gasoline tractors and the elimination of the horse started. Much more crops can be raised now with less labor, but the market for crops has lessened since motor power supplanted horse power."[32]

Both his historical understanding and his grasp of currently available alternatives came from talking with many people and advising his employees to do the same. Before going into a new business, he informally did much of what would now be called "due diligence." Shyness was not an option, and Garvey did not seem to have any sense that people might not wish to reveal their secrets to him. Like Dale Carnegie, he seemed to believe that people genuinely loved to talk about themselves, and when they were doing so, he was a careful if selective listener.

Based on what he learned, Garvey pursued what seemed to him responsible innovation. "Practical idealism" was perhaps a Kansas characteristic. Certainly Garvey's visions, however impossible they might seem to some, and however genuinely risky, were, in his mind, achievable. Dryland farming was not new, although it was far from universal on the High Plains in the 1920s when he insisted on it, nor was it easy to explain to the Agricultural Adjustment Administration, which based its subsidy allotments on last year's planting, when Garvey might well have been purposefully cutting back in anticipation of a dry year. Sheep had been grazed on wheatlands, probably by people who, like Garvey, were trying to get income out of a crop that might not last through the winter winds until harvest in July. The difference with Garvey was the scale of sheep raising and the expertise developed at it by his depression-era manager John Kriss. Wheat had not been grown for some time in areas of eastern Colorado where he bought land in the 1940s, and the Dust Bowl had made it seem to many that it would never be grown again. But it had been grown there before, and Garvey thought he had a system of management, hybrid grains, moisture conservation, equipment, and capital that made his play at breaking sod a responsible innovation. The fact that many did not see it that way made land prices low and provided an economic opportunity. And there had been large-scale farmers in the area, touting the virtues of size and business methods and bitterly criticized by family farmers since T. C. Henry showed off his operation in Dickinson County, Kansas, in the 1870s. Garvey personally studied the history of the operations of James N. Fike in northwest Kansas

29. R. H. Garvey to John Kriss, October 1, 1943, folder 3, box 17.
30. R. H. Garvey to Kenneth Crumly, August 19, 1935, folder 38, box 6.
31. R. H. Garvey to John Kriss, October 1, 1943, folder 3, box 17.
32. R. H. Garvey to Ernest Fogleman, October 1, 1943, folder 16, box 16.

in the first decade of the twentieth century, and of the Wheat Farming Company at Hays, in which he was an investor, that operated about sixty-five thousand acres in the early 1930s.[33]

Of course Garvey could have too many ideas to suit his farm managers. Overwhelmed with the task at hand, they would get letters from him asking if they would like to run a new ranch he had bought, or a restaurant. Would they be interested in organizing a custom combine crew to better utilize the combines they were purchasing?[34] Often they did not even dare reply, but Garvey thrived on testing new ideas and new combinations.

Through careful planning, willingness to adjust, and cost cutting, Garvey held on to his farmland during the devastating drought of the 1930s. This western Kansas field displays the ravages of high winds and no rain.

Despite anticipation, historical study, local knowledge, and achievable innovation, there was risk. Garvey felt comfortable with the risks of weather. More frustrating was political risk, and Garvey was less astute as a diplomat than a businessman. When Garvey bought his land in Colorado, participation in any government wheat programs required that the local Soil Conservation District Committee certify that breaking sod for wheat was appropriate land use. While many Kansas committees routinely approved Garvey's requests, the Colorado ones did not, and it took a considerable lobbying effort by Garvey and other Kansas buyers such as John Baughman, whom he joined in hiring local attorneys to change the rule that "suitcase" farmers from elsewhere had no vote on these committees.[35] Had his breaking permits been refused, he would have had carefully planned and fenceable blocks of wheat farming land that he could use only as pasture, and a massive investment in wheat equipment and personnel would have gone down the drain.

Public relations was problematical. "Garvey and Kriss," Coloradan H.C. Wear once wrote, "being wholesale wheat growers, are starting to tear up the country around Sheridan Lake [Colorado]. . . . I believe you . . . will agree with me that we are going to have some pleasure listening to what the natives say about our ambitious Kansas friends."[36] Kansas congressman Clifford Hope, who was from western Kansas and served on the Agriculture Committee, supported strict soil use restrictions to guard against a return of the Dust Bowl. Hope was a conservative and said he agreed with Garvey on many things but thought he was wrong in his Colorado sod breaking. He wrote to Garvey in 1945:

> The sod you are breaking out now isn't going to make much difference as far as the world's food supply is concerned. . . . The things that we are short on now are those things which are produced through methods of diversified farming rather than by those who farm several thousand acres of wheat land from a distance . . . western Kansas has suffered so much from the type of farming that you are doing that I cannot bring myself to feel too concerned about the order of which you complain.[37]

Garvey replied that "the soil in Western Kansas blew in, geologists tell us, and it blows around easily, and whether farmed by suitcase farmers or others, when you have a combination of dry weather and poor prices it will probably blow again." Farm regulation was a New Deal plot, he said, to tell farmers where to live and what to do and to take the country down the "Road to Serfdom" until it, like

33. Miner, *Harvesting the High Plains*, 7–8, 35, 63.
34. R. H. Garvey to Kenneth Crumly, March 29, 1944, folder 9, box 19; Garvey to Ernest Fogleman, July 27, 1944, folder 22, box 18.
35. R. H. Garvey to John Baughman, June 1, 1945, folder 12, box 20.
36. H. C. Wear to H. C. Healy and Jack Denison, March 27, 1945, folder 6, box 22.
37. Clifford Hope to R. H. Garvey, June 5, 1945, folder 9, box 21.

Garvey surveys some of his vast farming empire, which spread throughout western Kansas and eastern Colorado.

Russia, could not produce food at all.[38] He was partisan enough to tell a friend during the depression that he hoped for the end of "Dust and Democrats" and a return to "Rain and Republicans," but did not brook with the GOP and its main-line candidates either when it crossed him.[39]

Hope was polite about such excesses in Garvey, who had a deep hatred of government and could not quite approach any politician rationally (he was prone to call them "cockroaches"). Others were not so polite, and Garvey, when his frankness turned to colorful insult, made powerful enemies. Garvey told Kriss in the 1940s to keep moving, to give his instructions by telephone, and not to stop in any towns in Colorado. Wear wrote in capitals that "YOU SURE AS HELL NEED A LOT OF THE COMMODITY KNOWN AS GOOD WILL."[40] There was a gamble involved and it could have gone much differently. Needless to say, too, Garvey lost money, big money at times, not only in agriculture, but in other enterprises. "Losses are not as easy to take as profits," he wrote, "but a person has to keep trying or they will not take profits."[41]

Minimizing risk involved incorporating knowledge and experience into a system that could be applied consistently. Probably Garvey was deficient on the consistency part and set a poor example himself for his rules of focus and one thing at a time. But there was a system based on a folklore of experience, and it was not entirely idiosyncratic. Garvey's letters were his manual of procedures, his personnel department, and his training program. There was a definite "way things are done around here," and the standardization meant that lessons learned gave cumulative benefit. "This is the sound way to farm that ground," Garvey wrote in 1930, "and it is certain to come. Ninety per cent of the little farmers are incapable from a standpoint of knowledge, finances and will to do the right kind of work to handle power machinery profitably. We also may be incapable of it but we have the best man there on farming and the volume of land for the operations."[42]

That Garvey farmed on a large scale was perhaps his greatest public relations dilemma and political risk as well as his most important business lever. The anti-"chain farming" movement hit his agricultural operations first in 1930 at the same time as the antichain-store movement threatened his string of gas stations with Farmer's Union competition. And it was a constant thereafter. Garvey's early farm corporation partner W. D. Ferguson was so frightened of his association ruining his reputation in Colby that he asked Garvey to keep it a secret.[43]

Garvey favored attack rather than hiding and called the anticorporate sentiment "another Ku Klux program." As to his large farming corporation, "I have no apology to make for it and no defense to offer. I hope it will make money. It is my loss if it doesn't."[44] It was time, he said, to get centralized and standardized.

> I have petered along with indifferent tenants for the past ten years, and if I had been having it farmed as Schnellbacher farms, my rents would have amounted to from five to ten thousand dollars more each year. On the present basis the tenants such as have been messing with my land would break me over the next ten years. . . . There is no use leaving machines idle. If they will handle more ground and we have it avail-

38. R. H. Garvey to Clifford Hope, June 8, 1945, ibid.
39. R. H. Garvey to W. D. Ferguson, March 26, 1935, folder 3, box 7.
40. R. H. Garvey to John Kriss, April 19, 1945, folder 13, box 21; ibid., April 16, 1945, ibid.
41. R. H. Garvey to Kenneth Crumly, April 16, 1931, folder 26, box 2.
42. R. H. Garvey to W. D. Ferguson, June 18, 1930, folder 12, box 1.
43. W. D. Ferguson to R. H. Garvey, March 25, 1930, ibid.
44. R. H. Garvey to W. D. Ferguson, March 31, June 18, 1930, ibid.

able, why not handle it. Cutting down acreage in Thomas County is bunk. It is a race to see who must quit, and I believe we are in an airplane, and we are not just competing with the smaller farmers of Thomas County, but with the large raisers of Canada, Australia and Argentine. I believe we can produce wheat as low per bushel as they can.[45]

As the rains returned to western Kansas in 1939 and the 1940s, Garvey's wheat empire was once again in full swing and continuing to grow. Garvey would actively and energetically pursue his farming and other business ventures until his untimely death in 1959. The photo is of a wheat harvest around Colby, ca. 1950.

Rexford Tugwell in Washington was talking in 1934 about taking seven million acres of High Plains land out of production. "It would not be an unthinkable procedure," Ferguson commented to Garvey, "to shoo us all out of here and turn this back to the Indians." That, to those men, was ludicrous, but there was a time he could only hope that the New Deal agencies "may run out of letters before they get around to us and that may save us."[46]

Real life excited Garvey, and so he loved business with its harsh and surprising feedback. He liked farming best, characterizing his other large businesses for years as "sidelines." I think keeping busy with one's business, family and friends," he wrote in the 1940s, "if all are interesting, is a pretty good way to spend the next fifty years."[47] Ten years earlier, in the depths of the depression, he claimed he was still having fun. "This is an interesting period to live through," he wrote W. D. Ferguson, "if one lives through it."[48]

The way to survive was to learn the lessons of nature and of the market, to innovate, to produce at low cost, and to sell as high as possible. None of that was automatic, but one had to adjust to conditions. In writing to Ferguson in 1930 about that banker's "complex" concerning the controversy in Colby over large farming, Garvey noted that "this is the same proposition that has existed since 1885 as the different changes took place in agriculture and, first, when the cattle men had their range cut down by homesteaders and the homesteaders in turn had their cattle range cut down by farming operations, etc." Four years later Ferguson was willing to agree that it was wise "to look at things as they are and not as you think they ought to be."[49]

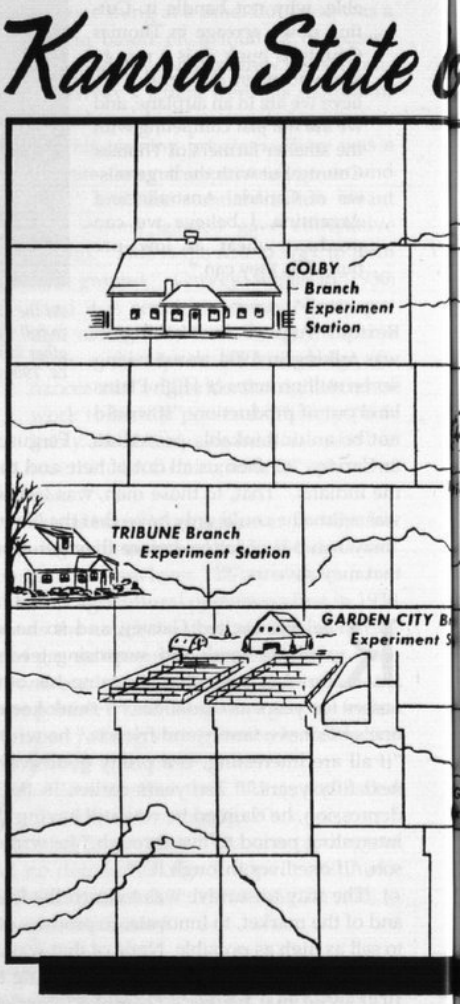
That is good advice for historians too. Garvey is the type of figure many of them love to hate. A certified genius, he was an anti-intellectual and encouraged Ferguson, who was on the Kansas Board of Regents, to cut back salaries at the universities and get rid of left-wing professors.[50] His right-wing political views do not fit academia either, nor his aggressive, often simplistic way of expressing them. But as an entrepreneur in wheat he must be taken seriously as the harbinger of a world in farming that some may wish had not arrived but which is increasingly a fact. There is no need to replace one mythology with another to recognize that there are a range of satisfactory approaches to farming, and that the bucolic utopia of the yeoman family farmer was probably never what it was supposed to be. KH

45. Ibid., July 8, 1930, folder 13, box 1.
46. W. D. Ferguson to R. H. Garvey, January 3, 1934, folder 1, box 6.
47. R. H. Garvey to Willard Garvey, September 19, 1945, folder 7, box 21.
48. R. H. Garvey to W. D. Ferguson, January 5, 1934, folder 1, box 6.
49. Ibid., September 13, 1930, folder 13, box 1; W. D. Ferguson to R. H. Garvey, September 18, 1934, folder 3, box 6.
50. R. H. Garvey to W. D. Ferguson, September 20, 1934, ibid.; Ferguson to Garvey, December 2, 1933, folder 4, box 4; Garvey to Ferguson, December 6, 1933, ibid.

Beyond *Winter Wheat*

The USDA Extension Service and Kansas Wheat Production in the Twentieth Century

by Bonnie Lynn-Sherow



Map is from the Kansas State College of Agriculture Experiment Station Bulletin for June 1955.

James Malin's celebrated study of farmers' adaptation to a "subhumid" climate, *Winter Wheat in the Golden Belt of Kansas* (1944), often has been hailed by scholars as a masterpiece of early environmental history.[1] His expansive view of humankind in the environment raised the study of history and ecology to unprecedented levels of detail and abstraction. But Malin was first and foremost an agricultural historian. His subjects were farmers and his venue was the Dust Bowl. Certainly Malin's intense pride as a native Kansan caused him to study the farmers of Edwards County, but celebration was not his primary objective. Malin's insistence on Kansas farmers' successful adaptation to the grasslands in *Winter Wheat* also was a reaction against what he considered the totalitarianism of federal agricultural planning, specifically the Agricultural Adjustment and Resettlement Administrations.[2] Malin's rejection of

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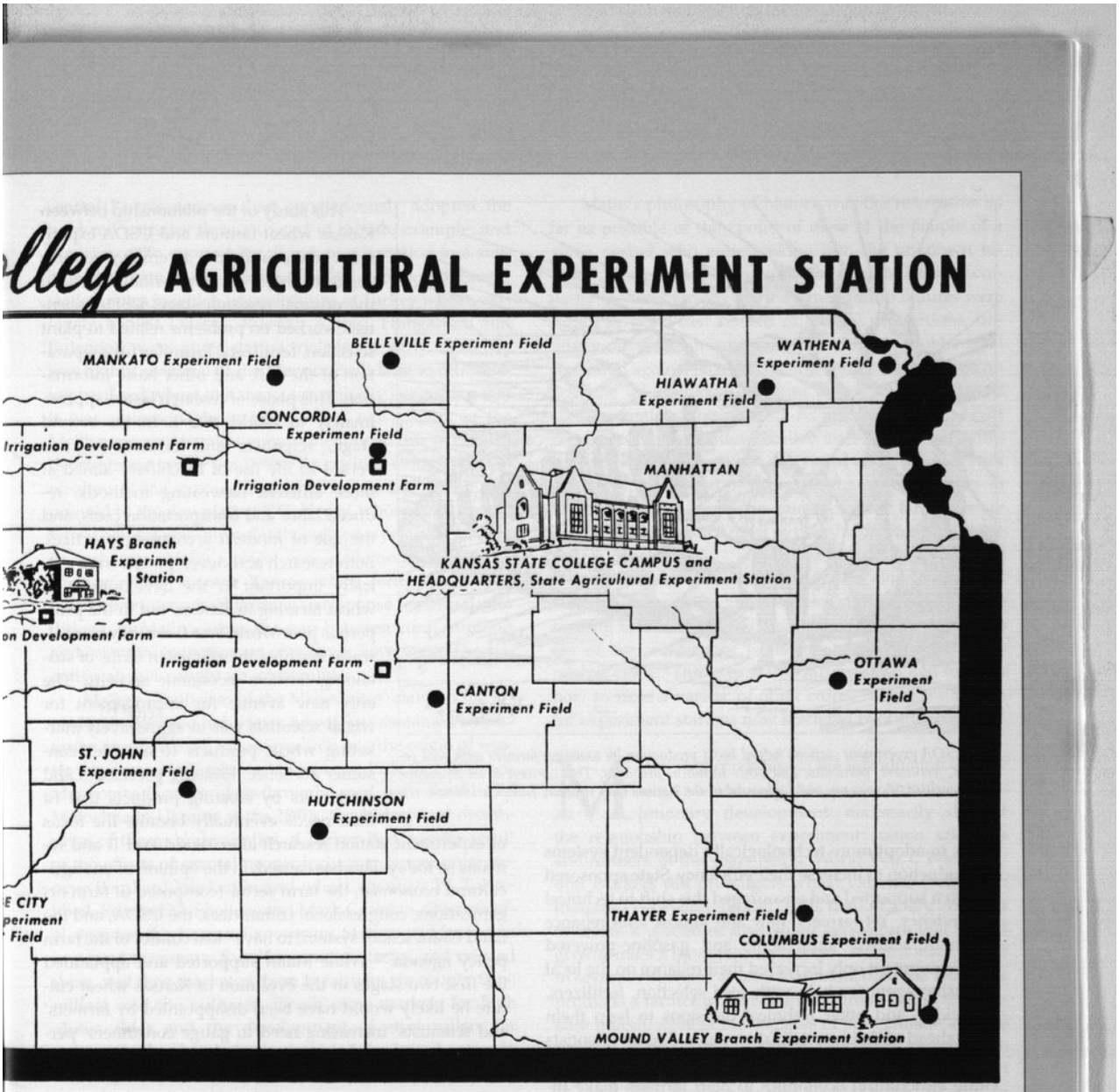
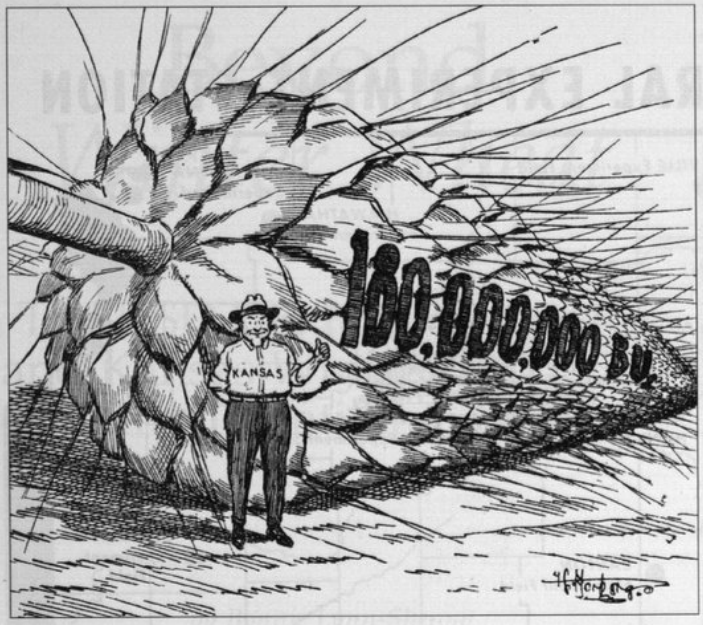
1. *See* particularly, Allan G. Bogue, "The Heirs of James C. Malin: Grassland Historiography," *Great Plains Quarterly* 1 (Spring 1981): 105–31; Burton J. Williams, "A Dedication to the Memory of James C. Malin, 1893–1979," *Arizona and the West* 22 (Autumn 1980): 206–10; Robert P. Sweirenga, "The Malin Thesis of Grassland Acculturation and the New Rural History," *Canadian Papers in Rural History* 54 (1985): 297–335.

2. Richard White has noted that, "Hostile to social and environmental planning, Malin has become the unlikely progenitor of a group of scholars identified with the environmental movement and who often advocate the planning Malin despised." *See* Richard White, "American Environmental History: The Development of a New Historical Field," *Pacific Historical Review* 54 (August 1985): 319.



government directed agriculture in the 1940s was squarely based on the steady progress farmers had made since the 1870s. Paradoxically, however, Malin documented that progress through the records of yet another government agency—the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Office of Experiment Stations. What Malin would not (or could not) see in 1944 was the already entrenched and interdependent relationship between Kansas wheat growers and the local USDA field station.

The telling difference for Malin in *Winter Wheat*, between government aid versus government interference, was whether it was farmer-centered. That is, did a government program evolve as a result of farmers' own perceived needs or was it foisted on them? Certainly Malin's faith in Kansas farmers' ingenuity and flexibility was directly on target when it came to winter wheat growing. After casting about for a generation for the most reliable (best adapted) varieties of winter wheat, Kansas farmers were amazingly



The USDA experiment stations helped boost production by assisting farmers with seed selection, fertilizers, pesticides, and other technical problems. This cartoon of an abundant yield, entitled "Some crop, eh?" appeared in the Kansas City Journal, *June 24, 1914.*

quick to adopt more technologically dependent systems of production to increase their efficiency. State sponsored research supported and encouraged this shift to technical dependency. Yet farmers' new and almost total reliance on manufactured implements and gasoline-powered farm equipment only increased their reliance on the local extension agent for help with seed selection, fertilizers, pesticides, and other technical decisions to help them keep ahead of their capitalization debts. Station scientists for their part reinvented their role as farm advisors to include agricultural economics to help farmers make informed decisions based on marketing research. Instead of asking farmers what they needed and wanted, USDA researchers slowly shifted their attention to the other end of the production cycle to discern and analyze the needs of consumers. In the context of agricultural station research, farmers were no longer the inventors of Kansas wheat culture as Malin described them. They were now simply producers who worked in cooperation with other members of the agricultural business sector in the wider state, national, and international economies.

This study of the relationship between Kansas wheat farmers and USDA experiment stations in the twentieth century suggests three developmental stages. In the original research stage, USDA scientists worked on problems related to plant selection, fertilizers, formulas for preparation of the soil, and other basic information. This phase of research lasted approximately to World War I. In the second stage, scientists and farmers became versed in the use of machinery aimed at more efficient harvesting methods, reduced labor and transportation costs, and the use of modern accounting practices. Both research and development were critically important in the development of wheat farming in Kansas, but in the prosperous post-World War II era they were already reaching their limits in terms of sustaining farmers' economic security. The only new avenue for improvement for wheat scientists was in aggressively marketing wheat products to a wider consumer audience. Pleasing processors and consumers by creating products that fit their needs eventually became the focus of experiment station research after World War II and remains so today. This has caused, in the opinion of one agricultural economist, the farm sector (composed of farm organizations, congressional committees, the USDA, and the Land Grant school system) to have "lost control of the farm policy agenda."[3] While Malin supported and applauded the first two stages in the evolution of Kansas wheat culture he likely would have been disappointed by farmers' and scientists' increasing need to gauge consumers' perceptions of appropriate farm policy and practices.

USDA scientists' initial investigations in winter wheat farming in Kansas centered on the search for a suitable wheat variety for the state. The origin of winter wheat and its adoption was of intense interest to Malin, and he spent a considerable amount of time gathering anecdotal and newspaper evidence to prove that

3. Don Paarlberg, "The Changing Policy Environment for the 1990 Farm Bill," *Journal of Soil and Water Conservation* 45 (January–February 1990): 8.

central Kansas farmers had spontaneously adopted the hard red varieties through word of mouth, example, and experience. To support his theory of adaptation to a subhumid climate, Malin laboriously cited Kansas experiment station notes in which several strains of Turkey wheat, variously named Odessa, Russian Amber, Hungarian, and Bulgarian, were given station trials in the early 1880s. He was highly skeptical of the Mennonites' claim to introducing hard red wheat to Kansas, sarcastically suggesting that it was unreasonable to believe that newspapers in the McPherson area would not have mentioned this wondrous development before the 1890s.[4] As positive evidence of the wisdom of the average Kansas wheat farmer, Malin also pointed to the downfall of T.C. Henry, whose brief Kansas wheat empire was imprudently built on soft spring wheat.[5] In each case, Malin's object was to demonstrate the resiliency of the average Kansas wheat farmer in having taken up winter wheat farming in response to natural conditions. In Malin's view, the gap between rural intuition and scientific investigation was never very wide. The scientists always caught up eventually.

Malin's skepticism of the Mennonites' claim to the introduction of hard red winter wheat was sustained by historian Norman Saul, whose research into the origin of winter wheat seed in Kansas led him to conclude that although Mennonite farmers likely brought seed with them from Molochna in Ukraine in the 1870s, the widespread distribution of the several varieties of Turkey Red was the result of the efforts of several people including farmer-entrepreneur Bernhard Warkentin and wheat scientists W. T. Krehbeil, Edward M. Shelton, and Mark Carleton. Over several decades the Kansas Experiment Station in Manhattan imported numerous Russian varieties, tested and crossed them, and then marketed them to farmers via county fairs, millers, and the railroads. Finally, new markets for high gluten flour and the development of steel rollers for milling the harder varieties provided the last chapters in the story of the "miracle" of winter wheat in Kansas.[6]

4. James C. Malin, *Winter Wheat in the Golden Belt of Kansas: A Study in Adaption to Subhumid Geographical Environment* (New York: Octagon Books, 1973), 167.

5. Homer Socolofsky, "The Agricultural Heritage" in *The Rise of the Wheat State: A History of Kansas Agriculture, 1861–1986*, ed. George Ham and Robin Higham (Manhattan, Kans.: Sunflower University Press, 1987), 23–24. A hagiography of T. C. Henry can be found in Stuart Henry, "Kansas Winter Wheat," Special Collections, Kansas State University, Manhattan, hereafter cited as Special Collections.

6. Norman E. Saul, "Myth and History: Turkey Red Wheat and the 'Kansas Miracle,'" *Heritage of the Great Plains* 22 (Summer 1989): 10.

Malin's philosophy of history was the re-creation so far as possible of the "point of view of the people of a given period who were looking into the unknown future."[7] This philosophy gave him an extreme sense of empathy for early Kansas wheat farmers. Crop failures were common: pests that arrived in biblical proportions, untimely rains, hailstorms, and other climatic problems all conspired against farmers' raising winter wheat. This created the informational vacuum that USDA experiment station scientists hoped to fill. As the director of the Fort Hays Experiment Station recalled in 1916, farming methods before 1900 "were not successful and they met with failure, either partial or complete for so many years in succession that a large percentage of these farmers were compelled to sacrifice most of their belongings and leave their homesteads. . . . [T]he hardships experienced and told by the few remaining pioneers are almost unbelievable."[8] The lack of a stable winter wheat crop had, according to the director, convinced western Kansas farmers of the wisdom of pasturing cattle in addition to raising wheat. This meant that farmers also had to learn how to raise a variety of other crops, "hence the reason for experiment stations now scattered over the Plains."[9]

Malin's interpretation of the introduction of hard winter wheat in Kansas, as a spontaneous evolutionary development, necessarily skewed the relationship between experiment station scientists and farmers in the years before World War I. While station workers did investigate wheat varieties (some two thousand between 1906 and 1910), their primary goal was to create a system of diversified agriculture that would give farmers a more reliable income. This led station staff in several directions at once to demonstrate the variety of products a farmer in Kansas might produce and thus ensure himself against the vagaries of both climate and the market. To this end, the Kansas legislature authorized a branch experiment station on the grounds of old Fort Hays in 1902, recognizing that the Manhattan location in the Flint Hills could not effectively reach out to farmers in central and western Kansas. Station staff at Fort Hays held farmers' institutes and traveled widely to dissemi-

7. Thomas Burnell Colbert, "A Most Original Thinker: James C. Malin on History and Technology," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 19 (Autumn 1996): 181.

8. Fort Hays Experiment Station, *Annual Report, 1916*, Special Collections.

9. Ibid.

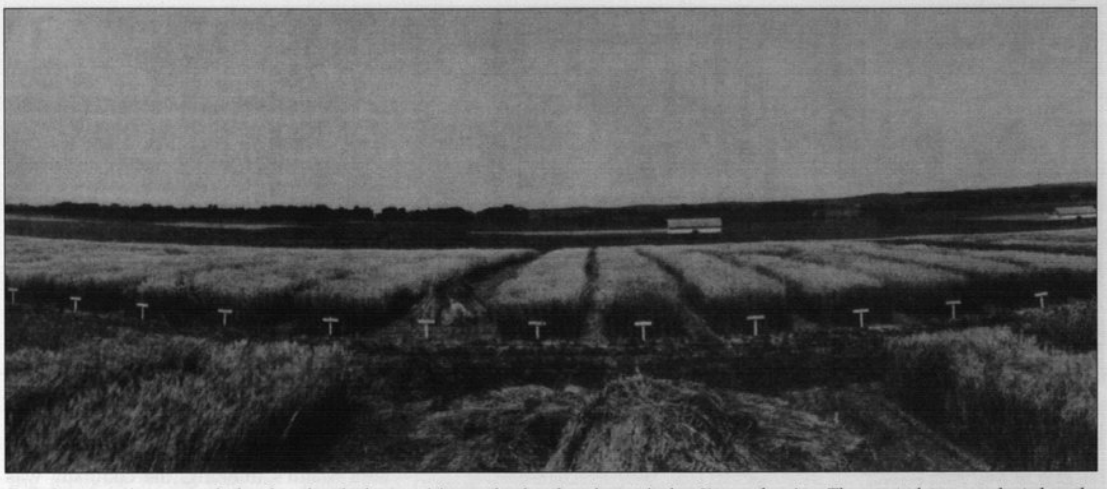
nate new information. They published circulars in local papers and wrote bulletins that they mailed to farmers on request. "Field Days" and livestock judging contests lured hundreds of local farmers to the station each year where they could see the results of the experimental work firsthand. They also were instrumental in the distribution of seed, particularly after 1900 when, in cooperation with the railroads, they were able to transport free quality seed to the entire state in a timely manner. Lastly, they created partnerships with other researchers, like those in the federal Office of Dry Land Agriculture who toured the Fort Hays substation in 1906.[10] In some cases, as in the selection of high quality winter wheat seed, station staff were highly successful. In other areas, as in their recommendations that farmers diversify their operations, they were virtually ignored.

This lack of farmer response to diversified farming was not a large problem for station staff as long as the winter wheat crop continued to bring in cash for credit-starved farmers and their own funding for more basic research remained secure. As the director of the Hays station wrote, "most people think wheat is one of the sure money crops and therefore has been grown too extensively. . . . There is no doubt but that continuous cropping will be practiced for some time to come even though the experiences of older countries teach us the danger of this practice."[11] The uneasy feeling station staff had about farmer's wholehearted investment in winter wheat farming slowly dissipated between 1900 and 1918 as wheat prices reached historic highs and mechanical wheat harvesting became more efficient and better organized. With the sharp postwar decline in agricultural prices in 1919, however, farmers were again officially encouraged to diversify their operations and manage their farms more efficiently. As the Kansas State Board of Agriculture's annual report to the legislature noted, "economic disturbances now upon us as a consequence of war cannot wholly be turned aside by human agencies, but better farm management is a medium through which each individual may improve his situation."[12] Station staff recognized too that their efforts in wheat breeding had improved the crop so much that farmers were now able to turn their attention to other aspects of farming, including mechanization and storage. They believed that reducing labor costs together with the ability to store grain (as insurance against low prices) also worked to meet their ultimate goal for Kansas wheat farmers, which was financial security equal to other sectors of the economy.

This next phase in the relationship between farmers and experiment station staff—the development stage—Malin considered a highly positive new direction and proof of farmers' continuing adaptation to their environment. Interestingly, scientists rather than farmers were the examples of technological ingenuity Malin chose to support his adaptation thesis, noting for example that in 1888 experiment station director Edward Mason Shelton's "experimental attitude toward adaptation to environment" had led to research on a listing plow for wheat based on corn listers. As Malin stated in the conclusion of *Winter Wheat*, "The difference in behavior among individuals, private organizations and government agencies is immaterial in these respects."[13] In a kind of intellectual coup de grace, Malin hypothesized that any sincere effort on the part of intelligent human beings, or "innovation," inevitably led toward progress in adaptation to the Plains. Whether belonging to a farmer or a scientist, Malin wished to see the free hand of innovation left to its own devices without the interference of any "government bureaucracy [*sic*]."[14]

But the center of technological innovation already was shifting from the farm and the experiment station to the implement dealer with profound consequences for the agricultural community. Although agricultural historians have long noted that tractors did not outnumber horses and mules until 1955, the Plains states were far ahead of most of the country in accepting new agricultural technology, and a majority of Kansas farmers owned tractors by 1925. According to agricultural historian R. Douglas Hurt, 75 percent of the 1929 winter wheat harvest on the Great Plains was accomplished by gasoline-powered combines.[15] Statistical evidence for this shift is further backed by a rather deep pool of anecdotal evidence. Wheat farmers in-

10. Ibid., *Annual Reports, 1902–1906*.
11. Ibid.
12. Kansas State Board of Agriculture, *Twenty-Second Biennial Report, 1919–1920* (Topeka: Kansas State Printing Plant, 1921), ix.
13. Malin, *Winter Wheat in the Golden Belt of Kansas*, 235.
14. Ibid, 252.
15. R. Douglas Hurt, *American Agriculture: A Brief History* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1994), 252; *see also* Robert C. Williams, *Fordson, Farmall and Poppin' Johnny: A History of the Farm Tractor and Its Impact on America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987); David B. Danbom, *Born in the Country: A History of Rural America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 196–97.



Experiment stations researched and analyzed wheat varieites to develop those best suited to Kansas farming. These test plots were planted on the agronomy farm at the experiment station in Manhattan, 1927.

vested early in agricultural machinery, especially harvesting equipment, and Kansas farm boys often worked summers for custom combining outfits. As Solomon Loewen recalled, mechanical harvesting after the turn of the century was a community-based activity organized through threshing rings. The introduction of affordable tractors and especially combines after 1940, however, meant that farmers no longer needed to rely on each other for help. "Harvesting became an individual family affair, not the enlarged family and community activity it used to be," explained Loewen.[16] Farm men and women now had greater freedom to develop their farming enterprises in isolation from their neighbors.

Experiment station research also was shifting from basic research to the development and assessment of new mechanical technology by the mid-1920s. This was a logical step in the station's long standing goal of helping farmers stretch their investments in land, labor, and capital to offset low prices and poor harvests. In essence, the new emphasis on mechanization and efficient production through lowering labor costs was consistent with the initial goal of experiment station work, which was aptly summarized in a popular 1920s USDA circular entitled *How to Make the Farm Pay*. The precipitous drop in farm income that followed World War I, however, had a direct effect on wheat farming in Kansas and on the kinds of work performed at the experiment stations. In a radical departure from regular "lines of work," as they called them, the staff of the USDA's new Bureau of Agricultural Economics conducted a survey in land tenure that was completed in 1919. Scientists' worst fears were confirmed when they found that the average age at which a farmer could be expected to own his own farm (the upper rung of the agricultural ladder) had risen from 24.6 years in 1875–1880 to 34.7 years in 1915–1919.[17] Gilbert Fite's recounting of his own South Dakota grandparents' futile struggle to hold on to their land and their heirs' inability to capitalize on their parents' hard work through the 1920s and 1930s is a perfect example of the consequences of those trends station scientists were seeing even before the bottom fell out of the market in 1919.[18] In essence, wheat farmers were falling farther behind in spite of everything station scientists had accomplished in terms of research and development.

16. Solomon Loewen, "Harvesting in Kansas During the Early Decades of this Century: A Reminiscence," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 13 (Summer 1990): 87.

17. Fort Hays Experiment Station, *Annual Report, 1918–1919*, 10, Special Collections.

18. Gilbert C. Fite, "Failure on the Last Frontier: A Family Chronicle," *Western Historical Quarterly* 18 (January 1987): 5–14.

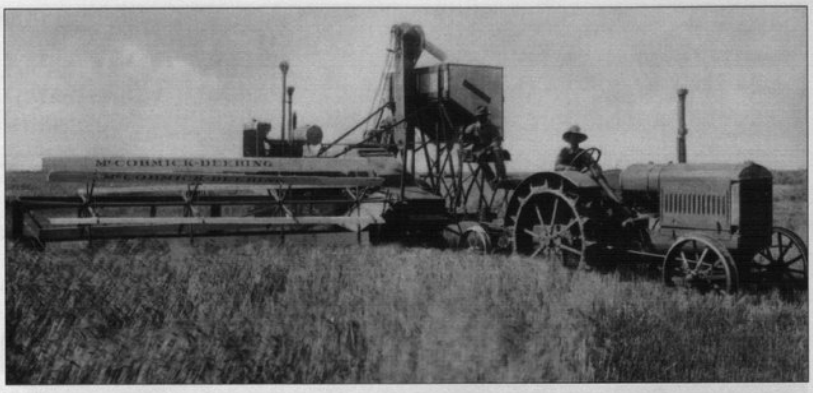
One phase of USDA research involved improving farm machinery to facilitate more efficient harvest methods. These four photographs, left and on the facing page, illustrate various types of harvest equipment from the 1910s to the 1950s: TOP LEFT: *Horses provide the power for cutting and binding wheat on the G. A. Garret farm, Russell County, 1912.* BOTTOM LEFT: *Steam-powered equipment and manual labor were the major resources for wheat threshing during the early decades of the twentieth century. Edwards County.* TOP RIGHT: *Combines greatly reduced a farmer's time and labor. Tractor-pulled machines were the first to be developed, as seen in this early 1930s photo.* BOTTOM RIGHT: *By the 1950s self-propelled combines were common and further eased the workload. Photo taken in 1957.*

One response to this economic slide was corporate farming. A primary example was the Wheat Farming Company (WFC) based in Hays, Kansas, and Kansas City, Missouri.[19] In a remarkable little 1930 booklet, which lifted the majority of its information from the publications of publicly funded research stations, author and company president John S. Bird compared Kansas land to the great eastern factories. Manufacturing, Bird claimed, had caused Kansas to "look upon her eastern sister states with a feeling almost of envy."[20] His solution, of course, was to turn Kansas wheat farms into factories. In addition to profitably farming their seventy-one thousand acres of Kansas wheat land, the WFC hoped to re-educate Kansas farmers in efficient mechanization, shrewd mathematical calculation, and positive thinking.[21] Very much in line with Malin's thinking, the company was founded on the premise that "thousands of acres were being handled ineffectively because of a lack of power, because of lack of capital, because of mortgage debt and because of broken morale among owners and producers."[22]

In a shameless use of social evolutionary theory, the WFC painted a rosy picture of inevitable progress—as defined by a decrease in hard labor and an increase in income. The key was greater production on a larger scale for less money. More efficient production, the company claimed, would raise farmers out of debt even if the cost of wheat fell below parity prices. The company's claim that political solutions were of no lasting usefulness, that the answer to wheat farmers' problems lay in their own energy and efforts, belied its ties to established financial interests and appealed to widespread notions of agrarian fundamentalism. Although the WFC went into receivership in 1931, its presumed viability underscored wheat farmers' increasing dependency on outside experts for technical advice. While adhering to some of the sentiments expressed by the WFC, western Kansas farmers were not ready to repeal their loyalty to local landownership, and they outlawed corporate farming that same year.[23]

19. J. S. Bird, *An Independent Kansas Agriculture Through Self-help* (Kansas City: Wheat Farming Co., n.d.), Special Collections.
20. Ibid., 3.
21. Craig Miner, *Harvesting the High Plains: John Kriss and the Business of Wheat Farming, 1920–1950* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998), 160.
22. Bird, *An Independent Kansas Agriculture Through Self-help*, 17.
23. Miner, *Harvesting the High Plains*, 160.

The wheat farming crisis of the 1930s in Kansas, as graphically depicted in Lawrence Svobida's autobiography *Farming the Dust Bowl*, only increased the pressure experiment station scientists felt to pull farmers out of the economic basement. Certainly Malin would not have approved of Svobida's ultimate adaptation to the state, which was to move away and start a new life elsewhere. Nor would he have relished Svobida's parting remarks that better farming methods would only be adopted "under strict regulation by wise laws adequately enforced."[24] For experiment station scientists, the application of New Deal laws governing their relationship to Kansas wheat farmers became a source of tension and confusion about their original goals and objectives. In a highly suggestive understatement, the director of the Fort Hays Experiment Station reported in 1935, "For the past two years, the Station has cooperated with the AAA in its program for control of wheat production, believing that the plan *might* [emphasis added] be of value in developing practical means of crop production control."[25]

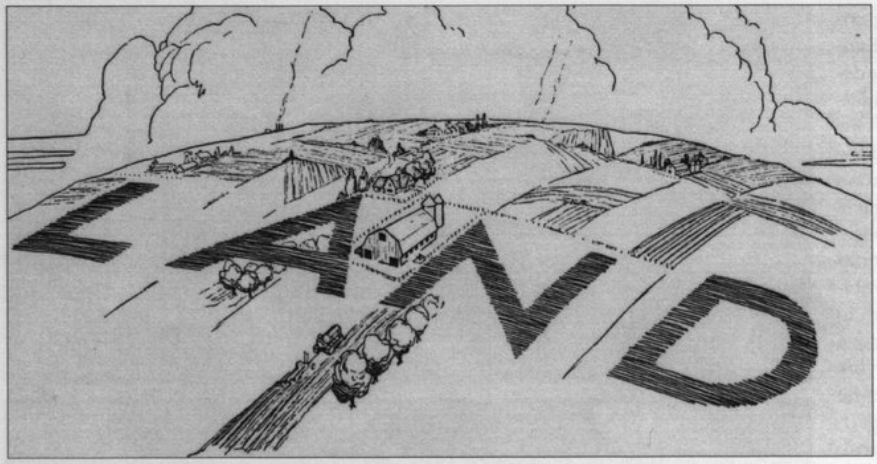


The fact was that wheat scientists felt wholly threatened by the introduction of new federal programs into what had traditionally been a closed local system. As Milton Eisenhower, who later became president of Kansas State University, put it in 1940, "State workers could perhaps see themselves gradually falling into what Grover Cleveland once called a condition of innocuous desuetude."[26] Also understood by station staff was implicit criticism of their work, which had first focused on increasing crop yields through basic research and then increased efficiency through the use of machinery. Over-production was now considered the culprit in farmers' economic tumble, and station staff who formerly took pride in helping farmers accomplish just that were left to scratch their heads as to their next project emphasis. Worse than this, by 1940 it was clear that funding for basic research at the

24. Lawrence Svobida, *Farming the Dust Bowl: A First-hand Account from Kansas* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1986). Svobida's account originally was published in 1940 under the title *An Empire of Dust* (Caldwell, Idaho: Caxton Printers, 1940); ibid., 248.

25. Fort Hays Experiment Station, *Annual Report, 1935*, 11, Special Collections.

26. Milton S. Eisenhower and Roy I. Kimmel, "Old and New in Agricultural Organization," *Yearbook of Agriculture, 1940* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1940): 1131.



One response to wheat marketing problems was corporate farming. In 1930 J. S. Bird of the Wheat Farming Company based in Hays and Kansas City compared Kansas land to industry in the East. Kansas, Bird wrote, possesses a great manufacturing opportunity in her level, fertile land.

station level could no longer be taken for granted. Formerly secure in their mission to aid farmers struggling with market forces beyond their control, station scientists, particularly wheat scientists, now found themselves subject to those same forces in maintaining their research programs.

As Alan Marcus, an agricultural policy historian, has clearly laid out, after World War II federal money that formerly would have gone to agricultural research was funneled instead to two new research institutions: the National Science Foundation (NSF) and the National Institutes of Health (NIH). This meant agricultural researchers were "frozen out of the extended review process by the Johnnies-come-lately."[27] The emergence of the NSF and NIH also caused good station scientists in agricultural research to find positions elsewhere, thus further weakening the experiment station system. Creation of the Agricultural Research Service in the mid-1950s only exacerbated the problem by making funding for crop research competitive through granting schemes that pitted experiment stations against one another. Finally, according to Marcus, the National Agricultural Research, Extension and Teaching Act of 1977 allowed all scientists, not just those associated with state programs, to compete for money traditionally set aside for station research.[28]

Not surprisingly, publicly funded wheat research has had to forge new partnerships with private groups and industries to maintain its programs. As a result, private consultation is taking over the role of the USDA as farmers' primary information source. As Steven Wolf of the Department of Agricultural and Resource Economics at the University of California at Berkeley recently wrote, "Agriculture is increasingly becoming more like other industries as the 'social contract' between agriculture and society is eroding."[29]

One clear example of this new focus on marketing and marketing research in Kansas wheat culture is the development of new varieties of white winter wheat. While Kansas remained ideal for the production of hard red winter wheat, scientists in the early 1970s began an intensive research program to develop a hard white variety for Kansas. The reasons for the shift were clear: white wheat was more desirable for consumers both at home and abroad. In January 1978 wheat scientist Floyd Smith stated that the station was working on a white winter wheat variety because "Wheat growers want help in stimulating markets."[30] About the only advantage hard red winter wheat had over white wheat, according to Smith, was that it did not sprout in the head as easily as white winter in the Kansas climate. In other words, red winter wheat was better climatically

27. Allan I. Marcus, "The Wisdom of the Body Politic: The Changing Nature of Publically Sponsored American Agricultural Research Since the 1830s," *Agricultural History* 62 (Spring 1988): 4, 25–26.
28. Ibid.
29. Steven Wolf, ed., *Privatization of Information and Agricultural Industrialization* (New York: Social and Water Conservation Society, 1999), 153.
30. "White Winter Wheat: A Promising Crop," *K-Stater* 27 (January 1978): 1.

but was not as marketable. Beginning in 1969 the experiment station's mission was to create a hard white winter wheat that performed as well as hard red in Kansas soils. In the early 1970s the white wheat breeding program for Kansas was given a major boost by private wheat grower Earl Clark of Sedgwick County, whose variety of hard white was resistant to early sprouting. Scientists were certain this would make Kansas wheat more competitive with white wheat grown in Canada and Australia.

Ironically, scientists' projects to introduce white winter wheat to Kansas were stymied not by difficulties in creating a new variety but in marketing it within an established system based on hard red winter wheat. According to the U.S. Standards for Wheat, adopted in 1917, growers or buyers could not market hard white apart from soft white varieties. The U.S. Standard for Wheat finally was updated for the first time in 1990—twenty years after the Kansas experiment station began work on a hard white variety. Also essential to the effective marketing of hard white wheat was maintaining separate storage facilities. This was a major obstacle in Kansas where storage and transportation have always been at a premium. The farmer who risked growing white winter wheat also risked not being able to store or transport his harvest. Lastly, hard red wheat is an eager volunteer in the spring where it has been planted before, making it possible for red wheat to become mixed into a white wheat harvest and reduce the value of the crop to a "mixed" wheat suitable only for a few markets. As a result of these marketing difficulties, the Kansas Experiment Station's first white winter wheat variety, named Heyne after the first scientist to suggest research on the crop in 1968, was not released until 1998. Solving the marketing problems of white winter wheat has been an integral part of the experiment station mission and remains so today.[31]

During economic difficulties, experiment stations assisted farmers in low-cost production methods, enabling them to secure some profits from their labors.

And how have Kansas wheat farmers fared as a result of the experiment station focus on marketing? On the one hand, Kansas wheat has continued to increase in productivity with both yields and harvests reaching unprecedented heights. This has been a direct result of experiment station research during the past forty years in terms of wheat breeding with nearly 75 percent of the 1998 wheat crop planted to Jagger, a hard red winter wheat developed by Kansas State University. From an average of 181 million bushels of wheat produced annually in the 1950s, Kansas wheat farmers in 1998 produced an astounding 494.9 million bushels of wheat. Similarly, the average wheat yield on Kansas farms has increased from 14.5 bushels per acre at mid-century to a whopping 49 bushels per acre in 1998.[32]

But increased productivity as a result of all this scientific research has not raised wheat farmers' standard of

31. Robert K. Bequette and Timothy J. Herrman, *Hard White Wheat*, Keeping Up with Research 120 (Manhattan: Kansas State Experiment Station, 1998).

32. Kansas State University Agricultural Experiment Station and Cooperative Extension Service, *1998 Kansas Performance Tests with Winter Wheat Varieties*, Report of Progress 816 (Manhattan: July 1998), 4; Kansas State Board of Agriculture, *Kansas Farm Facts* (Topeka: Kansas Agricultural Statistics, 1997), 9.