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YEOMANRY TRANSFORMED:  
THE CHANGING IMAGE OF THE AMERICAN FARMER IN THE  
NORTHERN AGRICULTURAL PRESS, 1873-1893

By

Kirk Leo Heinze

A DISSERTATION

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## ABSTRACT

### YEOMANRY TRANSFORMED: THE CHANGING IMAGE OF THE AMERICAN FARMER IN THE NORTHERN AGRICULTURAL PRESS, 1873-1893

By

Kirk Leo Heinze

From the emergence of a distinctly agricultural press in 1810 until well after the Civil War, farm newspaper editors and their readers shared a mythic conception of the American farmer. For over half a century, the pages of the northern agricultural press depicted the farmer as the noble yeoman--the central hero of the agrarian myth. Not only was the farmer the ideal man and citizen, he was also the symbol of American democratic government.

Between the Panic of 1873 and the Panic of 1893, the heroic yeoman image underwent a profound transformation. Throughout these tumultuous two decades of agrarian unrest, northern agricultural editors and their readers began strongly supporting collective political and economic action while denouncing monopoly and privilege. Instead of the traditional and ubiquitous poems, speeches and editorials apotheosizing the proud, virtuous and independent yeoman, the farm papers resounded with strident calls for cooperative economic and political action. The mythic yeoman image gave way to the farmer-businessman and political activist. This new image revealed an

agrarian willingness to face the social and technological challenges of industrialization, urbanization and commercialization.

At the same time, however, the late nineteenth century agricultural press revealed an ominous dimension of the agrarian character. Editorials and letters reflected an increasingly ardent xenophobia in the wake of large-scale immigration. Nativism, coupled with the unprecedented hostility toward Native Americans and Blacks occurring during the period, revealed a bitter, cynical, retrogressive farmer quite unlike either the yeoman or the progressive farmer-activist.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the legendary yeoman was displaced by a new, more complicated agrarian--one who was moving technologically, economically and politically forward, but who could not seem to reconcile many of the social changes ushered in by industrialization and a growing cultural pluralism. The result was an image of the American farmer that was, at best, paradoxical, and, at worst, schizophrenic. It is an image of a conflict between agrarian progressivism and retrogression which remained unresolved in the rural psyche well into the twentieth century.

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## INTRODUCTION

More than a few of the festive farmers may have become momentarily perplexed during the opening remarks coming from the tall gangling presidential hopeful at the platform podium. Speakers invited to annual agricultural fairs were generally given to extolling the virtues of farming, but here was Abraham Lincoln casually informing an audience of proud Wisconsin grain and milk producers that:

I presume I am not expected to employ the time assigned to me in the mere flattery of the farmers, as a class. My opinion of them is that, in proportion to numbers, they are neither better nor worse than other people. In the nature of things they are more numerous than any other class; and I believe there really are more attempts at flattering them than any other; the reason of which I cannot perceive, unless it be that they can cast more votes than any other. <sup>1</sup>

Any proclamation which assigned dubious motives to politicians would, under normal circumstances, appeal to the wary agrarians. But annual fairs were not pedestrian events, and further, Mr. Lincoln had prefaced his humorous poke at office seekers with some additional reservations about the nobility of the farming class. Yes, it was true that farmers had become accustomed to flattery, but was it not well deserved? Wasn't the small freeholder the linchpin of democratic government? Wasn't the energetic yeoman, sowing fecund fields in the open



air, much closer to the Almighty than the wretched immigrant toiling hopelessly away in the urban factories? Wasn't the farmer's house "the abode of the virtuous . . . a temple in which the precepts of holy religion are inculcated"?<sup>2</sup> After all, American agrarians had received similar encomiums since early colonial days--tributes not only from the always suspect politicians, but, more recently, from their trusted agricultural newspapers.<sup>3</sup>

Since the inaugural issue of the Agricultural Museum on July 4, 1810,<sup>4</sup> agricultural editors had printed countless letters, poems and editorials apotheosizing the American yeoman--in often rhapsodic fashion:

In a sweet healthy air, with a farm of his own,  
Secluded from tumult and strife,  
The farmer, more blest than a king on his throne,  
Enjoys all the comforts of life.  
When the sweet smiling spring sheds its fragrance around,  
And music enchants every tree,  
With his glittering plowshare he furrows the ground  
With a mind independent and free.<sup>5</sup>

Such lofty sentiments had their origin in a unique agrarian mythology which had as its dominant symbol a "vast and constantly growing agricultural society in the interior of the continent."<sup>6</sup> It was a society which promised growth, prosperity, freedom and harmony with the Almighty; in short, it offered a new beginning for those who had fared poorly in the Old World. The heroic figure in the agrarian mythology was the yeoman farmer. He was the ideal man and the ideal citizen who diligently tended his ground, reverently reaped his harvest,

helped sustain his community and America's destiny. Originally a construct of the educated classes, the agrarian myth had become a mass creed by the early nineteenth century. Early agricultural editors easily embraced the appealing allegory and faithfully passed it along, in poem and prose, to their readers.<sup>7</sup>

This is not to say that agricultural journalists were so mesmerized by the agrarian myth that they were oblivious of more practical concerns. On the contrary, the pages of the early nineteenth-century farm papers were largely devoted to such mundane tasks as "the application of manure," calf raising, deep ploughing and "the culture of wheat, corn and other grains."<sup>8</sup> Most papers were divided into specific sections including horticulture, machinery, husbandry, markets, and weather, and a great deal of the reader correspondence addressed such pragmatic concerns. Nor it is fair to insist that the agricultural editors and their readers were so transfixed by the pastoral vision that they somehow managed to ignore the rigors of nineteenth-century agricultural life. Many of the editorials, letters and agricultural society reports combine to form an often dreary, drudgerous picture of early farming. In fact, there is some evidence that agricultural editors were not above using yeomanesque hyperbole to keep wide-eyed rural youths from abandoning Arcadia for urban living.<sup>9</sup> Yet, despite some ambiguity about the nobility of farming (and some questions regarding the integrity of

certain editors), the sheer plethora of newspaper content strongly indicates that most early to mid-nineteenth-century agrarians and their agricultural editors shared a sincere faith in the Jeffersonian vision of a nation dominated by God-fearing yeomen.<sup>10</sup>

From the early 1800s until approximately the mid 1870s, the image of the American farmer, as revealed in the northern agricultural press, remained relatively unchanged. In the two decades between the Panic of 1873 and the Panic of 1893, however, that image underwent a gradual, yet profound transformation. American farmers entered the Gilded Age with expectations that the favorable economic conditions they had enjoyed during and after the Civil War would continue.<sup>11</sup> Their optimism was quickly dashed against the rocks of plummeting commodities prices, unpredictable, and often usurious transportation rates, a niggardly federal monetary policy, ravenous insects and capricious weather.<sup>12</sup> Although these proved a dismal two decades for most farmers, those in West and South suffered more than those in the East and Midwest. Many who were driven to the economic precipice fought back, primarily through cooperative marketing and political associations. The Grange, for the first (and for what also proved to be the last) time in its history, urged its members toward economic and political activism. The Alliance Movement spread north and east from the parched Texas plains, and, eventually, the Populists launched a third-party movement that

rocked the political establishment and served as the harbinger of many twentieth-century social and political reforms.<sup>13</sup> Throughout these tumultuous twenty years of agrarian unrest, and despite a long tradition of eschewing political issues in their papers, a great many agricultural editors in the East and Midwest joined their more newly-established and vociferous counterparts on the Plains in strident defense of farmers. Editorials in Maine and New York echoed those in South Dakota and Nebraska in supporting cooperative movements, denouncing monopoly and privilege, urging political activism and even endorsing friendly politicians. Instead of trusting in Providence, farmers were exhorted to take matters into their own hands. Instead of glorying in their alleged economic autonomy, they were encouraged to join and help manage sophisticated marketing cooperatives. Instead of basking in the warm, exalted glow of their yeomanry, they were called to take up arms against the powerful financial and industrial forces which many believed were exploiting them. The result was profound: by the end of the nineteenth century, the image of the Jeffersonian freeholder, "more blest than a king on his throne," had virtually disappeared from the pages of the northern farm press. In his place stood the precursor to the modern agribusinessman who has emerged during the twentieth century.<sup>14</sup>

Concomitant to the gradual appearance of the more economically sophisticated, politically aggressive farmer,

however, was the unmistakable development of a more ominous alter ego who was anything but progressive. The image of the new agrarian, at once pragmatic and visionary, also embraced an agrarian who demonstrated a darker, retrogressive side to his character. The late nineteenth-century agricultural press unveils an emerging xenophobe who increasingly vilifies urban life, who finds scapegoats among the growing waves of immigrants flowing into the cities, who scorns any theological departure from Protestant fundamentalism, and who often takes his merriment at the expense of Blacks, Native Americans and other minority groups. Although the wellsprings of anti-urbanism can be traced well into the rural American past and nativistic currents have ebbed and followed on farms and in villages throughout our history, the period between 1873-1893 witnessed a burgeoning of both retrogressive phenomena unprecedented in northern agrarian journalism.<sup>15</sup>

By the end of the nineteenth century there emerges from the pages of the northern agricultural press an image of the American farmer which is, at best, paradoxical, at worst, schizophrenic. It is the image of a farmer confronting the challenges of rapid industrialization head on, while simultaneously shrinking from them; one moving technologically, economically and politically forward, yet unable or unwilling to reconcile concomitant social changes; one showing no inclination to return to an idealized pastoral utopia, yet incapable of accepting an ever-expanding cultural pluralism.

In short, this double-edged image appears to encompass the conflicting forces of progressivism and retrogression which have struggled unresolved within the American rural psyche throughout the twentieth century--often to the decided detriment of agrarian interests.<sup>16</sup>

In an effort to trace the transformation of the yeoman image in the nineteenth-century agricultural press, I have organized the following study into six chapters:

Chapter 1--From Virgil to Virginia: The Wellsprings of  
the American Agrarian Mythology

Chapter 2--Yeomanry Enshrined: The Image of the Farmer  
in the Early and Mid-Nineteenth-Century  
Agricultural Press

Chapter 3--Agrarians in Conflict: Agriculture in the Gilded  
Age

Chapter 4--Farmers in the Vanguard: Economic and Political  
Progressivism, 1873-1893

Chapter 5--Anti-Urbanism, Xenophobia and the Emerging  
Paradox: Social Retrogression, 1873-1893

Conclusion--Yeomanry Transformed: The Image of the American  
Farmer in the Northern Agricultural Press at the  
Close of the Nineteenth Century

Chapter 1 will trace the development of the agrarian myth from its origins in Classical and Enlightenment thought to its introduction and subsequent proliferation throughout American culture. Concomitant to the development and popularization of

this unique, rural mythology was the emergence of the yeoman farmer as mythic hero. Chapter 2 will examine the various dimensions of the yeoman image as they are revealed in the early and mid-nineteenth-century agricultural press. The focus will be placed on ideas and themes which combine to convey the moral, economic and nationalistic significance of the image. The third chapter will survey late nineteenth-century agricultural history in order to establish a comprehensive backdrop against which the changing content of the farm papers can be considered. Chapter 4 will illustrate how the image of the solitary, independent yeoman was replaced by the political and economic activist. Many of the sweeping changes farmers were demanding, while often considered radical at the time, later became legal and institutional realities during the Progressive era. Such forward-looking proposals indicated that rather than longing to return to a romanticized Arcadia, farmers were willing to confront the economic and political challenges of industrial America. The juxtaposition of Chapters 4 and 5 will contrast the image of the progressive farmer-activist with the farmer-nativist. Although anti-urban, xenophobic tendencies were apparent in earlier farm papers, such proclivities became increasingly pronounced as hard times wore on. Perhaps due to severe economic pressures and the frustrations arising from feelings of powerlessness in the grip of distant and impalpable foes, farmers were compelled to lash out at more identifiable, more vulnerable targets. Such

attacks eventually reached a stridency unparalleled in earlier agricultural journalism. The conclusion will provide an impressionistic exegesis of the transformed image of the American farmer as it emerged from the pages of the agricultural press at the end of the nineteenth century.

### **Historiography and Methodology**

While relatively new to journalism historiography, the use of images like the yeoman farmer to illuminate American cultural attitudes, values and beliefs became a primary analytical tool for a small but influential group of literary critics and intellectual historians in the two decades after World War II. The emergence of the "myth, symbol and image" school provided the then embryonic American Studies movement with a methodological platform from which holistic, cross-cultural, scholarly explorations could be launched.<sup>17</sup> Beginning with Virgin Land in 1950, interdisciplinary investigations into literature, history, philosophy and theology produced a number of highly acclaimed works which subsequently provided a major theoretical framework for the American Studies and American Culture programs which proliferated during the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>18</sup> Shortly after the publication of The Machine in the Garden (1967), however, many American Studies proponents entered a period of intense self examination. Prompted by incisive critiques within and outside the discipline, scholars reappraised the movement, taking a particularly hard look at what had been one



of its predominant methodologies.

While reaffirming the holistic orientation of most American Studies scholarship, individuals like Robert Sklar and Cecil Tate concluded that one unfortunate result of the search for uniquely American cultural manifestations had been, in effect, to fracture content for the sake of form.<sup>19</sup> While accumulating evidence to help identify a homogeneous national character or style, scholars often inadvertently neglected America's great ethnic and geographical diversity. One result was that myths and images thought to reflect American life, in toto, may actually mirror specific regions of the country and, moreover, specific socioeconomic groups within those regions. Related to this argument was the contention that by placing major emphasis on expressions of elite culture, early American Studies scholarship sacrificed insights which could have been derived from the examination of more popular cultural forms.<sup>20</sup> While certainly not fatal to the mythopoetic methodology, such well-grounded reservations suggested modification in its use.

At approximately the same time American Studies scholars were reexamining their discipline, many journalism historians--also prompted by growing criticism within and outside the field--began vigorously exploring new historiographical approaches to their work. Allan Nevins had first thrown down the gauntlet in 1959 declaring that, among other shortcomings, many American journalism historians had been "deplorably uncritical and . . . dishonest" in their

been "deplorably uncritical and . . . dishonest" in their published endeavors. Noting but a handful of exceptions, Nevins averred that many media histories were erected on superficial evidence and, further, that there was little or no attempt to determine the broader implications of any substantial evidence that was presented. He suggested that journalism scholars begin moving away from the tendency to emphasize the "great men" in American journalism and toward approaches demanding greater sophistication in the selection and interpretations of data.<sup>21</sup>

Coupled with the charges of conceptual narrowness and superficiality was the growing realization that most journalism histories had been fashioned from a single interpretive paradigm.<sup>22</sup> Usually termed the "Whig" or "Progressive" model, the paradigm holds that press history has been marked by the gradual triumph of liberalism over the dark forces of retrogression and repression.

The Whig interpretation . . . views journalism history as the slow steady expansion of freedom and knowledge from the political press to the commercial press, the setbacks into sensationalism and yellow journalism, the forward thrust into muckraking and social responsibility.<sup>23</sup>

The heroes who often emerge from such interpretations are the crusading reporters, editors, and publishers who have waged relentless journalistic wars against the forces of conservatism, censorship and social injustice. Even when the focus shifts from powerful personalities to, for example, philosophical and legal foundations, the undergirding

interpretive paradigm generally remains the same: print journalism in America has gradually marched forward since the dark days of the partisan press into successive periods of ever-increasing enlightenment.<sup>24</sup> Years after most historians had abandoned the progressive cosmology, journalism scholars were still echoing strains of Turner, Parrington and Beard.<sup>25</sup>

During the late 1960s and early 1970s, press historians were exploring alternative analytical models. Many recognized that besides serving as a valuable repository of names, dates and events, the press is also a dynamic, culture-bound institution. As such, newspapers and magazines reflect or mirror the culture in which they appear.<sup>26</sup> In effect, print media can serve as sensitive cultural seismographs, recording subtle shifts or changes in the values, attitudes and beliefs popularly held during given historic periods. Instead of using press content to trace the careers of editorial titans or to chart technological advancements in printing, media historians could analyze advertising, features, news and reader correspondence in order to "grasp the form of consciousness, the imaginations, the interpretations of reality"<sup>27</sup> of past eras. The challenge to journalism scholars was to bring a more holistic orientation to their work, to integrate press content and culture in order to probe more deeply into the significance of press history. It was scarcely surprising, then, that some journalism historians turned to American Studies scholarship for possible methodological foundations upon which to build their

investigations.<sup>28</sup>

For several reasons, the somewhat embattled mythopoetic model offers particularly appealing possibilities for press scholarship. First, if newspapers and magazines accurately reflect the culture in which they appear, then they should also mirror the dominant mythic constructs which pervade that culture.<sup>29</sup> Second, by focusing on the journalistic expressions of those myths, images and symbols, scholars would be exploring one alternative to the biographical or technological emphases of most media histories. For instance, the gradual emergence and subsequent disappearance of a dominant cultural image may suggest some decidedly different conclusions about journalism history than those presupposed by the progressive paradigm. Third, since magazines and newspapers are usually expressions of popular culture, the charges of elitism leveled at American Studies scholarship would not apply to much journalism historiography. Further, by carefully selecting periodicals on the basis of such variables as readership and geographic circulation, media historians could avoid the more disturbing charge that mythopoetic scholarship had tended to sacrifice ethnic and regional diversity in the quest to identify and characterize a distinctly American cultural ethos. Instead, press historians could retain the distinctions of the southern, rural Black press or the midwestern, urban labor press while, at the same time, further examine the relationship between the content of

such publications and the broader culture. In short, they could retain the mythopoetic "baby" while discarding the "bathwater." By adopting the myth and image framework, press historians would find both the justification and the means for studying newspapers and magazines generally absent from standard print media histories--most of which reflect strong eastern, urban biases.<sup>30</sup> One of the most consistently disregarded realms of journalistic enterprise has been the American agricultural press.

In his 1941 preface to The American Agricultural Press, 1819-1860, Albert Lowther Demaree lamented that agricultural journals, the "medium of exchange for the ideas of eighty percent of the population and . . . a rich depository of social and economic history of their times" had been "entirely neglected by historians."<sup>31</sup> Demaree's exhaustive scholarship helped fill that historical void, but, over four decades later, his book remains the only fully developed study of the American agricultural press.

There are several plausible reasons why scholars have ignored the historical development of the farm press. First, complete files are very difficult to obtain. Nineteenth century farm periodicals are scattered across the country, and collections must be pieced together from land grant university libraries, state historical societies, the National Agricultural Library, and from the files of existent agricultural periodicals. Compounding this logistical dilemma

is a widely-held notion that agricultural papers have been exclusively concerned with matters related to practical husbandry. While it is true that a great deal of editorial space is devoted to improved production and marketing strategies, the farm press is also rich in social content. Unlike the urban press, however, the socio-cultural dimensions of the agricultural press are often overshadowed by the scientific and technical dimensions. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, press historians have been unwilling or unable to reconcile developments in the agricultural press and their overall interpretations of media history.

The Whig/Progressive paradigm cannot be easily applied to the farm press. For example, even though American agricultural newspapers began during the era of the partisan press, the overwhelming majority of farm editors vowed to avoid party politics. Most kept to their word. In addition, while urban papers in the mid-nineteenth century were changing dramatically in response to a burgeoning metropolitan readership, farm papers remained relatively unchanged until well after the Civil War. Even the newer midwestern and western agricultural periodicals were almost identical to their established counterparts in the East. Nor did the farm editors enjoy the twin luxuries of money and large staffs necessary to undertake expensive, time-consuming journalistic projects. In-depth features and expose stories, for example, were seldom evident in the nineteenth-century agricultural press. And, although

farm periodicals began to consolidate into a handful of small publishing groups after World War II, the agricultural chains have neither the power nor the sophistication of the urban-based media conglomerates. These incongruities illustrate the point that the development of the farm press cannot be neatly incorporated into an historiography that presupposes the steady, linear advancement of the American media through successive, ever more enlightened stages, in response to the mandates of "liberalism, freedom, democracy and libertarianism."<sup>32</sup>

Rather, farm papers danced to the beat of a different drummer, i.e., a fundamental agrarian ethos that could be alternately progressive, conservative or reactionary depending on the prevailing issues and the condition of agriculture at the time. The result of these differences between the urban and agricultural papers is that most press historians have either ignored the farm papers completely or relegated them to chapter-ending addenda, separate and distinct from dominant media trends. That "rich depository of social and economic history" Demaree affirms has, with few exceptions, remained untapped.<sup>33</sup>

Yet, it seems clear that the farm periodicals provide a more complete and balanced picture of rural American life than their often-quoted urban counterparts, which alternately romanticize and disparage country living, depending on the prevailing popular mood.<sup>34</sup> Because the agricultural papers were the

major information source for most farmers, they were as welcome on the farmstead as old, trusted friends.<sup>35</sup> Writing for the average farmer, with his predispositions firmly in mind, the agricultural editors were generally reluctant to examine such sensitive issues as religion, international affairs and party politics. Wary of antagonizing their readers, thereby sacrificing precious subscribers, farm editors chose their content with great caution. Open candidate endorsements and appeals for economic or political activism came only after long deliberation and much soul-searching--even after reader correspondence clearly indicated heightened receptivity to such appeals or endorsements out on the farm. For these reasons, the farm press is a far more accurate barometer of change in rural America than the urban dailies, the mass circulation magazines, or the polemical Alliance and Populist papers--all of which have been widely used in studies of agricultural developments during the Gilded Age.<sup>36</sup>

To briefly summarize, I believe the study of the farm press offers a unique opportunity to join journalism history and the mythopoetic methodology. Although a rich repository of rural popular culture, the agricultural press has gone virtually unnoticed in journalism historiography. As a result, the development of the farm press is relatively unencumbered by the standard interpretations of much journalism history. Those few studies of the farm press which do exist are either broad-ranging content summaries or biographical treatments.<sup>37</sup>



While such studies have illuminated important features of agricultural life, they have contributed little to a more holistic understanding of the "form of consciousness, the imaginations, the interpretations of reality" modern journalism scholars hope to achieve. One means of taking a more penetrating look at agrarian culture is to trace an established archetypal image through the pages of the farm press. Transformations of that image might indicate concomitant changes in rural America. Instead of examining the yeoman farmer in expressions of elite culture--which is usually the case--I will examine the image in the context of a medium that springs directly from rural America.

### **The Selection and Use of Primary Sources**

The most critical criterion governing the selection of agricultural papers for historical study is availability. Many of the records of the approximately 80 farm journals published between 1873-1893 have been lost or destroyed.<sup>38</sup> Extensive bibliographic searches have unearthed comparatively complete volumes of some of the more long-lived papers from the recesses of the National Agricultural Library, various college and university collections and from state historical societies. Occasionally, a current publisher can provide substantial holdings, as in the case of the Kansas Farmer or Farm Journal. In addition, the American Periodical Series (APS) contains a few agricultural publications from the Gilded Age,

although the APS collection of farm papers between 1820-1850 is far superior.

Fortunately, many of the surviving papers are generally considered among the most influential. Based on the judgment of scholars like Demaree and Gilbert,<sup>39</sup> I have tried to select from among the available papers those which enjoyed significant popularity and/or longevity. Since circulation figures varied widely relative to state and regional farm populations, and because farm editors were known to become somewhat overzealous in their readership tabulations, the time a paper managed to remain in business provides a more reliable means of gauging overall significance. Simplifying the selection process somewhat is the fact that most states only had one major agricultural publication during the period concerned. Papers like the Ohio Farmer, the Michigan Farmer, the Kansas Farmer and the Nebraska Farmer monopolized the agricultural news market in their respective states. Now known as "horizontals," these broad-ranging papers had not yet been seriously challenged by the specialized dairy, livestock, horse and cash grain papers ("verticles") which emerged in the twentieth century.<sup>40</sup>

Primary sources have been limited to what I have broadly termed the northern agricultural press.<sup>41</sup> Influential, long-lived farm papers were printed in the South during the Gilded Age, but, for several reasons, I have not included them in this study. The surviving files of the southern

agricultural papers are far more fragmentary than those of their northern counterparts. One apparent explanation for this phenomenon is that far fewer southern farm papers were published in the nineteenth century. Besides the paucity of surviving files, the southern farm papers present problems of content. Farm editors below the Mason-Dixon line were largely (and understandably) preoccupied with the technological, economic and political developments associated with a highly specialized agriculture. Unlike northern editors who were obliged to cover multi-dimensional forms of husbandry, ranging from dairy farming to grape growing, southern journalists focused a great deal of attention on issues surrounding intensive cotton and tobacco cropping. Another such issue was the tariff--something seldom discussed in the northern agricultural press. Finally, and, in the context of this study, most importantly, southern rural culture witnessed the emergence of an archetypal image rather different than the independent yeoman. The dominant symbol associated with the cotton and tobacco culture was not the hard-working, unassuming son of the plow, but the genteel plantation aristocrat. Such profound regional differences cannot be ignored, particularly in light of the shortcomings of earlier mythopoetic scholarship; therefore, I decided to confine this study to the northern agricultural press.

Most northern farm papers were monthlies or bi-weeklies, and they averaged between 12 and 16 pages per issue. The sheer

plethora of broadsheet newsprint precluded a line-by-line examination of each issue. I largely ignored items related to practical husbandry, choosing instead to concentrate on editorials, entertainment, news, the reports of various agricultural organizations and letters from readers. The last provided some measure of "check and balance" as to whether the editorials reflected the prevailing views of the readership. I paid special attention to issues published between September and December, the months for harvesting and marketing crops--and for major elections. January and February issues provided some particularly interesting letters to the editor because many farmers (with the exception of livestock and dairy operators) had more time to take pen in hand prior to spring planting.

It was difficult to gather the files of agricultural papers from the collections scattered around the country. Besides the close and patient cooperation of Michigan State University's Carol Jones, I have been assisted by reference librarians at the National Agricultural Library, Beltsville, Maryland; the Kansas State Historical Society, and the South Dakota Historical Resource Center. I have also had the support of friends and acquaintances in the American Agricultural Editors Association, including Richard Lehnert, editor of the Michigan Farmer, and Andrew Stevens, editor of the Ohio Farmer. Many publishing companies have more complete collections than either the land grant universities or the state historical societies.

Ultimately, these valuable historical records should be gathered under one roof.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Abraham Lincoln, "Address to the Wisconsin State Agricultural Society," Wisconsin Farmer, Nov. 1859, p. 390. The editor's note indicates the speech was given in Milwaukee on Sept. 30, 1859.

<sup>2</sup>Hon. Mr. Rowan, "The American Farmer--A Portrait," Franklin Farmer, 12 Oct., 1839, p. 61.

<sup>3</sup>Henry Nash Smith identifies Franklin, de Crevecoeur and Jefferson as the "best known expositors of the agrarian philosophy" during the second half of the eighteenth century--although he reminds us that they were certainly not unique among their contemporaries. Virgin Land (1950; rpt. Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1970), p. 126. Albert Lowther Demaree, The American Agricultural Press, 1819-1860 (New York: Columbia Univ. Press., 1941), has collected invaluable examples of such tributes to the yeoman.

<sup>4</sup>Although the Agricultural Museum was probably the first exclusively agricultural periodical in America, it was short-lived (the last known issue appeared in May, 1812), and there is no evidence that it influenced the better known papers which followed. Most scholars agree that the establishment of the American Farmer on April 2, 1819 marked the "birthdate" of the agricultural press in the United States. William Edward Oglivie, Pioneer Agricultural Journalists (Chicago: Leonard, 1927), pp. 3-9; Gilbert M. Tucker, American Agricultural Periodicals (Albany: Privately Printed, 1909), pp. 71-2; and Demaree, pp. 23-38.

<sup>5</sup>"A Poem," Western Farmer and Record of General Intelligence, 9 Nov. 1841, p. 161.

<sup>6</sup>Smith, p. 123.

<sup>7</sup>Richard H. Abbott, "The Agricultural Press Views the Yeoman: 1819-1857," Agricultural History, 42 (1968), 35-8.

<sup>8</sup>Western Farmer and Record of General Intelligence, 19 Jan. 1841, p. 4.

<sup>9</sup>Donald B. Marti, "Agricultural Journalism and the Diffusion of Knowledge: The First Half Century in America," Agricultural History, 54 (1980), 28-37. Marti suggests that some agricultural editors deliberately encouraged rural youths to stay on the farm to preclude reduced readership.

<sup>10</sup>Douglas R. Picht, "The American Farmer: An Inter-Disciplinary Examination of an Image," Diss. Univ. of Minnesota 1968; Lynne Blanton, "The Agrarian Myth in Eighteenth and Nineteenth-Century American Magazines," Diss. Univ. of Illinois 1979; Kirk Heinze, "Western Farmer and Record of General Intelligence: Michigan's First Agricultural Newspaper," Michigan History, 68, No. 2 (1984), 40-6.

<sup>11</sup>Fred A. Shannon, The Farmer's Last Frontier: Agriculture, 1860-1897 (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1945), pp. 291-328 and Earl W. Hayter, The Troubled Farmer, 1850-1900 (DeKalb, Ill.: Northern Ill. Univ. Press, 1968), pp. 3-11.

<sup>12</sup>The literature on agrarian misery during the Gilded Age is extensive. Among many excellent studies: John D. Hicks, The Populist Revolt (1931; rpt. Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1961); Norman Pollack, The Populist Response to Industrial America (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1962); Solon J. Buck, The Agrarian Crusade (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1920); and Shannon, The Farmer's Last Frontier.

<sup>13</sup>In addition to the Hicks' and Pollack volumes cited above, see: Norman Pollack, The Populist Mind (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1967); Solon J. Buck, The Granger Movement (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1913); Robert C. McMath, Jr., The Populist Vanguard: A History of the Southern Farmers Alliance (New York: Norton, 1977); Fred A. Shannon, American Farmers' Movements (Princeton: Van Nostrand, 1957).

<sup>14</sup>Richard Hofstadter, The Age of Reform (New York: Knopf, 1963), pp. 94-130. Although he makes limited use of the agricultural press, Hofstadter traces the emergence of the farmer as businessman and employer. By World War I, he concludes, American business, "while contributing to agricultural prosperity through its support of agricultural technology and education, thus laid the foundations of a business-agrarian alliance that has never been broken." (p. 125).

<sup>15</sup>Paul H. Johnstone, "Turnips and Romanticism," Agricultural History, 12 (1938), 224-54; Hofstadter, pp. 33-6; Marti, pp. 28-37; and Demaree, pp. 86-8.

<sup>16</sup>Farmers still distrust labor unions, metropolitan centers and various religious and ethnic minority groups. A recent illustration of agrarian nativism is: Bruce Maxwell, "Radical Right Wing on the Rise in Midwest," Rochester Post-Bulletin, 17 Sept. 1984, Sec. 1, pp. 1, 12, cols. 1-6. This article was the first in a six-part series exploring the emergence of right-wing extremism in the rural Midwest. History has contributed an ironic dimension to the long record of rural nativism. The number of farmers has dropped below three percent of the U.S. population; therefore, agrarians, themselves, have become a distinct American minority group. Gilbert Fite, American Farmers: The New Minority (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1981).

<sup>17</sup>Cecil Tate thoroughly traces the development of American mythopoetic scholarship in The Search for a Method in American Studies (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minn. Press, 1973), pp. 9-24. Borrowing from the social sciences, American Studies scholars have used a broadened conception of "myth" as a key methodological tool with which to examine culture. More than simply a false notion or a folk tale, myth is viewed as the crystallization of the thoughts and feelings shared by the majority of people in the culture or sub-culture from which the myth springs. In this sense, then, myth is seen to embody the "dominant thought forms" which determine and sustain human society. These thought forms are collective representations; they contain the commonly held ideological and emotional aspirations of the time. Such aspirations are necessarily expressed symbolically, i.e., as particular images or a complex of images which comprise the overarching mythology. Images (or, as Leo Marx prefers, "cultural symbols") can be expressed in a variety of forms including heroic gods or mortals, exotic animals or idealized natural settings. In American Studies scholarship, such images include the American Adam, the West, the Forest, the Frontier, the Desert, Andrew Jackson and the Yeoman Farmer. By examining such images in expressions of popular and elite culture, scholars have attempted to elucidate a uniquely American mythology--a mythology which reveals how Americans perceive and structure reality. Also see Kenneth E. Boulding, The Image (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Mich. Press, 1956), pp. 1-17, 133-45; John William Ward Red, White and Blue (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1969), pp. 1-6, Hofstadter, pp. 23-36; and Smith, pp. ix-xii.

<sup>18</sup>Karen J. Winkler, "For Scholars in American Studies, the Intellectual Landscape Is Changing," The Chronicle of Higher Education, 10 March 1980, p. 3, cols. 1-4; p. 4, cols. 1-5; Marion Marzolf, "American Studies--Ideas for Media Historians?" Journalism History, 5 (1978), 1, 13-16; and Charles W. Bassett, "Undergraduate and Graduate American Studies Programs in the United States: A Survey," American Quarterly, 27 (1975), 306-30.



<sup>19</sup>Robert Sklar, "The Problem of an American Studies 'Philosophy': A Bibliography of New Directions," American Quarterly, 27 (1975), 245-62; Tate, pp. 127-33. Leo Marx defends the work of what he terms the "humanistic scholars" against charges that American Studies research generally lacks a discernable methodology, "American Studies--A Defense of an Unscientific Method," New Literary History, 1 (1969), 75-90.

<sup>20</sup>Jean Ward, "Interdisciplinary Research and Journalism Historians," Journalism History, 5 (1978), 1, 17-19; Robert Sklar, "American Studies and the Realities of America," American Quarterly, 22 (1970), 597-605; and Marzolf, pp. 1; 13-16. For a succinct examination of both the historical development of popular culture and the distinction between elite and popular art, see Russel B. Nye, The Unembarrassed Muse (New York: Dial, 1970), pp. 1-7.

<sup>21</sup>Allan Nevins, "American Journalism and Its Historical Treatment," Journalism Quarterly, 36 (1959), 411-12; 519.

<sup>22</sup>James W. Carey, "The Problem of Journalism History," Journalism History, 1 (1974), 3-5, 27 and Joseph P. McKerns, "The History of American Journalism: A Bibliographic Essay," American Studies International, 15, No. 1 (1976), 17-34. McKerns concludes: "The time has come for a radically different interpretation of journalism history grounded in the context of a paradigm other than . . . the Progressive interpretation." (p. 34).

<sup>23</sup>Carey, p. 4.

<sup>24</sup>For "progressive" philosophical and legal interpretations of journalism history, see Frederick S. Siebert, Theodore Peterson, and Wilbur Schramm, Four Theories of the Press (Urbana: Univ. of Ill. Press, 1956) and Leonard Levy, Freedom of Speech and Press in Early American History (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), respectively. The best known general histories also embody the progressive paradigm, e.g., Alfred M. Lee, The Daily Newspaper in America (New York: MacMillan, 1937); Frank Luther Mott, American Journalism, 3rd ed. (New York: MacMillan, 1962); and Edwin Emery and Michael Emery, The Press in America, 5th ed. (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1984). Although the Emerys have added new chapters concerning recent challenges to press credibility, the progressive interpretation remains. The latest edition concludes with a clarion cry that "the rights of citizens are only as strong as their will to defend them and their willingness to defend those who bring them this news and opinion with no other interest than their own." (p. 750).

<sup>25</sup>McKerns, pp. 33-4 and Gary Whitby and William David Sloan, "The Purposes of the Press: A Re-Interpretation of American Journalism History," History Division, AEJ Convention, E. Lan., Mich., 1981. Hofstadter provides a penetrating analysis of the major progressive historians in, The Progressive Historians: Turner, Beard, Parrington (New York: Knopf, 1968).

<sup>26</sup>According to Maxwell H. Bloomfield, Alarms and Diversions: The American Mind Through American Magazines 1900-1914 (The Hague: Mouton, 1967), ". . . periodical literature constitutes a discrete body of social data, capable of shedding new light on the thought patterns of the average citizen, as he confronted the most pressing problems of his times." (p. 7) The view that newspapers and magazines mirror the culture in which they appear has been pervasive and, until recently, almost unchallenged (see n. 36). David Lawrence, executive editor of the Detroit Free Press told Michigan State Univ. journalism students that "a newspaper should be a reflection of the world in which we live and also, in theory, one should be able to pick up a newspaper years from now and agree that the world was as it was written in the newspaper." (Millicent Reynolds, "Editor Says Power of Press is Enormous," MSU News-Bulletin, 16 Nov. 1984, p. 4, cols. 1-4).

<sup>27</sup>Carey, p. 27.

<sup>28</sup>Carey, pp. 3-5; Hazel Dicken Garcia, "Cultural Research in Communications History," Clio, 11, No. 2 (1979), 1-7; Ward, pp. 1, 17-19; Marzolf, pp. 1, 13-16; and a special section of Journalism History, 2 (1975), containing articles by Garth Jowett, Richard Schwarzlose, John Erickson, Marion Marzolf and David Weaver.

<sup>29</sup>Extending Henry Nash Smith's theory that "men cannot engage in purposive group behavior--without images which simultaneously express collective desire and impose coherence on . . . experience" (Virgin Land, ix), Joseph McKerns discusses the relationship between those images and media. "The media, taken collectively, is a culture-bound institution and media practitioners are products of culture. The image or images of reality that the media present to society are governed by the dominant social and cultural ideas and attitudes of their time." (Clio, 11 No. 2 (1979), 10-11) That media reflect the dominant images of their time is an assumption central to this study.

<sup>30</sup>Among many examples in journalism historiography, Emery and Emery; Mott; Lee; Robert W. Jones, Journalism in the United States (New York: Dutton, 1947); and Willard Bleyer, Main Currents in the History of American Journalism (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1927). One notable attempt at a more balanced geographical analysis of journalism history is Sidney Kobre, Development of American Journalism (Dubuque, Iowa: Brown, 1969).

<sup>31</sup>Demaree, p. xi.

<sup>32</sup>Joseph McKerns, "The Limits of Progressive Journalism History," Journalism History, 4 (1977), 88. This is certainly not to imply that because journalism historians have frequently applied the progressive paradigm to the urban press the urban press has, in fact, been progressive. More recent scholarship suggests that the urban press has been subject to the same editorial vicissitudes as the rural press, depending on the prevailing popular mood. Herbert Gans, Deciding What's News (New York: Pantheon, 1979); Michael Schudson, Discovering the News (New York: Basic Books, 1978); and Gunther Barth, City People (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1980).

<sup>33</sup>Many standard journalism histories make no mention of the agricultural press, e.g., Jones, Kobre and Lee. The Emerys briefly note farm papers, and Mott includes minor sections throughout A History of American Magazines, 5 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1957). James Playsted Wood, Magazines in the United States (New York: Ronald, 1956), incorporates a chapter on farm magazines.

<sup>34</sup>The most systematic study of how the popular urban press treats the farmer is Blanton's, "The Agrarian Myth in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century American Magazines." The author concludes that throughout the nineteenth century the urban press continued to portray an idealized image of the yeoman. However, during the final two decades of the nineteenth century, urban writers alternately scolded farm radicalism and unscientific farming while, at the same time, apotheosized the untrammelled rural life (pp. 316-26).

<sup>35</sup>Demaree, pp. xi-xvi, 39-134; Oglivie, pp. v-vi; and Tucker, pp. 71-74. Farmers continue to rate farm magazines as their most important source of agricultural information. John L. Adams and Anne M. Parkhurst, Farmer/Rancher Perceptions of Channels and Sources of Change Information, Dept. of Agricultural Communications Report No. 9 (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska-Lincoln, 1984), pp. 29-37.

<sup>36</sup>As mentioned above (n. 26), one of the central tenets of this study is that newspapers and magazines accurately mirror the attitudes, values and beliefs held by the users of those media. In the last two decades, communications researchers have challenged the "media as mirrors/barometers" assumption. Instead, they argue, media, especially newspapers and television, actually create political and social issues based on the news choices made day after day. In other words, the media set the social and political "agenda" instead of simply reflecting it. For a detailed account of the growth of agenda-setting research, see Donald L. Shaw and Maxwell E. McCombs, et al., The Emergence of American Political Issues: The Agenda-Setting Function of the Press (St. Paul: West, 1977). Recent agenda-setting research indicates that the more specialized a medium, the more it tends to reflect or mirror the attitudes, values and beliefs of its users. Trade publications, for example, would be less prone to agenda-setting than national news magazines. The farm press served a highly specialized audience; therefore, the agricultural papers should be relatively free of any agenda-setting role. (Telephone interview with Michael Salwen, Ph.D. Candidate--Mass Media, Michigan State Univ., 18 Jan. 1985).

<sup>37</sup>Even Demaree's work has been criticized for its lack of interpretive depth. "There is little attempt to correlate and extract significance from the mass of biographical material presented, and a chapter on the significance of the agricultural press does not explain the significance of the early farm press at all." Simon Bourgin, rev. of American Agricultural Press, in Land Policy, 4 (1941), 35-8.

<sup>38</sup>The most detailed record of nineteenth-century agricultural papers is Tucker's, and he noted in 1901 that due to the absence of a systematic effort to preserve farm papers, subsequent attempts to study them would be difficult "if not quite impossible." (p. 72).

<sup>39</sup>Demaree, pp. 321-389; Gilbert, pp. 72-9.

<sup>40</sup>Other than the eastern horticultural society journals and scattered fruit and livestock publications, most specialized agricultural papers did not appear until the early 1900s. One important exception was Hoard's Dairyman, first published in 1870 and now a premier publication in the dairy industry.

<sup>41</sup>When using the designation "northern agricultural press," I am referring to farm papers published in those states which lie to the north of the original Mason and Dixon Line (parallel  $39^{\circ} 43' N$ ) and the subsequent extensions of that line prior to the Civil War. The original Mason and Dixon Line divided Pennsylvania on the north and Maryland (as well as portion of what is now W. Virginia) on the south. During the Missouri Compromise debates (1819-20), the line was extended to include the Ohio River from the Pennsylvania border to its outlet in the Mississippi River. The Missouri Compromise extended the line west of the Mississippi River along parallel  $36^{\circ} 30' N$ , thereby separating the free and slave states. (The important exception was, of course, Missouri which lies north of  $36^{\circ} 30' N$ , but remained a slave state.) From a more contemporary cartographic standpoint, this designation would include the northeastern states, the northern Great Lakes states, the northern plains states, the central plains states, and the central Mississippi Valley states, excluding Kentucky and Missouri. ("Mason and Dixon Line," Encyclopedia Americana, 1985 ed. and The National Atlas of the United States of America, U.S. Dept. of Interior Geological Survey: Washington D.C., 1970).

## **CHAPTER 1--From Virgil to Virginia: The Wellsprings of the American Agrarian Mythology**

By the time the Reverend David Wiley issued the first number of the Agricultural Museum at Georgetown, District of Columbia, on July 4, 1810, the agrarian myth had captured the American imagination.<sup>1</sup> Common journalistic expressions of the myth included the propositions that agricultural life was Divinely sanctioned; that is was inherently natural and good; that urban living was unnatural, thus wicked and destructive; that all non-farm occupations or populations were dependent on the farmer for their sustenance; that farmers were independent, virtuous, and happy; and that the yeoman was the backbone of republican government. These and corollary ideas had been frequently penned by many well-known, eighteenth-century journalists, including such influential almanac editors as Nathaniel Ames, Eben W. Judd, Daniel Leeds and Benjamin Franklin. Important precursors to the agricultural papers, the almanacs not only reflected American acceptance of agrarianism but also helped spread its various tenets.<sup>2</sup> What had titillated the imaginations of philosophers and poets from antiquity through the Enlightenment had become a mass creed in early nineteenth-century America.

Although randomly and unsystematically expressed in the almanacs and agricultural papers, the principle beliefs embodied

in the agrarian myth derived from two seminal sources: the intellectual ferment of the Enlightenment and the realities of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century American experience. The propositions which would eventually coalesce to form the core of a uniquely American mythology represented a fusion of the ideological and the actual. While the historical developments of colonial America are generally well-known, the influence of the European Enlightenment on the intellectual development of our founding fathers has just recently received more detailed scholarly attention.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, it is instructive to begin this examination of the agrarian myth by considering certain fundamental concepts of Enlightenment thought that were "in the air" when Jefferson, Madison, Crèvecoeur, John Taylor and others were forming their respective agrarian Weltanschauungen.

The Enlightenment, often referred to as "The Age of Reason," was one of the most important developments in the history of Western thought. Beginning in the last two decades of the seventeenth century and gaining momentum throughout the eighteenth century, the Enlightenment represented, in the most general terms, an intellectual reaction to those who believed that explanations for human behavior could be found in revelation, tradition or illumination. In more practical terms, it constituted a reaction to old and powerful European institutions, particularly the clergy and the nobility who, for centuries, had held hostage basic human liberty. Although Newton, Bacon and Locke were often considered the "Holy Trinity"

of the Enlightenment, the movement was not circumscribed by a small cluster of thinkers or by particular national boundaries. It included theologians, philosophers, political economists, artists, scientists, statesmen and even members of the nobility from every nation and corner of Europe.

While Enlightenment thinkers represented a rich, broad and divergent intellectual spectrum ranging from, for example, Locke to Hume, Gibbon to Priestley, Voltaire to Rousseau or, closer to home, Hamilton to Paine, some central tenets were generally shared. According to Henry May, the Enlightenment, regardless of the various forms it may have taken, "consists of all those who believe in two propositions: first, that the present age is more enlightened than the past; and second, that we understand nature and man best through the use of our natural faculties."<sup>4</sup> With Newton, Priestley and others, Enlightenment thinkers believed that recent scientific discoveries proved that the universe was governed by regular, observable laws and principles--often referred to as natural laws. The order, balance and harmony observable in Nature were clearly creations of a beneficent Deity, a Deity which had also had the magnanimity to give mankind the power of Reason to explore and eventually to understand the Universe.

Further, just as Enlightenment thinkers believed they lived in a universe governed by the laws of Nature and Nature's God, so, too, they believed that the same laws controlled:



. . . the movement of the stars in the heavens and the tides in the oceans and the circulation of blood in the veins of man, governed too the great tides of human history, the rise and fall of empires, the operation of laws, and the functioning of the economy and the ultimate standards of morality.<sup>5</sup>

Because the laws which governed natural phenomena were the same that regulated human affairs, they did not distinguish sharply between what they called Natural Philosophy and Moral Philosophy (or, in many cases, Political Economy). They had an almost limitless confidence in man's ability to penetrate and grasp those laws and to apply them to practical affairs. Thus, they believed that man could use his rational faculties to create societies which would be free of the villainies and corruptions of previous epochs. Because these new societies would be conceived and governed in compliance with natural laws, they would achieve a level of perfectability unprecedented in history.

This is not to say, however, that the utopian visions of the Enlightenment were created ex nihilo, that history had provided no suitable antecedents for the creation and maintenance of virtuous societies. On the contrary, Enlightenment thinkers in Europe and America looked to the widely shared and understood literature, art, architecture, philosophy and political theory--in short, to the history--of ancient Greece and Rome. There, in the history, in the cultural institutions and, perhaps most importantly, in the moral lessons of Antiquity, they found ample and incontrovertible evidence that society could not only be improved, but even perfected. Thus, the history of antiquity became "a kind of laboratory in which autopsies of the dead

republics would lead to a science of social sickness and health matching the science of the natural world."<sup>6</sup>

From the standpoint of political institutions, the classical world had been a major source of knowledge and inspiration for enlightened political theorists at least since Machiavelli, and particularly to the classical republicans and their heirs of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, including the radical Whigs. As Gordon S. Wood observes, enlightened thinkers on both sides of the Atlantic were especially drawn to the Roman Enlightenment, "the golden age of Latin literature from the breakdown of the Republic in the middle of the first century B.C. to the establishment of the Empire in the middle of the second century A.D."<sup>7</sup> The questions posed by Cicero, Sallust, Tacitus, and Plutarch were, in many cases, the questions of the eighteenth century. How did a once great republican empire gradually atrophy and then crumble amidst civil disorder, corruption and moral turpitude. Further, what parallels could be found between the general degeneracy observed throughout Europe and that which brought Rome to its knees.

For many enlightened Europeans and Americans, the answers to these questions were not epistemological or metaphysical; instead, they were moral. It was not the will of God or the force of arms which made the ancient republics great or precipitated their decline. Rather, it was the character and spirit of their people. Such traits as frugality, industry, temperance, independence and simplicity made the ancient

republics strong. Such traits were also the moral equivalents of the natural laws which governed a moderate, harmonious and carefully ordered universe. Conversely, prodigality, sloth, excessive luxury, and intolerance--all antipodal to Nature's laws--were forces which destroyed the ancient republics.<sup>8</sup>

Particularly compelling to many eighteenth-century thinkers was the classical praise of rural life. At least since Homeric times, the countryside was portrayed as the abode of the virtuous.<sup>9</sup> Early classical writers extended lavish tributes to both husbandry and the farmer.<sup>10</sup> In his Work and Days, Hesiod expressed his preference for agriculture over commercial and military life. Xenophon, in The Economist, has Socrates avow that agriculture is the essential occupation of man and is among the noblest of all professions.

The apotheosis of rural life and the concomitant disparagement of urban living became conventionalized in Augustan and Imperial Rome. Cicero, Varro, Horace, Columella, Pliny, Virgil and others consistently extolled the virtues of agrarian life. The simplicity and repose of the countryside and the noble character of the farmers ensured the strength of the republic. Agriculture was regularly described as the basis of prosperity, the first source of all arts and the foster mother of mankind. Conversely, the city was portrayed as the fundamental source of Rome's woes. Columella, in De Re Rustica, contrasted the agrarian utopia of early, Golden Age Rome with the sickly, rampant urban vices of his day. The city had become the abode of vice, corruption and

moral decay. These and related sentiments were perhaps best expressed in the well-known conclusion to Virgil's second Georgic, beginning with the "O fortunatos nimium" passage. In Dryden's translation, this paradigm panegyric on country life begins:

Oh happy, if he knew his happy State!  
The Swain, who, free from Business and Debate,  
Receives his easy Food from Nature's Hand,  
And just Returns of cultivated Land!<sup>11</sup>

The Augustan writers established an almost stereotypical dichotomy between the salubrity of rural life, on the one hand, and the malevolence of urban living, on the other. This dichotomy persisted through the Middle Ages, the Renaissance and into the Age of Reason.<sup>12</sup>

As Enlightenment thinkers surveyed the contemporary European landscape, they saw modern man locked in what was clearly a classical, but losing struggle between vice and virtue, slavery and liberty, passion and reason. They saw what they believed was the same corruption of natural and moral law which had doomed the ancient republics. With the exception of the constitutional monarchy in England, which they generally admired, they saw Europe fraught with corruption and decadence. Political and spiritual bondage to nobility and clergy coincided with pervasive poverty and wretchedness. Cities were rife with crime, disease and immorality. In the countryside, where man should have had an infinitely better life, they witnessed increasing peonage, ignorance and despair. Wherever they looked, they saw human

rights violated, liberty and virtue in shambles. In short, the established European order seemed to represent all that was antithetical and anathema to the dictates of reason and natural law. But, if Europe was hopelessly degenerate and bent on the same destructive course as the ancient republics, where then could mankind apply the new understandings of the universe? Where could man begin anew--for the first time equipped with the lessons of enlightened science, philosophy and political economy? Many European thinkers--from Radical Whigs in England and Scotland to Physiocrats and Encyclopedists in France--gazed westward across the Atlantic and found their answer in the unbounded geography of a vast new continent and in the classical character traits they observed in the American farmer.<sup>13</sup>

While much of what European visionaries saw in America was filtered through rose-colored lenses, some of their utopian hopes were grounded in fact. From almost the beginning of European settlement, the American colonies had been predominantly agricultural.<sup>14</sup> The census of 1790 (apparently the earliest demographic data available) indicates that over 3.5 million Americans, or approximately 95% of the total population, lived in rural areas. Cities were comparatively small and few in number. Philadelphia, the largest metropolis, had a population of about 43,000. New York numbered approximately 33,000 residents, while Boston had just 18,000.<sup>15</sup> Although the census did not distinguish rural dwellers by occupation, it can be safely assumed that in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, "to say

'American' was synonymous with saying farmer.'"16 It was also a fait accompli that a great many eighteenth-century American farmers owned their own land. Through a random, and largely inefficient process, companies like Plymouth, Massachusetts Bay and Virginia, and, later, proprietors, the Crown, or other landowners gradually succumbed to colonial pressure and relinquished land to those who farmed it. By the second half of the eighteenth century, land ownership was widespread, highly prized and easily achieved.17

The tremendous availability of land, its quality and the relative ease of securing it combined to increase the agrarian population, slow urbanization and, finally, to stimulate agricultural production in America. According to John Schlebecker, America had developed a base for an independent agriculture by 1763.18 For a few decades, at least, that independence was not to mean a commercial agriculture. Some of the southern cotton and tobacco planters notwithstanding, this independent American yeomanry was overwhelmingly comprised of subsistence farmers. Although these farmers worked hard to produce some surplus commodities for sale, inadequate transportation and marketing facilities, coupled with rudimentary technology, forced them to concentrate on feeding themselves and their families.19

The New World envisioned by many European thinkers was, in fact, a land of agrarian independence and simplicity. In this regard, American agrarianism marked a sharp contrast to the

European variety. During the first quarter of the eighteenth century, what had begun as a legitimate and fruitful agricultural enthusiasm in England became what can best be described as an upper class craze. In stark and frivolous contrast to new discoveries in scientific husbandry, the establishment of agricultural societies, and the publication of numerous books on farming, there was George III's model farm at Windsor, or the rustic murals on Lord Bolingbroke's barns, or Alexander Pope's cabbage and turnip patches or Marie Antoinette's shepherds, milk maids and perfumed, pink sheep.<sup>20</sup> While the upper classes trifled in such agrarian escapism, the European yeomanry and peasantry remained in the same political and economic bondage they had for centuries.

Thus, for many radical Enlightenment thinkers, the New World was a true agrarian society blessed with many of the virtues--and unencumbered by most of the vices--of the ancient republics and the English commonwealth. These European visionaries saw small, well-tended farms instead of sprawling, chaotic cities, proud, hard-working farmers instead of haughty merchants or dissipated aristocrats, independent yeomen instead of landless, dispirited peasants. More importantly, they envisioned an unparalleled opportunity for the creation of a government based on the most advanced principles ever conceived by man. They had also met, befriended, flattered and ultimately influenced those Americans who would help establish that enlightened government--philosopher-statesmen like Franklin, Hamilton, Paine, Madison and

Jefferson.

It would be a mistake to assume, however, that the Founding Fathers were merely passive recipients of the main currents of European radical thought. As Henry Commager has noted, while the Old World "imagined, formulated and agitated" the Enlightenment, "America absorbed it, reflected it, and institutionalized it."<sup>21</sup> With a kind of "audacious intellectual imperialism," Americans annexed those enlightened doctrines which could be applied to the New World experience and discarded those which could not. Their ultimate goal was to "formulate a science of politics and of history that would explain what was happening to England and to themselves."<sup>22</sup> And none of the New World philosophes ransacked European thought with more sense of purpose and with more intellectual audacity than Thomas Jefferson, the father of American agrarianism.

Jefferson's thought, like agrarianism itself, represents a fusion of carefully selected Enlightenment notions and the realities of American experience.<sup>23</sup> The key elements in his thinking were built on a complexity of intellectual pillars, including Scottish moral philosophy, French physiocracy, Lockean epistemology and Newtonian empiricism. The central tenets of his eclectic world view were that God had fashioned a rational and moral universe; that God had also bestowed natural rights on man--regardless of earthly condition; that man was essentially reasonable, just, compassionate and intelligent; and that the ends of society should always be liberty and progress. And how



were these ends to be realized? The answers were manifest in America's vast territory, its isolation from Old World corruption, its overwhelmingly agricultural ethos and, most importantly, its farmers--those "public-spirited, wholesome . . . sturdy yeomen of the piedmont and the Appalachians."<sup>24</sup> Like many of his European mentors, Jefferson believed that America provided a unique historical opportunity to establish a utopian agrarian republic which would safeguard individual liberty and encourage social progress.

It was not only by virtue of his intellectual wellsprings and his political pragmatism that Jefferson so fervently advocated the development of an agrarian republic. His personal predispositions also helped convince him that agriculture was the noblest of occupations. In an 1811 letter to Charles Willson Peale, Jefferson wistfully concludes:

I have often thought that if heaven had given me choice of my position and calling, it should have been a rich spot on earth, well watered, and near a good market for the productions of the garden. No occupation is so delightful to me as the culture of the earth.<sup>25</sup>

Echoing Virgil, Horace and other classical writers whom he had read, Jefferson believed agriculture contributed most to "real wealth, good morals, and happiness,"<sup>26</sup> which, in turn, ensured independent, vigorous and virtuous citizens "tied to their country, and wedded to its liberty and interests by the most lasting bonds."<sup>27</sup> Jefferson was convinced that farmers were God's chosen people because of their intimacy with nature, their humble way of life and their unimpeachable integrity. And like

agricultural commentators from antiquity to the Enlightenment, Jefferson saw in urban existence all that was antithetical to the wholesomeness and blessedness of country life.

Most of these ideas and themes are expressed in the well-known and richly metaphoric passage from Notes on the State of Virginia:

But we have an immensity of land courting the industry of the husbandman. Is it best then that all our citizens should be employed in its improvement, or that half should be called off from that to exercise manufactures and handicraft arts for the other? Those who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever He had a chosen people, whose breasts He has made His peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue. It is the focus in which He keeps alive that sacred fire, which otherwise might escape from the face of the earth. Corruption of morals in the mass of cultivators is a phenomenon of which no age nor nation has furnished an example. . . . Dependence begets subservience and venality, suffocates the germ of virtue, and prepares fit tools for the designs of ambition. This the natural progress and consequence of the arts, has sometimes perhaps been retarded by accidental circumstances; but, generally speaking, the proportion which the aggregate of the other classes of citizens bears in any State to that of its husbandmen, is the proportion of its unsound to its healthy parts, and is a good enough barometer whereby to measure its degree of corruption. While we have land to labor, then, let us never wish to see our citizens occupied at a workbench, or twirling a distaff. Carpenters, masons, smiths, are wanting in husbandry; but, for the general operation of manufacture, let our workshops remain in Europe. . . . The mobs of great cities add just so much to the support of pure government, as sores do to the strength of the human body. It is the manners and spirit of a people which preserve a republic in vigor. A degeneracy in these is a canker which soon eats to the heart of its laws and constitution.<sup>28</sup>

Jefferson clearly affirms the preeminence of husbandry and its importance to the State; he emphasizes the independence and virtue of those who are their own masters; he unabashedly

proclaims the Divine approbation of rural life; he denigrates cities and manufacturing; and he links the availability of land to the establishment and maintenance of the American republic. These ideas would eventually coalesce to form the core of our agrarian myth.

Although Jefferson is widely regarded as America's foremost agrarian democrat, his was neither the first nor the only New World voice raised on behalf of husbandry. In what Leo Marx has called the "first major treatment of a pastoral conception of society," by a "native," Robert Beverly's History and Present State of Virginia (1705) provides a somewhat insouciant vision of a semi-primitive, agrarian utopia which combines the innocence of Eden and the material advantages of the cultivated soil.<sup>29</sup> Drawing on the written accounts of such early explorers as John Smith and Arthur Barlow, as well as on personal observation, Beverly celebrates Virginia's overwhelming fecundity and the blissfulness of its native inhabitants. Unlike earlier commentators, however, he is disturbed by the widespread indolence he observes among many Europeans living in such a naturally bountiful environment.

They sponge upon the Blessings of a warm Sun,  
and a fruitful Soil, and almost grutch the Pains  
of gathering in the Bounties of the Earth. I  
should be asham'd to publish this slothful  
Indolence of my countrymen, but that I hope  
it will rouse them out of their Lethargy, and  
excite them to make the most of all those happy  
Advantages which Nature has given them. . . .<sup>30</sup>

Acutely aware of the dangers of a radical primitivism, Beverly suggests that by cultivating and planting the virgin soil,

settlers can avoid the soporific effects of idleness and thereby secure even greater bounties from the land. While Beverly never fully reconciles primitivism and agrarianism, he foreshadows the clearer conception of an agriculturally-based society which was to emerge.

Writing over seven decades after the publication of Beverly's History, J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur had carefully observed (and participated in) the transformation of American wilderness into productive farmland. His Letters from an American Farmer (1782) is an exuberant celebration of agricultural preeminence and includes many of the themes discussed throughout this chapter: the unadulterated joy of tilling the soil, the physical and spiritual advantages of living in nature, the divine sanction bestowed on farming, the economic primacy of husbandry and the political and social liberty which springs from land ownership.

The instant I enter on my own land, the bright idea of property, of exclusive right, of independence, exalt my mind. Precious soil, I say to myself, by what singular custom of law is it that thou wast made to constitute the riches of the freeholder? What should we American farmers be without the distinct possession of that soil? It feeds, it clothes us; from it we draw even a great exuberancy, our best meat, our richest drink; the very honey of our bees comes from this privileged spot. . . . This formerly rude soil has been converted by my father into a pleasant farm, and in return, it has established all our rights; on it is founded our rank, our freedom, our power as citizens, our importance as inhabitants of such a district. These images, I always behold with pleasure and extend them as far as my imagination can reach; for this is what may be called the true and only philosophy of an American farmer.<sup>31</sup>

For Crevecoeur, there is no hint of Beverly's uneasy

vacillation between alternative living environments. The heart of his English visitor is gladdened by the "substantial villages, extensive fields . . . decent houses, orchards, and meadows" in America, not by the "wild, woody, and uncultivated" terrain along the frontier. Americans are, first and foremost, "tillers of the earth . . . a people of cultivators," and it is the on-going transformation of "rude soil" into fertile farmland that sustains the democratic impetus.<sup>32</sup> Crèvecoeur's greatest wish is to pass the legacy of farming to his children so that they, in turn, can pass it on to theirs. With the exception of Jefferson and John Taylor, no indigenous spokesman was as instrumental in spreading agrarianism--although many other distinguished voices contributed to the increasingly euphonic praise of husbandry reverberating throughout late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century America.

John Taylor, a wealthy planter from Caroline County, Virginia and a close friend of Jefferson's, was perhaps the most ardent New World Physiocrat.<sup>33</sup> He was convinced that the agricultural class was the only true producer of wealth, and his writings, even more so than Jefferson's, constitute a highly systematic and detailed development of agrarian principles. Unlike his European counterparts, however, he used theological arguments to bolster his economic and political theories. Convinced of an "inner moral light shining forth from the their way of life,"<sup>34</sup> Taylor never doubted that farmers were God's chosen people. For Taylor, the "divine intelligence which selected an agricultural state as a paradise for its first favorites" has also "prescribed the

agricultural virtues as the means for the admission of their posterity into heaven."<sup>35</sup>

At the awful day of judgment, the discrimination of the good from the wicked, is not made by the criterion of sects or of dogmas, but by one which constitutes the daily employment and the great end of agriculture. The judge upon this occasion has by anticipation pronounced, that to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and give drink to the thirsty, are the passports to future happiness.<sup>36</sup>

By linking millennial Christianity and agriculture, Taylor moves well beyond both the Physiocrats and his Virginia countryman and, in so doing, also foreshadows the emergence of a mythic agrarianism.

Other voices raised on behalf of agriculture included those of such luminaries as Washington, Livingston, Madison and Monroe. Countless lesser lights like Philip Freneau, Hugh Henry Brackenridge and George Logan also spread the agrarian faith in speeches, poems and prose.<sup>37</sup> Even the venerable Franklin, while in no way personally disposed to rural life, wrote that agriculture was "the only honest way" for a nation to accumulate wealth, "wherein man receives a real increase of the seed thrown into the ground, a kind of continuous miracle, wrought by the hand of God in his favour, as a reward for his innocent life and virtuous industry."<sup>38</sup> As late as 1788, he declared that the "great Business of the Continent is Agriculture."<sup>39</sup>

So compelling was the vision of an agriculturally-based society that even Alexander Hamilton, the consummate proponent of manufacturing and commerce, found it prudent to pay homage to husbandry in his Report on Manufactures (1791). While unwilling

to grant agriculture any "exclusive predilection," Hamilton conceded that "the cultivation of the earth, as the primary and most certain source of national supply," and "as including a state most favorable to the freedom and independence of the human mind . . . has intrinsically a strong claim to preeminence over every kind of industry."<sup>40</sup> Even as the "unpent genie of industrialism was moving about the world," the American Aladdin could not ignore the pervasive power of the agrarian ethos. So thoroughly had it captured the American imagination that, by the 1830's, Alexis de Tocqueville could clearly observe its symbolic efficacy. To the perceptive Frenchman, it appeared that agrarianism had assumed mythic dimensions--that it had come to define the promise of American life.<sup>41</sup>

Why, then, did agrarianism--a somewhat random and perplexing blend of Classical and Enlightenment thought, utopian political theory and the realities of American life--become so universally compelling that it assumed mythic proportions? At the risk of oversimplification, I suggest that part of the answer is provided by historical events and part can be derived from an understanding of the unique character of American nationalism.

History tells us that the Revolutionary War pitted an army of ill-equipped, poorly trained yeomen against the prodigious military might of England. For the most part, the American troops were led by citizen soldiers, scarcely the martial equals of George III's highly professional officer corps. Even the commander-in-chief of the American forces was, first and

foremost, a tiller of the soil. Yes, the British were less than enthusiastic in their conduct of the war. Yes, there was the invaluable and timely French intervention. Yet, despite these and other qualifications the victory of the "embattled farmers" over a vast commercial empire seemed to most observers nothing short of miraculous. More than anything else, it appeared to be an historical confirmation of the civic and moral superiority of both the yeoman and the new agrarian nation he had fought to establish.

The new nation was not only forged on the battlefield. Americans were also engaged in a pervasive and highly charged intellectual ferment throughout the Revolutionary period. Discussions and debates ranging from democracy to liberty to republicanism moved from the drawing rooms and university lecture halls into America's taverns, shops and churches. Generally abstract notions which had animated intellectual discourse on both sides of the Atlantic became popular patriotic shibboleths replete with reference to independence, individual freedom and inalienable rights. Singularly significant was how, for a brief moment in American history, previously disparate ideas seemed to coalesce, how all knowledge seemed to coincide. As Gordon Wood notes, it was a time "when classical antiquity, Christian theology, English empiricism, and European rationalism could all be linked" in support of a single goal--the Revolutionary effort.<sup>42</sup>

What, in fact, Americans were doing on the battlefields and in



the taverns and churches was something rather unique in human events: a nation and its distinctive socio-cultural identity were being forged simultaneously.<sup>43</sup> Whereas in most Old World countries, the cultural, psychological, economic and religious underpinnings of nationhood were laid well before the political superstructure was built, the United States established the political structure first, and much of what is now considered uniquely "American" came later. The political decision was vindicated first on the field of battle and then, more gradually, in the socio-cultural arena. Whether Americans gathered in the frosty cabins at Valley Forge or in the dimly-lit taverns of Boston, they were, consciously and unconsciously, equipping themselves with the accouterments of nationhood. Among other things, these accouterments included legends, shrines, heroes, memorials and, of course, mythologies.

It was in the realm of mythology that agrarianism was most accommodating. Here was a creed that had almost universal appeal. It could be espoused by statesmen, teachers, poets, farmers and, most importantly, by the Protestant clergy. During the Revolutionary period, it scarcely mattered to the churchmen that agrarianism was rooted in the Age of Reason and often espoused by European infidels because they had already reconciled Enlightenment rationalism and covenant theology. In pulpits throughout America:

The traditional covenant theology of Puritanism combined with the political science of the eighteenth century into an imperatively persuasive argument for revolution. Liberal rationalist sensibility blended with Calvinist christian love to create an essentially common emphasis on the usefulness and goodness of devotion to the general welfare of the community. Religion and republicanism would work hand in hand to create frugality, honesty, self-denial and benevolence among the people.<sup>44</sup>

Such views were indistinguishable from the major tenets of classical agrarianism. Agriculture was God's chosen profession; the farmers were God's chosen people. It really didn't matter to the American clergy that the classical agrarians were pagan or that the French Physiocrats were agnostic or that Thomas Jefferson was, at best, a Deist infidel. The creed could be easily be shaped to their needs and to the needs of their flocks.

Besides its broad appeal, agrarianism was a creed that made patriotic heroes of a approximately 95% of the people who would come to espouse it. Which class of people most nearly epitomized the democratic principles set forth in the Declaration of Independence? Who, more than the frontier farmer, was a more quintessential representative of those democratic principles? Divinely blessed, self-reliant, virtuous and happy, the yeoman was easily and naturally associated with the struggle for independence and the development of a new nation.<sup>45</sup>

Thus, the distinction between farming, American nationalism and democracy blurred; the concepts fused. Farmers, as a class, came to symbolize the ideas of democratic government. The imaginative blending of farming and democracy is best illustrated in many of Crèvecoeur's lyrical passages, including the following

tribute to the yeoman:

Who on contemplating the great and important field of action performed every year by a large farmer can refrain from valuing and praising as they ought this useful, dignified class of men? These are the people who, scattered on the edge of this great continent, have made it to flourish, and have, without the dangerous assistance of mines, gathered by the sweat of their honest brows and by the help of their ploughs, such a harvest of commercial emoluments for their country, uncontaminated either by spoils or rapine. These are the men who in future will replenish this huge continent, even to its utmost unknown limits and render this new-found part of the world by far the happiest, the most potent as well as the most populous of any.<sup>46</sup>

In this most revealing encomium, Crèvecoeur links America's destiny to the fortunes of those who till the soil. By the end of the eighteenth century, the yeoman farmer had become more than a good man, a proud freeholder and the bulwark against the threat of urban virulence--attributes devolved from European agrarian traditions. Because of a unique confluence of events, the yeoman also came to symbolize the triumph of hard work over privileged leisure, American democracy over European aristocracy, of progress over decadence. As Tocqueville perceived, the yeoman became the symbolic embodiment of the assumptions and aspirations of an entire society. He was the hero of a pervasive agrarian mythology, and his virtues were proclaimed in sermon and song, poetry and prose, newspaper and magazine--whenever the subject of agriculture arose. It was scarcely surprising that the pages of the incipient agricultural press reverberated with praise for the American yeoman.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Henry Nash Smith, Virgin Land (1950; rpt. Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1970), pp. 123-26; Wayne C. Rohrer and Louis H. Douglas, The Agrarian Tradition in America: Dualism and Change (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969), pp. 11-19; Richard Hofstadter, The Age of Reform (New York: Knopf, 1963), p. 28; and "Horace Greeley: Agrarian Exponent of American Idealism," Rural Sociology, 13 (1948), 411-19.

<sup>2</sup>Chester E. Eisinger, "The Farmer in the Eighteenth-Century Almanac," Agricultural History, 28 (1954), 107-12.

<sup>3</sup>Henry F. May's, The Enlightenment in America (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1976) was the first comprehensive treatment of the subject since 1907. Other studies which helped shape my discussion of the Enlightenment include Henry Steele Commager, Jefferson, Nationalism, and the Enlightenment (New York: Braziller, 1975); Gordon S. Wood, The Creation of the American Republic: 1776-1787 (New York: Norton, 1969), pp. 1-124; and Morton White, The Philosophy of the American Revolution (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1978).

<sup>4</sup>May, The Enlightenment in America, p. xiv.

<sup>5</sup>Commager, Jefferson, Nationalism, and the Enlightenment, p. xiii.

<sup>6</sup>Wood, The Creation of the American Republic: 1776-1787, p. 52.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 51.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., pp. 49-53; Commager, pp. 133-4.

<sup>9</sup>This necessarily brief survey of what has been called "the literature of agriculture" is drawn from two seminal studies by Paul H. Johnstone: "In Praise of Husbandry," Agricultural History, 11 (1937), 80-95 and "Turnips and Romanticism," Agricultural History, 12 (1938), 224-55. Johnstone's rich and incisive use of primary sources has been acknowledged in most major treatments of agrarianism and the agrarian myth, including Hofstadter's, The Age of Reform and Leo Marx, The Machine in the Garden (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1967). A more general treatment of agricultural literature can be found in Edward T. Booth, God Made the Country (New York: Knopf, 1946).

<sup>10</sup>Johnstone, "In Praise of Husbandry," 80-1.

<sup>11</sup>Virgil, The Georgics, trans. John Dryden, introd. Alistair Elliot (London: Mid Northumberland Arts Group, 1981), p. 87.

<sup>12</sup>Paul H. Johnstone, "Old Ideals Versus New Ideas in Farm Life," in Farmers in a Changing World: The Yearbook of Agriculture, 1940, ed. Gove Hambidge (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Dept. of Agriculture, 1940), pp. 112-4, 118-9, and Johnstone, "In Praise of Husbandry."

<sup>13</sup>Marx, The Machine in the Garden, pp. 73-144; Commager, pp. 49-53.

<sup>14</sup>John T. Schlebecker, Whereby We Thrive: A History of American Farming, 1607-1972 (Ames: Iowa State Univ. Press, 1975), pp. 3-14, 36-48; Gilbert Fite, American Farmers: The New Minority (Bloomington: Univ. of Indiana Press, 1981), pp. 1-7.

<sup>15</sup>Rohrer and Douglas, The Agrarian Transition in America, pp. 26-7.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 27.

<sup>17</sup>Schlebecker, Whereby We Thrive, pp. 3-14 and Chester E. Eisinger, "The Freehold Concept in Eighteenth-Century American Letters," William and Mary Quarterly, 4 (1947), 42-59. Although Eisinger exaggerates the importance of private land ownership in Jefferson's thought, he accurately observes the importance of the English freehold tradition among the rank and file American colonists. With the emergence of capitalism, which gained considerable momentum during the early years of the Renaissance, "freehold tenure took on real meaning. Not only could a man possess his own farm, but he was his own master, rising and falling by his own effort, bargaining in a free market (46)." Although freehold tenure was often inequitably adjudicated and only sporadically applied in Renaissance Europe and afterwards, its legacy (or, its promise) of individual autonomy inspired most of the seventeenth-century settlers who came to America.

<sup>18</sup>Schlebecker, p. 14.

<sup>19</sup>Gregory A. Stiverson, "Early American Farming: A Comment," in Two Centuries of American Agriculture, ed. Vivian Wiser (Washington, D.C.: Kimberly Press, 1976), 37-44.

<sup>20</sup>Johnstone, "Turnips and Romanticism," 231-33. According to Johnstone, the "agricultural enthusiasm was without doubt one of the singular features of the eighteenth century. Farming came to engage of attention of kings, queens, princes . . . courtiers, and burghers who previously could not distinguish flax from turnips (233)."

<sup>21</sup>Commager, p. 3.

<sup>22</sup>Wood, p. 17. It would be a mistake, however, to assume that all, or even most, influential Americans were committed to such strictly empirical pursuits. As May notes, the powerful Protestant clergy were not nearly as interested in the scientific aspects of revolutionary politics and history as they were in the theological dimensions. Even a philosopher-statesman like Madison waged a lifelong struggle between piety and rationalism, guided by a moderate Calvinism, on the one hand, and moderate Enlightenment doctrine, on the other (pp. 54-96).

<sup>23</sup>Until recently, Jeffersonian scholars generally agreed that while the origins of Jefferson's intellectual development were complex and wide-ranging, he was primarily influenced by John Locke, the French radicals and Greek and Roman Classicism. In Inventing America: Jefferson's Declaration of Independence (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1978), Garry Wills argues convincingly that Jefferson was also greatly influenced by the Scottish radicals. Wills contends that the major ideas in both the Declaration of Independence and Notes on the State of Virginia were "not derived, primarily, from Philadelphia or Paris, but from Aberdeen and Edinburgh and Glasgow . . . the real lost world of Thomas Jefferson was the world of William Small, the invigorating realm of the Scottish Enlightenment at its zenith (p. 180)." Other recent treatments of Jeffersonian thought include Commager, pp. 33-92; May, pp. 287-302; and William Bruce Wheeler, "Jeffersonian Thought in an Urban Society," in The Agrarian Tradition in American Society: A Focus on the People and the Land in an Era of Changing Values, eds. Bradley J. Deaton and B. R. McManus. A Bicentennial Forum--The Institute of Agriculture, Univ. of Tennessee, Knoxville, Tennessee, July 16-8, 1976.

<sup>24</sup>Rohrer and Douglas, p. 30.

<sup>25</sup>Quoted in Marx, p. 138.

<sup>26</sup>"To George Washington," 14 August 1787, The Works of Thomas Jefferson, ed. H. A. Washington, II (New York: Townsend Mac Coun., 1884), 252.

<sup>27</sup>"To John Jay," 23 August 1785, Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln and Agriculture, Bureau of Agricultural Economics (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Dept. of Agriculture, 1937), p. 37.

<sup>28</sup>Thomas Jefferson, Notes on the State of Virginia, ed. William Peden (Chapel Hill: Univ. of N. Carolina Press, 1955), p. 165.

<sup>29</sup>Marx, pp. 75-88.

<sup>30</sup>Robert Beverly, The History and Present State of Virginia, ed. Louis B. Wright (Chapel Hill: Univ. of N. Carolina Press, 1947), p. 319.

<sup>31</sup>J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur, Letters from an American Farmer (1782; rpt. Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1968), pp. 30-1.

<sup>32</sup>Crevecoeur, Letters from an American Farmer, p. 46.

<sup>33</sup>Although Jefferson knew and admired many of the French physiocrats--and maintained a lifelong friendship with Du Pont de Nemours--he became increasingly impatient with what he felt was the abstract, rigid and exclusive nature of their economic agrarianism. Jefferson's agrarianism was, above all, democratic and pragmatic. Taylor's agrarianism, by comparison, was more doctrinaire. Writing primarily in response to Hamiltonian challenges, Taylor accepted the physiocratic belief that the land was the true source of all wealth, that farmers and miners were the only productive class and that trading and financial interests were merely parasites feeding on the producers. There were other differences between these two major proponents of classical agrarianism, but, in general, Jefferson's was the more fluid and flexible, Taylor's the more rigid and polemical. Commager, pp. 50-5; Rohrer and Douglas, pp. 31-6; and Grant McConnell, The Decline of Agrarian Democracy (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1959), pp. 6-8.

<sup>34</sup>McConnell, The Decline of Agrarian Democracy, p. 7.

<sup>35</sup>John Taylor, "The Pleasures of Agriculture," in M. Thomas Inge, ed., Agrarianism in American Literature (New York: Odyssey, 1969), p. 12. The passage was taken from Taylor's, Arator, Being a Series of Agricultural Essays, Practical and Political, Fifth Edition (Petersburg, Va.: Whitworth & Yancey, 1818), pp. 138-41.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>37</sup>Hofstadter, p. 26; and Eisinger, "The Freehold Concept in Eighteenth-Century American Letters," 53-8.

<sup>38</sup>Benjamin Franklin, The Writings of Benjamin Franklin, ed. Albert H. Smyth, V (New York: Macmillan, 1906), 200-2.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., X (1907), 117-8.

<sup>40</sup>Alexander Hamilton, The Works of Alexander Hamilton (New York: Williams & Whiting, 1810), III, 215-6. Having dutifully paid homage to agriculture, however, Hamilton goes on to assert that the rapid development of American manufacturing would further agrarian interests.

<sup>41</sup>Smith, Virgin Land, p. 126.

<sup>42</sup>Wood, p. 7.

<sup>43</sup>Commager, pp. 157-95.

<sup>44</sup>Wood, p. 118.

<sup>45</sup>Eisinger, 46-7. Just as the agrarian myth could accommodate various and sundry ideas from Antiquity, the Enlightenment and Protestant theology, so, too, could it accommodate Romanticism. Early nineteenth-century American Romanticism, unlike its European counterpart, was essentially forward looking. Except in the South, New World romanticism generally did not associate itself with the past, with class consciousness, with reaction or with religion. Rather, it was concerned with the U. S. forests and farmlands, with burgeoning nationalism, with territorial expansion and with unlimited opportunity. It was optimistic rather than melancholy, buoyant rather than brooding. Just as it helped spread nationalistic fervor, American Romanticism also helped spread the agrarian myth. While a well-kept farm was not quite as majestic as an untrammelled forest or a rustic yeoman not quite as heroic as a frontier woodsman, the agricultural ethos was democratic, egalitarian, progressive and, hence, romantic. (Commager, pp. 193-6.)

<sup>46</sup>Crevecoeur, p. 56.



## CHAPTER 2--Yeomanry Enshrined: The Image of the Farmer in the Early and Mid-Nineteenth-Century Agricultural Press

In the initial issue of the Agricultural Museum, America's first exclusively agricultural paper, editor David Wiley printed excerpts from a lengthy address by Enoch Edwards to the Philadelphia Society for the Promotion of Agriculture and Domestic Manufactures. Edwards' speech, which had been delivered twenty-one years earlier, on February 2, 1789, lustily affirms the nobility and preeminence of husbandry.

Agriculture is a profession truly honourable; venerable from its great antiquity, and dignified by the extensive and universal blessings it daily administers to mankind. It appears, from the sacred writings, to have been, in some measure, understood in the first ages, and is almost co-eval with our knowledge of the world.<sup>1</sup>

In the florid oratory of the time, Edwards proclaims that agriculture is the basis of morality and religion, that it provides the foundation for manufacturing, commerce and economic prosperity and that it promotes peace, happiness and national pride. Those fortunate enough to be farmers enjoy lives of "sweet and innocent repose, out of the way of difficult and dangerous temptations," a situation for which they "express gratitude for all the boundless mercies of heaven."<sup>2</sup> With the Edwards' address, Wiley sounded the editorial tone the Museum

would follow until its demise two years later. Although short-lived and, therefore, comparatively uninfluential, the Museum heralded the apotheoses of agricultural life found in three more important pioneer farm newspapers which followed it: the American Farmer, The Plough Boy and the New England Farmer.<sup>3</sup>

John Stuart Skinner, generally considered the father of agricultural journalism in the United States, established the American Farmer in Baltimore on April 2, 1819. Raised on a Maryland farm, trained in the law and employed in government service, Skinner decided to launch the American Farmer after reading John Taylor's writings.<sup>4</sup> The editor's primary aim was "to collect information from every source, on every branch of Husbandry . . . to enable the reader to study the various systems which experience has proved to be the best."<sup>5</sup> Despite this very practical, somewhat reserved statement of editorial policy, Skinner was seldom reluctant to sprinkle his paper with more colorful poems, prose and correspondence extolling the virtues of husbandry. One early issue featured the poem, "Agriculture," which frequently reappeared in farm papers throughout the first half of the nineteenth century.

Thou first of arts, source of domestic ease,  
Pride of the land, and patron of the seas,  
Thrift Agriculture! Lend thy potent aid;  
Spread the green field where dreary forests shade;  
Where savage men pursue their savage prey,  
Let the white flocks in verdant pastures play;  
From the bloom'd orchard and the showery vale,  
Give the rich fragrance to the gentle gale;  
Reward with ample boon the laborer's hand,  
And pour thy gladdening bounties o'er our land.  
Columbia's sons, spurn not the rugged toil;

Your nation's glory is a cultur'd soil.  
 Rome's Cincinnatus, of illustrious birth,  
 Increas'd his laurels while he till'd the earth;  
 E'en China's Monarch lays his scepter down,  
 Nor deems the task unworthy of the crown.<sup>6</sup>

Such sentiments were not limited to poetic renderings. One typically enthusiastic reader, identified only as "Cincinnatus," pronounces that the "tiller of the ground, who earns his bread by the sweat of his brow . . . may with religious confidence, partake of the fruits of his earning."<sup>7</sup> The writer concludes that the farmer is the most independent of men and profits materially and spiritually from his vocation. "Every blade of grass affords a medium, and every kernel of grain a subject of devout speculation, fortifying to his [the farmer's] faith and confidence in Deity."<sup>8</sup> Even Skinner, decidedly less effusive than correspondents like Cincinnatus and somewhat more editorially subdued than many of his counterparts, elected to grace his paper's banner with a motto borrowed from Virgil: "'O fortunatos nimium sua si bona norint, Agricolas!'"<sup>9</sup>

More ebullient in his glorification of agrarian life was Solomon Southwick, editor of The Plough Boy, first published in Albany on June 5, 1819. Writing under the bucolic pen-name, Henry Homespun, Jr., Southwick wasted little time in explaining his paper's prosaic name. After establishing that George Washington and Cincinnatus were, first and foremost, "plough boys," Southwick maintains that the shibboleth conveys:

. . . the idea of a real, unsophisticated American; a virtuous, intelligent, brave, hardy and generous yeoman, who despises alike the trappings of Royalty or Aristocracy; who abhors the idleness, luxury and dissipation, which subvert private happiness and public liberty; and firm as his native hills, wraps himself in the simple dignity of his condition, and imitating his glorious ancestors, resolves to live free or to die.<sup>10</sup>

Like most of the early agricultural editors, Southwick vowed to eschew political wrangling. If forced to side with one party or another, he would always choose the "HOMESPUN PARTY--the party of the PLOUGH BOYS," those "true republicans whose first leaders were the patriarchs of the human race."<sup>11</sup> And whereas Skinner had foraged among the classics for a suitable motto to grace his paper's banner, Southwick reached into the somewhat more familiar book of Ecclesiastes: "'He that observeth the wind shall not sow; and he that regardeth the clouds shall not reap.'--BUT--'He that tilleth his land shall have plenty of bread.'"<sup>12</sup>

The third important agricultural paper to appear in the first quarter of the nineteenth century was the New England Farmer, first published in Boston on August 3, 1822. The new periodical was edited by Thomas Green Fessenden, a 1796 graduate of Dartmouth College and a close friend to Nathaniel Hawthorne. Like Skinner, Fessenden was raised on a farm, and he retained a lifelong commitment to agricultural advancement.<sup>13</sup> In his "Prospectus," Fessenden explains the importance of his paper by averring that "Every human being has an interest in that art which is the foundation of all other arts, and the basis of civilization."<sup>14</sup> Unique among his editorial peers, Fessenden

often conveyed his views of rural life through poetry. One of his most popular poems, "The Farmer," expresses many of the themes central to the agrarian myth.

Let monied blockhead's roll in wealth,  
 Let proud fools strut in state,  
 My hands, my homestead and my health  
 Place me above the great.

I never fawn, nor fib, nor feign,  
 To please old Mammon's fry;  
 But independence still maintain  
 On all beneath the sky.

Thus Cincinnatus, at his plough,  
 With more true glory shone,  
 Than Caesar with his laurell'd brow,  
 His palace and his throne.

Tumult, perplexity and care  
 Are bold ambition's lot;  
 But those intruders never dare  
 Disturb my peaceful cot.

Blest with bare competence, I find  
 What monarchs never can,  
 Health, and tranquillity of mind,  
 Heaven's choicest gifts to man.

The toil with which I till the ground  
 For exercise is meet--  
 Is mere amusement, which is crown'd  
 With slumber sound and sweet.

But those who toil in pleasure's rounds,  
 Sweet slumber soon destroy;  
 Soon find, on dissipation's grounds,  
 A grave for every joy.<sup>15</sup>

The didactic tone of "The Farmer" is indicative of most poetry printed in the early rural press. Fessenden, in particular, brought a strong reformatory zeal to his editorial work, and the New England Farmer contained numerous attacks against tobacco use, lotteries, cruelty to animals and alcohol consumption.

Proud of the high moral posture of his paper, Fessenden once boasted that its pages "had never been stained with a statement, sentiment, or expression which would raise as blush of shame on the cheek of modesty, or infuse poison in the uncorrupted mind."<sup>16</sup>

The American Farmer, The Plough Boy and the New England Farmer served as models for most of the agricultural newspapers which came after them. Such important papers as The Genesee Farmer (Rochester, N.Y., 1831), the Maine Farmer (Winthrop, 1833), The Cultivator (Albany, 1834), the Boston Cultivator (1839), the Prairie Farmer (Chicago, 1840), the Massachusetts Ploughman (Boston, 1841), the American Agriculturist, (New York, 1842), the Michigan Farmer (Jackson, 1843), the Indiana Farmer (Indianapolis, 1845), and the Ohio Cultivator (Columbus, 1845) closely resembled the appearance, content and tone of their three predecessors. Like Skinner, Southwick and Fessenden, most later editors dedicated their papers to practical husbandry, carefully avoided political issues and staunchly advocated the application of scientific principles to agriculture. They also idealized farmers and farm life. In so doing, they were reinforcing and popularizing the agrarian myth. Oblivious of the mythology, per se, and the precise reasons for its development, these early editors printed poems, letters, speeches and editorials they believed would appeal to their readers. In the process, the lofty agrarian sentiments of Virgil, Crèvecoeur, Jefferson and Taylor were randomly mixed with various Protestant theological

maxims and with popular, sometimes romanticized notions about agricultural life. Poems like "Agriculture" and "The Farmer," speeches like Edwards' and letters from subscribers like Cincinnatus contain a potpourri of ideas and impressions which, while clearly linked to the rich intellectual traditions already discussed, also reflect the experiences and beliefs among nineteenth-century American farmers. By carefully reading and analyzing these various forms of journalistic and literary expression, there emerges a fuller understanding of the yeoman as he appeared in the early agricultural press.

The yeoman image, like the agrarian mythology which circumscribes it, cannot be explained in a few words or phrases. Instead, it derives from a montage of beliefs, feelings and impressions which crystallized to form a powerful and pervasive cultural symbol. For purposes of discussion, however, I have grouped these various thoughts and feelings into three general categories corresponding to the 1) moral, 2) economic, and 3) — nationalistic dimensions of the yeoman image. The first category encompasses the yeoman's uniquely virtuous personal qualities--qualities which are derived from God through Nature. The yeoman's inherent moral goodness is frequently contrasted to the corruption and sinfulness found among urban dwellers. The second category includes the yeoman's complete economic independence, the virtue of hard work and the concept of agricultural fundamentalism, i.e., the belief that farming is the basis for all other economic endeavors. The third category contains those

ideas which link the yeoman's well-being to America's continued growth and prosperity. Although the categories are considered separately, the concepts they contain are closely interrelated and mutually reinforcing. Together these concepts form the essence of a singular cultural image.

### **The Moral Dimension**

Central to understanding the yeoman's unique moral characteristics is the proposition that the farmer enjoys God's special favor. Most agricultural editors and their readers shared a fundamental conviction that after God had created a beneficent and harmonious natural kingdom, He charged mankind with the responsibility for its stewardship. The Bible provided ample evidence that the farmer was Divinely sanctioned. Writing to the Ohio Cultivator in 1845, Joseph S. Sullivan maintains that agriculture "dates from creation" and is the only art that "has directly received the approbation of the Almighty." The writer further explains that after God created the "Garden of Eden, He ordained" that man "dress and keep it."<sup>17</sup> Because the yeoman has remained faithful to that original mandate, he has also retained his favored status under Heaven. This sentiment is poetically expressed in "The Farmer," which first appeared in The Cultivator, in 1839.

Drive on thou sturdy farmer,  
     Drive cheerfully o'er the field;  
 The pleasures of a farmer's life,  
     No other life can yield.



Thou risest with the morning sun,  
 To till the fruitful earth,  
 And when thy daily task is done,  
 Thou seek'st thy peaceful hearth.

Thou lovest not the gaudy town,  
 With its tumult'ous roar;  
 Plenty and peace thy fireside crown,  
 And thou dost ask no more.

Monarch with robes in crimson dyed,  
 Are low, compared with thee;  
 They are the pampered sons of pride,  
 Thou'rt God's nobility.

Go on thou sturdy farmer,  
 Tread proudly on the sod,  
 Thy proud and goodly heritage,  
 Thou chosen man of God.<sup>18</sup>

It was very important, however, that the farmer not take his exalted status for granted. Besides attending to all the tasks husbandry demands of him, the yeoman must always remain mindful and appreciative of God's blessings. The final two stanzas of "Agricultural Hymn," which appeared in the Maine Farmer in 1854, constitute a gentle reminder to thank the Almighty for Nature's bounty:

The farmer, when the seed-time's o'er,  
 Joys in the mercies given--  
 Thinks on thy promised harvest store,  
 And smiling looks to Heaven.

God of the Sheaf! to thee alone  
 Are due our thanks and praise,  
 When Harvest's grateful labor's done,  
 On Plenty glad we gaze:  
 Then shall our thoughts on heaven rest;  
 Thy grace we will adore,  
 And thank that God whose mercies blest  
 Our basket and our store.<sup>19</sup>

One primary advantage of doing God's work is that the yeoman thereby enjoys a "constant, intimate and sensible" relationship

with all that God has created. In the agricultural press, the farmer becomes, in effect, natural man. By working in Nature, the farmer "observes the regularity and order in all his conduct." He learns from the sun and the moon that "industry is required at his hands," and he looks to Heaven through the "rains and dews for the reward of his labors."<sup>20</sup> Consistent with the spirit of the Enlightenment, there is no suggestion in the early farm papers that Nature is the least bit malevolent. At worst, it may occasionally prove capricious, particularly during harvest. For the most part, however, Nature represents balance, order and harmony. If properly understood and managed, it will serve the farmer's best interests. In language reminiscent of the classic pastoralists, Ephraim Abbott, the editor of The Valley Farmer celebrates the intimate relationship between the yeoman and his natural environment:

The farmer! What a glorious occupation is his! Free from noise, the bustle, the dust, the pent up air and noxious gasses of the city, he breathes the pure air of heaven enriched by the sweet perfumes of a thousand flowers, drinks pure water from the fountains of nature, receives his food from his mother earth, enraptured with the merry songsters of nature which pour forth their praise, not like the dolorous singers of unfelt psalms, but with thrilling gladness--in short, the farmer . . . is the only nobleman.<sup>21</sup>

Nature provides the yeoman with much more than a pleasant place to work, however. It is also the source of his physical and mental well-being. In a long letter to The Cultivator, James Tufts suggests that because farmers breath fresh air and listen to the "songs of birds," they are seldom "troubled with

hypochondria, dyspepsia, and indigestion . . . which are injurious to happiness and health." Who, he asks, fails to envy the "health, strength and cheer of the wood chopper, the reaper, the mower or the plowman . . .?"<sup>22</sup> A robust physical condition is all the more important because it is prerequisite to mental health.

Can there be any doubt that the occupation which gives such health and cheer to the farmer is favorable to the development of the mind, and the pursuit of knowledge, especially when we consider the intimate connection between health of body and health of mind, and how many minds are necessarily feeble, stunted and sickly, because dwelling in a feeble and sickly body?<sup>23</sup>

Unlike the merchant, mechanic or lawyer--confined to shop, workbench or desk--the farmer is free to labor in the midst of his fields, forests and flocks. Each season of the year presents new challenges and calls for a variety of different tasks. Thus, the yeoman's mind is never dulled by the monotonous routine that often plagues those in other professions. The constant variability of the seasons, with each bringing its own demands and rewards, furnishes the theme of the "Farmer's Song," which appeared in several agricultural papers in the early 1840's.

When the sweet smiling Spring sheds its perfumes around,  
And musk enchants every tree,  
With glittering plowshare he furrows his ground,  
With a mind independent and free.

When summer to fruit the sweet blossoms transforms  
And his harvest fields wave with the breeze;  
Sweet anticipation unfolds all her charms,  
And points to contentment and ease.  
When bountiful Autumn her treasures bestows,  
And her fruits are all gathered and stored;

His heart to the giver, with gratitude glows,  
 And plenty presides at his board.  
 When Winter howls dismally over the earth,  
 And want tells her tale at his door;  
 Serenely he sits by his clean blazing hearth  
 And dispenses relief to the poor.<sup>24</sup>

Singularly blessed by God, intimately and joyously associated with nature, physically hardy, and mentally alert, the yeoman enjoys a much greater measure of happiness than anyone. Such an enviable way of life is not without its conditions, however. To ensure the continuance of his Divine approbation, the yeoman must demonstrate the highest moral standards. The yeoman's inherent moral rectitude is seldom, if ever, compromised because he spends most of his time and energy tending to the business of husbandry. Therefore, he has neither the inclination nor the hours for the sundry vices which often seduce the more indolent segments of society. The yeoman's upright moral character is particularly important because it guarantees social and civil equilibrium. Jesse Buel, the widely respected editor of The Cultivator, contends that farmers serve as a vital counterpoise to those "mass of persons" who are:

. . . idle and profligate, who herd together . . .  
 and who, having nothing to lose, are always ready  
 for every innovation, or every disturbance that  
 threatens convulsion and overturn, as in the general  
 scramble they may obtain plunder and power.<sup>25</sup>

Ultimately, it is the moral leadership provided by the yeomanry which prevents the anarchy which stems from moral decay and becomes "the surest index to the general happiness of a people, and to the stability and excellence of their institutions."<sup>26</sup>

The specific provisions of the yeoman's moral code varied considerably, depending on the editor or correspondent. In general, the virtues were consistent with the conventional strictures which emanated from the then predominantly Protestant pulpits. Dan Bradley, writing to The Genesee Farmer, lists several "plants of righteousness" which, "before the fatal apostasy, grew in the delightful Garden of Eden."

Among them, and first in order, stand Piety and Philanthropy; next, Temperance, Patience, Godliness, Brotherly kindness, Charity. In connection with the same Heaven-born group, stand also in bold relief, Honesty, Justice, Goodness and Truth. What a cluster of precious fruits.<sup>27</sup>

Other frequently mentioned virtues included honor, fairness, industry and, of course, thrift. "Listen young farmer, to the moral muse, / And catch the useful lessons of her song. / Be frugal and be blest; frugality / Will give thee competence."<sup>28</sup> In a "Letter of Advice" to a young farmer who had recently moved from New York to Virginia, a more seasoned cultivator explores the dimensions of "good moral character." After celebrating such attributes as hard work, perseverance, economy, honesty and prudence, the writer encourages his younger counterpart to "deal honorably and uprightly, keeping your word on all occasions; be careful about making contracts and promises, but when made, fulfill them to the very letter."<sup>29</sup> The "essence of morality," he concludes, is to follow the Golden Rule by "doing to others as you would wish them to do to you."<sup>30</sup>

As with the most desirable virtues, the compendium of moral

transgressions was derived from the familiar teachings of Covenant Theology. Some of the most "noxious weeds which grow to embarrass cultivation in the field of nature" are malice, greed, envy, hatred, selfishness, prevarication, fornication and adultery.<sup>31</sup> Farmers were admonished by the farm papers to avoid "evil thoughts" and to refrain from "mean or dishonorable deeds." They were warned to eschew law suits and pecuniary speculation--both of which could easily lead to economic ruin. Further, the yeoman was not to gamble, curse, or, most importantly, to chew tobacco or drink alcohol.<sup>32</sup> These last two strictures were so pervasive they warrant more detailed treatment.

Tobacco in any form was regularly attacked throughout the nineteenth century, but particularly during the reform years between 1830 and the beginning of the Civil War. Editors and readers were concerned that such a "filthy, extravagant habit" was increasing "at an alarming rate."<sup>33</sup> Ezekiel Holmes, editor of the Maine Farmer, writes that tobacco use is "as filthy and degrading as the use of rum."<sup>34</sup> The Prairie Farmer recommends its value in killing lice and ticks, but urges readers to keep it out of their mouths.<sup>35</sup> It was often noted that smoking was killing thousands of people each year because of lung disease, and many editors urged the development of "Anti-Tobacco Societies," similar to the widespread Temperance Societies.<sup>36</sup>

Widely considered more venal and dangerous than any other moral transgression, drinking, "the generalissimo of Satan's formidable host of diabolical plants,"<sup>37</sup> could quickly usher the

unwitting yeoman to his doom. Alcohol keeps the tiller from his fields, damages his familial bonds and, in extreme cases, precipitates lawlessness and even murder. The Genesee Farmer somberly recounts the fate of Richard Sinkey who was accused of manslaughter following a libationary log-rolling near his home in Johnstown, Ohio. The editorial urges the banishment of whiskey from all "logging bees" and "raising bees" where the "worm of the still creeps along and frequently raises its ugly head," transforming rational and decent men "into beasts . . . to triumph by force of strength over their brother animals."<sup>38</sup> The editor of the Western Tiller expresses similar disgust at the quantity of corn used in whiskey production. Why not use that same corn to "improve the condition of four-footed hogs" instead of "making an article used only to increase the number of their two-legged imitators."<sup>39</sup> Writing to the Ohio Cultivator at the outbreak of the Civil War, a distraught correspondent wonders why the Americans continue to consume an "accursed poison" that causes every bit "as much misery and demoralization as the present war?"<sup>40</sup> In "The Little Boy's Appeal to His Parent," which appeared in the Boston Cultivator in 1847, "Clara" takes a more poignant approach:

Oh! father, won't you sign the pledge,  
And never drink again;  
And let us go to that dear home,  
From whence we long since came.

. . . .  
Oh! we were very happy then,  
And now we're very sad;  
If you will only sign the pledge,  
We all should be so glad.

Dear mother now is very dull,  
 And weeps when you are gone;  
 She does not seem so happy now,  
 As when in that dear home.

Oh! we should be so happy then,  
 And suffer no more pain;  
 Oh father won't you sign the pledge,  
 And be a man again.<sup>41</sup>

Despite such colorful and obviously heartfelt diatribes against selected blasphemies, it is important to note that farm editors and their readers expended far less energy analyzing the "bad moral soil" around them than they did in examining the good. This was due, in part, to the general moral optimism of the age but, in much larger part, to the conviction that wickedness, temptation and corruption were absent from rural life. If one wanted to seriously examine evil in the world, one needed only to consider the realities of urban life. Like agricultural commentators from Virgil to Jefferson, the editors and readers of the nineteenth-century agricultural press found in the city all that was morally antipodal to the virtues of country living.

Just as the countryside was considered the natural home for man, the city was widely portrayed as a hostile, alien environment which was, at best, dreary, and at worst, morally and physically destructive. In "The Farmer Boy," a poem appearing in the Ohio Cultivator in 1862, "Aunt Fanny" exclaims:

I would not live in the crowded town,  
 With its pavements hard and gray,  
 With its lengthened streets of dusty brown,  
 And its painted houses gay--  
 Where every boy his ball may bound  
 Upon his neighbor's dome,  
 And every shout and every sound  
 Disturbs some other's home.<sup>42</sup>



In a letter to The Cultivator, "C.W." notes that "the inhabitants of cities fly to the country for health and fine air." Anyone who seriously doubts the salubrity of rural life should simply "contrast the pale and sickly appearance of many children inhabiting our large cities, with the rugged and healthy look of our farmers' boys and girls."<sup>43</sup>

In a more strident commentary, the editor of the Indiana Farmer contends that those who leave the "pure atmosphere" and the "vital renovating influence of pure country air" and move to the city will "naturally degenerate, both physically and morally."<sup>44</sup> In the same issue, reader William Coggeshall refers to the city as "selfish . . . egotistic, sensual, superficial."<sup>45</sup> On the surface, the city offers a variety of temptations, but those who are unwittingly lured to urban areas often become "shipwrecked and lost, and their characters utterly ruined." Warming to his topic, "A Lover of the Country" argues that city life "crushes, enslaves, and ruins so many thousand of our young men," driving them to "dissipation, reckless speculation and ultimate crime."<sup>46</sup> Writing to the Massachusetts Ploughman, B.F. Wilbur ruefully concludes that such moral destruction will continue "so long as the glitter of wealth and the prospect of gain . . . fix the attention of our young men to the exclusion of the more humble and christian-like walk of the farmer."<sup>47</sup>

To graphically illustrate the sordid dimensions of city life, farm editors frequently published detailed accounts of urban poverty, both in the United States and in Europe. In an article

entitled, "Destitution in England," the Massachusetts Ploughman recounts the tribulations of several urban unfortunates. Typical of these is the saga of Esther Pierce, "a pale, consumptive-looking girl" who tries to pawn a scarf she has been hired to embroider, "driven to it to save herself from starvation." The charges against Esther are dropped, and the "poor fainting girl" is escorted to the "parish work house" to recover from her ordeal.<sup>48</sup> Under the provocative headline, "Filth in New York City," the editor of the Maine Farmer reprinted a New York Tribune interview with that city's Superintendent of Sanitary Inspection. In his preface to the Superintendent's account, editor Holmes finds it "incredible that there could be so much filth concentrated in any one place" and strongly sympathizes with anyone who has to live and work in "the horribly foul localities of New York."<sup>49</sup>

In most of the anti-urban commentary in the farm press, the city dweller is not considered inherently evil; rather, it is the unnatural urban environment that has distorted or destroyed man's fundamental moral sense. Even the most righteous yeoman would eventually become corrupted living in such virulent conditions. As one Indiana Farmer reader proclaims: "The farm is the natural home of man. Placed in any other condition he naturally degenerates, both physically and morally, and soon acquires an inferior type."<sup>50</sup> Those "inferior types" included not only criminals, but also such selected malefactors as bankers, lawyers and speculators. The New England Farmer, for example, advised

farmers to avoid "the door of a bank as you would an approach of the plague or cholera."<sup>51</sup> For a time, at least, reference to specific urban villains was infrequent and not without a somewhat sardonic humor. Lawyers and bankers could join politicians in serving as the occasional butt of an editor's or reader's joke. It would not be until the latter part of the century that these urban knaves, and others, would appear to many agrarians far more sinister than laughable.

### **The Economic Dimension**

The yeoman provided more than America's moral foundation; he was also the economic bulwark of the Republic. The economic importance of the farmer was based on two related propositions, both central to the agrarian mythology. First, the yeomanry was considered the most economically independent working class, and, at a time when farm production was primarily designed to provide for the needs of the immediate family, the "doctrine of rural independence clearly harmonized with reality." Secondly, the yeoman's occupation was viewed as the basic employment of man--the employment upon which all other economic activities are dependent. This doctrine, derived in large part from Physiocratic influences filtered through Taylor, Jefferson, Timothy Pickering and others, is often referred to as agricultural fundamentalism.<sup>52</sup> These two propositions undoubtedly appealed to the approximately 90% of the American citizenry employed in agriculture, and they were frequently

articulated in the agricultural press.

Just as Nature is the source of the yeoman's physical and spiritual well-being, it also provides the basis for his economic autonomy. As a Stark County (Ohio) farmer attests in his letter to the Ohio Cultivator, the yeoman "possesses a conscious independence . . . that soars above the common business of life." The major reason for this self-reliant condition is that the farmer is dependent on "none but old mother earth for his sustenance or means of living." His livelihood does not derive from exacting "extortionate prices" from others; rather, it is "drawn from the bosom of the earth by the sweat of his brow."<sup>53</sup> In a similar letter in the Michigan Farmer and Western Agriculturist (later to become the Michigan Farmer), "B.T.L." agrees that the "occupation of farming" provides "a sweet and cheering feeling of independence" as the yeoman "gathers from nature those rich and substantial blessings the God of Nature designed he should enjoy."<sup>54</sup>

Unlike the manufacturing and commercial classes, the farmer is "as independent of his fellows, as in civilized society it is possible for any man to be."<sup>55</sup> In a lengthy editorial in the Prairie Farmer, John S. Wright maintains that it is agriculture, "and only agriculture," that "enables so many men to live as independent principles."

In almost all other pursuits men are, as employers and employed, woven into the fabric, so that no thread can be separated without violence from the whole. . . The clothier cannot eat his fabrics, nor the carpenter wear his structures, nor the mason sleep upon his brick and mortar,

nor the smith feed hungry mouths from his anvil. . . . The husbandman alone can find in his province the elements of living--food, raiment, shelter, and the raw material for almost every physical want.<sup>56</sup>

Because he provides all his family's needs, the farmer is under obligation to no other man. This economic independence also enhances the yeoman's social standing. Writing to the Union Agriculturist and Western Prairie Farmer (later to become the Prairie Farmer) in August, 1841, an anonymous correspondent proclaims that:

The farmer is the most noble and independent man in society. He has ever been honored and respected from the days of Cincinnatus, the Roman farmer, to the present time. . . . He is not placed in that station which requires him ever to be seeking or courting popular favor, bowing and bowing to this or that man to gain favor.<sup>57</sup>

Professor John Platt, of Greenville College (Ohio), eloquently expresses similar sentiments in his address to the Licking County (Ohio) Agricultural Society:

There is, in rural occupations, a state of comparative independence. If any man is free, the lord of the soil is that man. Of all men, he lays and executes his plans with the least dictation . . . is most his own to go whither he pleases, and to do what he pleases; and can best secure, within himself, as you say, the means and ends of life. The lord of the soil . . . is the only true king, owning his domain as no other king does, invested with a right over his subjects--his flocks and his herd--as no other king is.<sup>58</sup>

In his regal, albeit humble, state the yeoman "walks erect in the elevated consciousness of his own dignity and independence." He answers to "no mortal superior, but feels himself equally aloof from the impertinent intrusions of the landlord and the arbitrary requisitions of the despot."<sup>59</sup>

Yet, just as the yeoman must observe a strict moral code in order to ensure and perpetuate Divine favor, so, too, must he work long and diligently in order to guarantee continued economic well-being. Agricultural editors and their readers could scarcely gainsay the toil associated with husbandry. Any such attempt would have been contrary to experience. Instead of portraying physical labor as a tribulation, however, the farm papers emphasized its virtues. Frances D. Gage, the widely respected Woman's Editor of the Ohio Cultivator, frequently celebrated farm work in her poems and prose. In "The Sounds of Industry," for example, she writes that the "plowman's whistle," the "reaper's cheerful song," and the "warm voice of the dairyman," continually remind her that:

Yes! There is good in labor  
 If we labor but aright,  
 That gives vigor to the day time  
 And a sweeter sleep at night.  
 A good that bringeth pleasure,  
 Even to the toiling hours--  
 For duty cheers the spirit  
 As dew revives the flowers.<sup>60</sup>

For Gage, and many other commentators, labor is not "Jehovah's curse" on man; rather, "it is his richest mercy, / And will scatter all life's gloom."<sup>61</sup>

The inherent goodness of agrarian toil was regularly contrasted to the odiousness of excessive leisure. "Who are the unhappy?" asks Luther Tucker, the influential editor of The Genesee Farmer. "Are they not those who are inactive, and sit still, and tell us, if fortune had only thrown this and that in

their way, that they should be far happier?"<sup>62</sup> In an address to the Kennebec County (Maine) Agricultural Society, Sidney Perham contends that "heaven could send no greater evil than to exempt us from all necessity for labor." In those countries where inhabitants are sedentary and slothful, one finds the people "sunk in sensuality, morally degraded and intellectually debased."<sup>63</sup>

The belief that physical labor was detrimental to intellectual and spiritual development was considered an unfortunate legacy of European culture. According to The Cultivator, such a view might yet prevail in "ancient forms of society," where "one man is born with a golden spoon in his mouth, and another with an iron chain around his neck, freedom from which is impossible." But in America, where every yeoman is free to forge his own destiny, the idea that labor is "disgraceful or degrading is a gross perversion of terms."<sup>64</sup> On the contrary, the most admired and respected American husbandmen, according to numerous accounts in the farm press, are those who are the most industrious. The "slothful farmer," on the other hand, earns only the "scorn and contempt" of his fellows and the "wrath of an offended Deity."<sup>65</sup>

More than an economic necessity, then, labor becomes another moral imperative. Hard work is consistent with God's law and ensures fair measures of prosperity, happiness and community standing. Conversely, economic gain without toil is unnatural and, in the case of speculators and confidence men, for example,

morally reprehensible. Indolence offends the Almighty and inexorably leads to fiscal and spiritual ruin. The message to the readers of the farm press was clear: find a farmer who has failed, and you will also find a lazy farmer; find a happy, prosperous yeoman, and you will also find a hard-working yeoman. The myriad rewards of labor are extolled in "The Tillers of the Soil," which appeared anonymously in the Maine Farmer in 1854, and in several other agricultural papers over the next decade.

Whose are the sturdy hands  
That drive the bright plowshare,  
And make the barren lands  
Look beautiful and fair?  
Who are that little band,  
Who labor, sweat, and toil?  
The bulwark of our land--  
The tillers of the soil!

Who makes the barren earth  
A paradise of wealth,  
And fills each humble hearth  
With plenty, life and health?  
Oh! I would have you know,  
They are the men of toil--  
The men who reap and sow--  
The tillers of the soil!

Oh! let me hold the plow,  
And drive the bright plowshare,  
And feel that on my brow  
Toil's honest sweat is there!  
Oh! let me sow and reap,  
And learn to bind and coil  
The yellow, ripened sheaf,  
Like a tiller of the soil.

Ye are a nation's stay,  
Ye men of worthy strife--  
The stars that light the way  
To happiness and life.  
Then still the plow caress,  
Shall be your watchword, Toil!  
And may God ever bless  
The tillers of the soil.<sup>66</sup>



Hard work, then, is crucial to the farmer's well being which, in turn, affects the well being of everyone else. The continued economic independence of the farmer is vital because of the corollary proposition that those in all other walks of life are economically dependent on the yeoman. This notion of agricultural fundamentalism is clearly articulated by editor Buel in an 1836 issue of The Cultivator. "Every business of life is mainly dependent, for its prosperity, upon the labor of agriculture." Other classes "cannot thrive . . . without the aid of the farmer: he furnishes the raw materials for the manufacturers, he feeds the mechanic, and freights the bark of commerce."<sup>67</sup> Occasionally, this dependency on the farmer was extended beyond the economic arena. In a letter to the New England Farmer, H.S. Dearborn declares that the "culture of the earth" is the "precursor of letters, science, the arts, manufactures, navigation, and commerce."<sup>68</sup> Most commentators, however, avoided such universal claims, preferring instead to focus on the specific relationship between agriculture, commerce and manufacturing.

Speaking to the Rensselaer County (New York) Agricultural Society, S. Blydenburgh states that in America, the "more subservient mechanic arts" have progressed "as a corps of faithful pioneers . . . leaving agriculture to move with slow but becoming dignity, as the main body in the center, while commerce, in the flank and rear, closes the procession."<sup>69</sup> The primacy of agriculture is echoed by H.K. Oliver in an 1858 address printed

in the American Farmers' Magazine:

[T]he whole pulse of commercial and monetary operations is affected by the healthful and unhealthful beatings of the agricultural heart; that stocks and prices in the market and on 'change,' rise and fall as the agricultural tide ebbs and flows; that, as come the crops, either plenteous or meager, so darts or limps the gigantic business of the busy world.<sup>70</sup>

To provide proof of the economic centrality of agriculture, farm editors frequently turned to history. The Indiana Farmer sadly recounts the fate of Egypt, once "the cradle of agricultural and mechanical arts." Now, when the "plow no longer furrows her fields . . . and flocks and herds no longer graze in her pastures," all that remains is the plaintive Nile rolling "its solitary waves through regions once populous and active with the enterprise of man."<sup>71</sup> Citing more contemporary evidence, the editors of The Cultivator suggest that the 1836 crop failure in England "deranged the monetary and commercial relations of the globe" and demonstrated, that of "all the branches of industry, there is none with which the prosperity of nations is so intimately connected, and on which it is so dependent, as our agriculture."<sup>72</sup> In the Maine Farmer, Ezekiel Holmes approvingly quotes a similar argument from "a brother editor from Michigan":

"All other businesses and professions depend on the farmers for prosperity. What benefits the majority of farmers, benefits all. If the farmers are intelligent and wealthy, the State is intelligent and wealthy. If the farmers are ignorant and poor, the State is ignorant and poor."<sup>73</sup>

Thus it was in the agricultural press that along with providing

the nation's moral leadership, the yeoman was also responsible for its economic well-being. As the farmer went, so went the nation. It was a small and rather logical leap from these premises to the conclusion that the yeoman, "the nation's stay," and "the bulwark of our land," was also the key to the future of a young, energetic and flourishing nation.

### **The Nationalistic Dimension**

During the first several decades of the nineteenth century, most Americans believed their young republic was destined to become one of the greatest nations the world had ever seen. More than a popular opinion, it was, in Paul Johnstone's words, "an unreasoned basic attitude"<sup>74</sup> that the Almighty had given Americans the unprecedented historical opportunity to create a truly utopian society. The hard-fought military victory over Great Britain, the vast abundance and ready availability of fertile land, the rapid westward expansion, the dramatic technological advancements, and the comparative prosperity of the new nation provided ample evidence that America would become an earthly paradise. This pervasive optimism, along with the corollary belief in the inevitability of social and technological progress, suffused the agricultural press. In another letter to the New England Farmer, this one appearing in 1849, H.A.S. Dearborn confidently, and somewhat sententiously proclaims that "the people of this republic have the natural resources and other advantages for becoming the most distinguished in individual and

national independence, wealth, and happiness, and [those blessings] are beyond those God has ever granted to any other portion of the globe."<sup>75</sup> Several years earlier, and some distance to the west, G.A.O. Beaumont addressed a similar topic before a group of agriculturalists who were determined to organize an agricultural society in Ottawa, Illinois. In language reminiscent of Robert Beverly and Crèvecoeur, Beaumont begins by explaining that America, like Illinois, is still "in the childhood of her existence," and that her future looms exceedingly bright:

We have found a land fairer and more fruitful than the promised land with which Heaven endowed its chosen people. The richness of its soil is only equalled by the beauties of its landscapes. It would seem, indeed, as though Providence, in the fullness of its bounty, had determined to prepare and perfect a land . . . where nothing should be wanting. . . . We look abroad upon the rolling prairie, as it were an ocean . . . we behold a garden more beautiful than those which Oriental luxury has formed for its princes . . . and ask ourselves the involuntary question, "Could man ask for more?"<sup>76</sup>

As the republic's most virtuous citizen, as well as its economic foundation, the yeoman would naturally be expected to blaze the trail leading toward national expansion and prosperity. In "The Plough Boy," a poem written especially for the agricultural paper of the same name, William Ray urges farmers, those:

Sons of America! awake, arise!  
Lo, bright before you what a prospect lies!  
A wide-extended country, blest and free--  
Majestic rivers--many an inland sea--  
Waiting the spade and plough to bid them pour  
Through vales that never saw nor heard them roar--

Land rich, productive, facile to obtain,  
Pledge to reward your industry with gain.<sup>77</sup>

In an early issue of the Kennebec Farmer, which later became the Maine Farmer, the lead editorial stridently avers that America's greatness is, and will continue to be, based on "an active, intelligent, enlightened and enterprising yeomanry--upon men whose hopes, and the hopes of their children are attached to the fertile American soil."

Who will cling faster to his country than the farmer?--Engaged in his peaceful occupation, remote from the allurements of political ambition, his mind untainted by sordid desires and surrounded by all that is necessary to his comfort and happiness . . . he will become more and more devoted to "his home, his country, and his brother man."<sup>78</sup>

A similar sentiment, containing the added weight of historical allusion, is sounded in the final two stanzas of "The Farmer's Summons," by "H.E.G." which appeared in the Ohio Cultivator in 1845.

O! your spreading lands are a noble dower,  
And a kingly blade ye wield;  
For we call, like Rome in her days of power,  
Our sovereigns from the field

And they are our bulwarks, who bear their part,  
In the peasant's sturdy toil,  
For the fountains that nourish the nation's heart,  
Lie deep in our teeming soil.<sup>79</sup>

Historical authority was often cited in explications of the inextricable union of agricultural progress and national development. After contrasting the American yeoman to the hapless Russian serf, an anonymous correspondent to the Indiana

Farmer suggests that:

The history of the world proves that the march of the human mind and progress of civilization correspond, in great degree, with the agricultural condition of States, or nations. . . . No country can exist without agricultural intelligence and labor.<sup>80</sup>

A more lyrical expression of the historical link between the yeoman and America's destiny is found in "The Plough and the Sickle," submitted to the New England Farmer in 1849 by T. Burges of Rhode Island:

With a Pioneer Axe, what a conquest is made!  
What a field from the forest is won!  
What regions, reduced from the wilderness shade,  
Are now warmed in the beams of the sun!

From the rock where our fathers in exile first landed,  
Their clearing from river to river has spread;  
And mountains and plains by their sons are commanded.  
Till now on the beach of Pacific they tread.

What a farm for a nation to cultivate now,  
And gather the wonderful harvest it yields!  
'Tis an Empire reduced to the Sickle and Plough,  
An Empire of gardens, and orchards, and fields.

Hail, Nation of Farmers! rejoice in your toil,  
And shout when your harvest is o'er;  
Receive the oppressed to your land with a smile,  
But frown every foe from your iron-bound shore.

And he who, by deeds, has now reached a high station,  
And is called to preside o'er the commonwealth now,  
Must relinquish his farm to save our young nation,  
As for Rome Cincinnatus relinquished his plough.

The Plough and the Sickle shall shine bright in glory,  
When the sword and the scepter shall crumble in rust;  
And the farmer shall live, both in song and in story,  
When warriors and kings are forgotten in dust.<sup>81</sup>

The poem, which contains an unusually rich complement of agrarian themes, also sounds an important note of caution which may be

muffled amidst the general chorus of optimism regarding America's future. Burges suggests that regardless of how vast and powerful the new nation may become, its enduring greatness will not hinge on sustained military might. Rather, it will be the industrious yeomen who will nurture the nation in peacetime. In the unfortunate event of war, the military heroes will not emerge from the ranks of professional soldiers, but, like Washington and Cincinnatus, will come reluctantly but dutifully from their farms to command their agrarian brethren in battle. This was one of history's most important lessons--a lesson that had been reinforced by the victory of the "embattled farmers" over George III's professional army. In an address widely published in the agricultural press, Marshall P. Wilder, the President of the United States Agricultural Society, concludes:

While the nations of the Old World seek for glory in war and acquisitions of the sword, let us cultivate the arts of peace, and let us remember that the history of a noble, happy and prosperous people is inscribed, not on the star spangled banner of military fame, or of political preferment and power, but it is seen in the peaceful triumphs of the plough, in fields of waving grass and grain, in thriving flocks and herds, in highly cultivated farms and gardens, in the refined arts of rural life and cultivated taste, and in the grateful incense which rises from the altars of an industrious, intelligent and virtuous yeomanry.<sup>82</sup>

So pervasive was this view, that no less a warrior than Andrew Jackson suggested in his 1832 message to Congress, which was widely reprinted in the agricultural press, that: "The wealth and strength of a country are its population, and the best part of that population are the cultivators of the soil. Independent

farmers are everywhere the basis of society and the true friends of liberty."<sup>83</sup>

During the forty years following the publication of John Skinner's American Farmer, it was relatively easy for agrarians to believe in and embrace their leading role in the unfolding American drama. The first half of the nineteenth century was a relatively stable, contented and prosperous time for most Americans--a large majority of whom were farmers. They were readily and enthusiastically caught up in the prevailing optimism of the age. Even the Civil War, which temporarily disrupted farmsteads throughout the land, could not permanently dampen northern agrarian faith in the American dream. With the cessation of hostilities between the North and the South, most farmers and farm editors breathed an aggregate sigh of relief. The Union had been preserved, and the agricultural prosperity they had enjoyed before and during the war could now continue without any accompanying bloodshed. What they could not envision, however, were the tumultuous events of the second half of the century--events that would forever change the face of American agriculture, and, in the process, shatter many of rural America's most ardent beliefs.



## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Enoch Edwards, "Address to the Philadelphia Society for the Promotion of Agriculture and Domestic Manufactures," Agricultural Museum, 4 July 1810, p. 4.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>3</sup>In American Agricultural Periodicals: An Historical Sketch (Albany: Privately Printed, 1909), Gilbert Tucker includes these three agricultural papers among "the five pioneers of the American agricultural press (p. 71)." The other two were the New York Farmer, first published in New York City in about 1827, and the Southern Agriculturist, first published in Charleston, S. Carolina, in 1828. The first five volumes of the New York Farmer are apparently lost, and the Southern Agriculturist falls outside the scope of this study.

<sup>4</sup>Dumas Malone, ed. Dictionary of American Biography IX (New York: Scribner's, 1964), pp. 199-201. Early issues of the American Farmer contain frequent communications from such notables as Taylor, Jefferson, Madison and Timothy Pickering. Skinner remained editor until 1830, when he sold the paper for \$20,000. After several other publishing endeavors, he established The Plough, the Loom and the Anvil in Philadelphia in July, 1848. This unique paper explored the common economic bonds between agriculture and industry, advocating, for example, a protective tariff for each. Skinner remained editor until his untimely death (from a fall) in 1851.

<sup>5</sup>John S. Skinner, "To the Public," American Farmer, 2 April 1819, p. 5.

<sup>6</sup>"Agriculture," American Farmer, 13 Aug. 1819, p. 160.

<sup>7</sup>Cincinnatus, "To the Editor of the American Farmer," American Farmer, 7 May 1819, p. 46. References to Lucius Quinctius Cincinnatus were common in the agricultural press. According to legend, the tribe of Aequi was besieging a Roman army on Mount Algidus in 458 BC, and Rome was in danger of losing many of its finest soldiers. Amidst this crisis, the Senate elected Cincinnatus, a humble farmer, as temporary dictator. The delegation dispatched to inform him of his ascension found him working his fields, clad only in a tunic. His wife, Racilia, brought a toga from their cottage, and he was pronounced dictator. He proceeded to Mount Algidus, saved the army, immediately resigned his dictatorship and, within fifteen days, was back in his fields. Cincinnatus probably lived, but it is likely that many of the stories about him are mythical. In the American agricultural press, Cincinnatus is the classical equivalent of George Washington--each representing the quintessential agrarian hero who returns to his farm after reluctantly leading his nation in battle. Michael Grant and John Hazel, Who's Who in Classical Mythology (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1973), pp. 115-6.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 46.

<sup>9</sup>Loosely translated, the motto means, "How happy is the farmer's state". At the time the American Farmer was first published, mottoes were considered an indispensable part of a newspaper, although most quotations were in English rather than Latin. A.L. Demaree, The American Agricultural Press, p. 26.

<sup>10</sup>Solomon Southwick, "Original," The Plough Boy, 5 June 1819, p. 2. Southwick, an ardent Jeffersonian, served as editor of The Plough Boy until 1823 when he apparently tired of agricultural journalism. He twice ran unsuccessfully for governor of New York, in 1822 and, again, in 1828. He was an eloquent, often inflammatory speaker whose penchant for biting phrases is evident in his writing. Dictionary of American Biography IX, pp. 413-14.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 1. Skinner, too, expressly avoided political issues. In the May 14, 1819 issue of the American Farmer, he wrote: "Once and for all, then . . . not a word of party politics will ever be allowed to enter these columns (p. 55)."

<sup>12</sup>It appears Southwick took some editorial liberties in attributing his entire motto to the Bible. The language before the conjunction "BUT" is from Eccl. xi.4, King James Version. The language following the conjunction seems to be Southwick's own.

<sup>13</sup>Prior to establishing the New England Farmer, Fessenden, a staunch Federalist, was best known for his Democracy Unveiled: or Tyranny Stripped of the Garb of Patriotism (1805), a virulent attack on Jefferson and other Democratic leaders. Fessenden edited the New England Farmer until his death in 1837. Dictionary of American Biography III, pp. 347-8.

<sup>14</sup>Thomas Green Fessenden, "Prospectus of the New England Farmer," New England Farmer, 3 Aug. 1822, p. 1.

<sup>15</sup>Fessenden, "The Farmer," New England Farmer, 29 March 1823, p. 280.

<sup>16</sup>Fessenden, "To the Public," New England Farmer, 2 Jan. 1839, p. 207.

<sup>17</sup>Joseph S. Sullivan, "Agriculture is a Science as Well as an Art," Ohio Cultivator, 1 Jan. 1845, p. 7.

<sup>18</sup>"The Farmer," The Cultivator, Feb. 1839, p. 197.

<sup>19</sup>"Agricultural Hymn," Maine Farmer, 1 June 1854, p. 1.

<sup>20</sup>"The Farmer's Life," Boston Cultivator, 16 July 1853, p. 227.

<sup>21</sup>Ephraim Abbott, "The Farmer!," The Valley Farmer, Dec. 1853, p. 436.

<sup>22</sup>James Tufts, "The Life of the Farmer Favorable to the Pursuit of Knowledge," The Cultivator, Aug. 1850, p. 262.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., p. 262.

<sup>24</sup>"The Farmer's Song," Boston Cultivator, 22 July 1848, p. 240. Frequently, poems and letters were reprinted in agricultural papers, without any editorial note regarding where the material first appeared. Therefore, it is often difficult to ascertain where a poem like "The Farmer's Song" first appeared.

<sup>25</sup>Jesse Buel, "Editor's Table," The Cultivator, Feb. 1839, p. 198.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., p. 198.

<sup>27</sup>Dan Bradley, "A Moral Garden," The Genesee Farmer, 7 Jan. 1832, p. 3.

<sup>28</sup>James S. Babcock, "Song of the Plowman," The Valley Farmer, May 1850, p. 167.

<sup>29</sup>Old Agricola, "Letter of Advice," American Agriculturist, Oct. 1856, p. 305.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., p. 306.

<sup>31</sup>S. Rhodes, Jr., The Genesee Farmer, 29 Jan. 1831, p. 27.

<sup>32</sup>Several moral admonishments are cited below. Other examples include items in the Prairie Farmer, 14 April 1859, p. 234; the American Agriculturist, June 1859, p. 183; the Ohio Farmer, 18 Aug. 1855, p. 132; and the New England Farmer, 20 Nov. 1833, p. 145.

<sup>33</sup>Anti-Tobacco, "Anti-Tobacco Society," Maine Farmer, 12 Dec. 1834, p. 371.

<sup>34</sup>Ezekiel Holmes, "Street Smoking," Maine Farmer, 20 Nov. 1838, p. 326.

<sup>35</sup>J. Ambrose Wight, "Tobacco," Prairie Farmer, Aug. 1855, p. 263.

<sup>36</sup>Rural New-Yorker, 28 March 1857, p. 104; 11 April 1857, p. 120. Cited in Demaree, p. 77.

<sup>37</sup>Dan Bradley, "A Moral Garden," The Genesee Farmer, 7 Jan. 1832, p. 4.

<sup>38</sup>Luther Tucker, "A Somber Lesson," The Genesee Farmer, 20 April 1833, p. 121.

<sup>39</sup>"Demon Rum," Western Tiller, 14 July 1859, p. 163.

<sup>40</sup>Alethea, Ohio Cultivator, 15 March 1845, p. 45.

<sup>41</sup>Clara, "The Little Boy's Appeal to His Parent," Boston Cultivator, 30 Jan. 1847, p. 35.

<sup>42</sup>Aunt Fanny, "The Farmer Boy," Ohio Cultivator, 1 Oct. 1862, p. 316.

<sup>43</sup>C.W., "Agriculture--Its Labors, its Profits, its Pleasures.," The Cultivator, Nov. 1850, p. 354.

<sup>44</sup>"The Farm vs. The City," Indiana Farmer, June 1858, p. 65. Echoing Jefferson, the editor later suggests that "cities are at best a necessary evil, and should never be considered the abode of man, in successive generations."

<sup>45</sup>Wm. T. Coggeshall, "City and Country Life," Indiana Farmer, June 1858, p. 67.

46A Lover of the Country, "Poetry and Profit of City Life," Prairie Farmer, Jan. 1850, pp. 18-19.

47B.F. Wilbur, "The Farmer's Life," Massachusetts Ploughman, 24 Aug. 1844, p. 1. (This paper is not consecutively paginated.)

48"Destitution in England," Massachusetts Ploughman, 16 Nov. 1844, p. 4. Other cases include those of "a poor milkman, named Davis," "John Coggins, laborer," "a poor, sick woman named Phillis Peddor," and "an inmate of a Union work house." A farmer from Highworth tells the magistrate: "I have to work in the harvest from daylight to dark like a slave, to pay what I get behind at the shop, and I can't do it then, . . . something must be done. What will be the end of it, I know not. I can't stop longer to see my wife and children nearly half-naked and half-starved."

49Ezekiel Holmes, "Filth in New York City," Maine Farmer, 17 Aug. 1854, p. 2.

50"Correspondence," Indiana Farmer, June 1858, p. 65.

51Thomas G. Fessenden, New England Farmer, 27 May 1835, p. 368.

52Scholars using the term, "agricultural fundamentalism," include Paul H. Johnstone, "Old Ideals Versus New Ideas in Farm Life," in Farmers in a Changing World: The Yearbook of Agriculture, 1940, ed. Gove Hambidge (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Dept. of Agriculture, 1940), p. 117; Gilbert Fite, American Farmers: The New Minority (Bloomington: Univ. of Indiana Press, 1981), p. 4; Wayne C. Rohrer and Louis H. Douglas, The Agrarian Tradition in America: Dualism and Change (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969), pp. 28-9.

53A Stark County Farmer, "From Our Readers," Ohio Cultivator, 15 March 1845, p. 41.

54B.T.L., "Letter From a Ploughboy," Michigan Farmer and Western Agriculturalist, 1 June 1843, p. 58.

55The Genesee Farmer, 7 Nov. 1835, p. 360.

56John S. Wright, Prairie Farmer, Feb. 1848, p. 66.

57"The Farmer," Union Agriculturist and Western Prairie Farmer, Aug. 1841, p. 63.

58John Platt, "Address to Licking County Agricultural Society," Ohio Cultivator, 1 April 1859, p. 112.

59Ibid., p. 113.

<sup>60</sup>Frances D. Gage, "The Sounds of Industry," Ohio Cultivator, 1 Jan. 1851, p. 16. Seven years after its initial appearance, the editor of the Ohio Cultivator said the poem had made the rounds of the press once a year and had been "copied a thousand times"; that it had "been copied, miscopied, and plagiarized until its own mother would not recognize it." Ohio Cultivator, 15 Nov. 1858, p. 351.

<sup>61</sup>Frances D. Gage, "Work," Ohio Cultivator, 15 Dec. 1853, p. 379.

<sup>62</sup>Luther Tucker, "Labor vs. Leisure," The Genesee Farmer, 20 April 1833, p. 121.

<sup>63</sup>Sidney Perham, "An Address to the Kennebec County Agricultural Society," Maine Farmer, 2 March 1848, p. 35.

<sup>64</sup>Luther Tucker, "Labor is Disgraceful?," The Cultivator, May 1852, p. 91.

<sup>65</sup>Ibid., p. 92.

<sup>66</sup>"The Tillers of the Soil," Maine Farmer, 16 Feb. 1854, p. 1.

<sup>67</sup>Jesse Buel, "Matters of Interest to All," The Cultivator, Aug. 1836, p. 72.

<sup>68</sup>H.A.S. Dearborn, New England Farmer, 20 Jan. 1849, p. 34.

<sup>69</sup>S. Blydenburgh, "Advance of Agriculture," The Genesee Farmer, 28 Feb. 1835, p. 66.

<sup>70</sup>H.K. Oliver, "Extract from an Address," American Farmers Magazine, Jan. 1858, p. 23.

<sup>71</sup>"Agriculture," Indiana Farmer, 15 Feb. 1853, p. 187.

<sup>72</sup>Willis Gaylord and Luther Tucker, "Introductory," The Cultivator, Jan. 1840, p. 5.

<sup>73</sup>Ezekiel Holmes, "County Agricultural Schools," Maine Farmer, 23 March 1854, p. 2.

<sup>74</sup>Johnstone, "Old Ideals Versus New Ideas in Farm Life," p. 124.

<sup>75</sup>H.A.S. Dearborn, New England Farmer, 20 Jan. 1849, p. 34.

<sup>76</sup>G.A.O. Beaumont, "Address before meeting held at Ottawa on Nov. 11, 1840," The Union Agriculturist, Feb. 1841, p. 9.

<sup>77</sup>William Ray, "The Plow Boy," The Plough Boy, 31 July 1819, p. 66.

<sup>78</sup>"The Farmer," Kennebec Farmer, 21 Jan. 1833, p. 4.

<sup>79</sup>H.E.G., "The Farmer's Summons," Ohio Cultivator, 1 May 1845, p. 69. The editor introduces the poet as ". . . a young lady, whose initials are familiar to the readers of fugitive poetry in Ohio, and several of her pieces have found their way into the widely circulated periodicals of the east, justly taking rank among the productions of the first poets of our land."

<sup>80</sup>"Agriculture and History," Indiana Farmer, 15 Feb. 1853, p. 185.

<sup>81</sup>T. Burges, "The Plough and the Sickle," New England Farmer, 8 Dec. 1849, p. 408.

<sup>82</sup>Marshall P. Wilder, "First National Cattle Show," Maine Farmer, 23 Nov. 1854, p. 1.

<sup>83</sup>Quoted in Fite, American Farmers, p. 4.

### **CHAPTER 3--Agrarians in Conflict: Agriculture in the Gilded Age**

During the first six decades of the nineteenth century, one of the most significant characteristics of agricultural life in the northern United States was its stability. With the exception of the restless westward migration which continued unabated throughout the period, the years between 1800 and 1860 provided rural Americans with large measures of social and economic equilibrium. Change was usually gradual, often predictable and, therefore, seldom convulsive. The traditional subsistence farming of the colonial period was continued along the successive agrarian frontiers, then gradually replaced by small-scale commercial agriculture as domestic and foreign markets expanded. Improved tillage, cultivation, and harvesting practices enabled farmers to produce more commodities with less labor and risk. Transportation advances made it easier and more economical to move those surplus commodities to the marketplace. Despite sporadic episodes of financial uncertainty, like the depression of 1819-21 and the panics of 1837 and 1857, most farmers were relatively secure, content and optimistic about the future.

As we have seen, the agrarian optimism of the first half of the nineteenth century was sustained, in part, by a pervasive rural belief in agriculture's moral, economic and political importance to the new nation. From a more practical standpoint,



there was also the security of knowing that if farming proved unremunerative in one region, one could always try again a few hundred miles to the north or west. The uncertainty of moving to a new location was tempered by the realization that farm practices and farm life were much the same in Connecticut as they were in Pennsylvania or Ohio. Westward expansion also created more new markets for agricultural goods. The increased demand kept upward pressure on commodities prices which, in turn, meant greater profits for the farmer. Finally, despite some rather violent fluctuations, land values rose progressively from 1815-1860. Rising land values meant greater net worth, and, with greater net worth, the farmer could command greater credit. He could use his credit to expand his acreage, purchase better equipment and improve the quality of his life. By the eve of the Civil War, most northern farmers were convinced that the agrarian promise was gradually being fulfilled and that even better days loomed ahead.<sup>1</sup>

Although the Civil War shook their faith in American unity and progress, it did little to hurt farmers' pocketbooks. The sadness of seeing their sons leave the farmstead to serve in the armies was somewhat assuaged by the vigorous demand for agricultural products. The increased demand was the result of several factors including European crop shortages between 1860-62, the necessity of feeding and clothing a vast army and the continued population growth, particularly in eastern urban areas. Even though England began buying fewer commodities after 1863,

strong greenback prices raised even greater hopes for prolonged prosperity. The result was that most northern farmers remained thoroughly optimistic despite the tumult and tragedy of the war.<sup>2</sup>

Following the Civil War, both the constancy and the prosperity which had characterized nineteenth-century agricultural life were eroded by the powerful currents of change which swept across the American landscape. The comparative stability of the antebellum period gave way to the accelerated and often turbulent change which occurred during the Gilded Age. Dramatic developments in commerce, industry, and transportation, along with staggering technological advances and severe socio-economic dislocations, created bewilderment and confusion throughout America. Like other groups, farmers had difficulty understanding and assimilating all that was swirling around them. On one hand, they could embrace new technology, adopt innovative business strategies and welcome rapidly expanding urban markets. On the other hand, they became increasingly fearful of foreign immigration, they deeply resented growing corporate economic power, and they regarded urban life with unprecedented suspicion and hostility. As a noted agricultural historian has observed, the question for millions of rural people during the Gilded Age was:

To be or not to be . . . should they wholeheartedly accept the emerging commercial system with all of its disturbing elements and conflicting values-- a 'culture that threatened the familiar order with strange, even dangerous ideas,' or should they deny and resist the new age and remain rooted in a more comfortable rural ideology.<sup>3</sup>

To better understand the dilemmas facing farmers in the three decades after the Civil War, it is important to consider some of the major changes in agrarian life which occurred throughout the nineteenth century. In this chapter, I will examine, in a general way, key agricultural developments in the northern United States between 1785 and 1900. I will discuss westward expansion, transportation improvements, increased mechanization, specialized farming and coincidental economic and political developments. This analysis will also include a brief overview of the Gilded Age and a more detailed treatment of two developments which exerted a major influence on farmers during that period: 1) the ascendancy of business power and influence in American life and 2) the ambiguity and ambivalence produced by a dramatically changing society. Both posed serious questions about the continued efficacy of the agrarian creed and also about the vitality of the mythology which arose from it.

**From the Atlantic Seaboard to the Plains: American Agriculture Between 1785 and 1865<sup>4</sup>**

Beginning with the Ordinance of 1785, the United States government spent prodigious time and energy trying to determine equitable ways to distribute the vast public domain. The Ordinance provided for the sale of federal lands to private individuals at public auctions. The minimum lots of 640 acres were sold at a price of not less than \$1 per acre, and the terms were cash. The provisions of the Ordinance were based on two

fundamental objectives: 1) land disposal would encourage westward expansion and national growth and development along agricultural lines and 2) the new government could accumulate some much-needed revenue to bolster its strapped treasury.

Unfortunately, the sales proceeded much more slowly than anticipated. Settlers were discouraged by the British-induced Indian troubles north of the Ohio River. In addition, many states had thoughts of raising land-sale revenues of their own. Thus, state officials viewed the federal program as unwelcome competition and did little to encourage participation. The most serious deterrent to brisker sales, however, was the simple fact that most pioneer farmers could not afford the \$640 required for the minimum purchase. Therefore, many settlers "squatted" on the unsurveyed, vacant lands and formed protective associations to ensure continued occupancy.

Undaunted, and still determined to raise money, the federal government passed subsequent land acts in 1796 and in 1800. Both proved inadequate because the prescribed land price was still more than most farmers could afford, and the required minimum acreage was far in excess of what any farmer could hope to clear and cultivate in a lifetime. In many instances, the lands were purchased by speculators who would offer settlers much smaller lots, but at per-acre prices much higher than the speculator had originally paid to the government. Such practices angered many frontier agrarians, and they began agitating for a more liberalized land distribution system that would discourage

speculation and put more acreage in the hands of small farmers.

The result was the Land Act of 1820 which, among other things, cut the minimum bidding price at public auctions to \$1.25 per acre and reduced the minimum parcel to 80 acres. Although an 80-acre tract was still more than most farmers could successfully till, and the per-acre price was still more than many impoverished pioneer farmers could afford, the more liberal provisions of the new act helped many people become first-time land owners. In addition, the Act of 1820 was the first major legislative step in the direction which would eventually lead to a policy of free land distribution. Throughout the 1840s, a vociferous group of land law reformers urged the passage of homestead legislation as a means of alleviating the economic woes of urban factory workers. Meanwhile, the Preemption Act of 1841 and the Graduation Act of 1854 further encouraged the disposal of public lands, although huge tracts continued to fall into the hands of speculators and timber and mining companies.<sup>5</sup>

As a result of continued pressure from urban reformers and from the agrarian west, the first serious homestead legislation was introduced in Congress in 1852, but it failed to clear the Senate. In 1860, President James Buchanan vetoed a homestead bill, and Congress failed to override. It was not until the enactment of the Homestead Law on May 20, 1862 that the federal government established a policy to distribute free land to farmers. Under the provisions of the Homestead Act, any person could file for 160 acres of unappropriated public land provided

he or she met certain age and citizenship requirements. In order to secure a fee-simple title to the land, the farmer had to live on or farm the claim for five years after filing.

Like the older land laws, the Homestead Act had some major shortcomings. As originally passed, the law excluded anyone who had fought against the United States. This restriction was modified in 1866 so that Confederate veterans could file claims, but some Mexicans, Canadians and Britishers remained ineligible. A more serious problem was that a large portion of the best farmland on the Great Plains quickly went, via federal land grants, to states and to railroad companies. As a result, there was very little first-class frontier cropland available for homesteading during the 1870s and 1880s, especially in western Iowa and Minnesota and in eastern Kansas, Nebraska and the Dakotas. In addition, an exceedingly lax federal regulatory policy encouraged continuous, and often unscrupulous, land speculation. Despite these drawbacks and inequities, the fact remains that many American settlers found it easier and cheaper to secure farmland as the nineteenth century progressed.<sup>6</sup>

Whether stimulated by the increasingly liberal land laws or by the lure of greater economic opportunity or by wanderlust, Americans moved West in increasing numbers between 1820 and 1860. Settlers quickly and aggressively populated the vast interior east of the frontier line--an area lying between the Appalachian Mountains and the Mississippi River, excluding Michigan, Wisconsin and northern portions of Illinois, Indiana, and

Mississippi. Other pioneers gradually pushed the northern frontier line west and north through southern Michigan, Wisconsin, and Minnesota, northern Indiana and Illinois and on into Iowa and eastern Kansas and Nebraska.<sup>7</sup> Between 1815 and 1860, fifteen new states were admitted to the Union, and most were located in the Mississippi River valley. The population of the United States increased from 9.6 million in 1820 to 31.5 million in 1860. The population of Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan and Wisconsin alone grew from approximately 800,000 in 1820 to almost 7 million in 1860--more than a seven-fold increase in just forty years.

Those who had first crossed the Appalachians between 1775 and 1790 moved either along the available waterways--primarily Lake Erie and the Ohio River--by canoe, small sailboat or flatboat, or they travelled along old Indian trails by horseback. Such limited modes of transport and travel meant that westernmost farmers had no reliable way to move surplus commodities to more densely populated markets. The introduction of the steamboat helped resolve this problem. By 1820 steamboats were regularly working the eastern seaboard, the Great Lakes and some of the larger western rivers. In the East, steamboats were built for speed and dependability in order to attract passenger traffic and cargo hauling contracts. But the boats on the western rivers were designed for durability and greater cargo capacity, rather than speed. The steamboats which worked the Mississippi and Ohio rivers and their many tributaries had to operate in shallow and

often treacherous waters while hauling such bulky agricultural products as cotton, grain and livestock. In so doing, these sluggish but reliable vessels helped expand the market for the agricultural products of the interior and provided a substantial impetus to commercial farming.

Another major transportation advance occurred between 1815 and 1840 when Americans undertook--with the help of state government funding--an extensive program of canal construction. In those 25 years, canal mileage increased from 100 to 3,300 miles. Although many of the canal building enterprises were abruptly halted during the Panic of 1837, the Erie Canal proved a notable exception. It was built across relatively flat terrain which helped keep construction on schedule and within budget. When it was completed, the Erie Canal connected the Great Lakes system and the Hudson River. Grain produced in the Northwest Territory could then be shipped from Chicago to New York by water. Like the steamboats, the Erie Canal helped open new markets for the surplus commodities produced by farmers in Ohio, Indiana, Michigan and Illinois.

The preeminence of steamboat and canal transportation was first challenged and later eclipsed by the rapid railroad expansion between 1840-60. In 1830, the United States had just 23 miles of operating railroad. Ten years later, track mileage had increased to 3,000, and by 1860, America boasted over 30,000 miles of track. Most of the new construction occurred in the Northeast and in the Northwest Territory. By 1860, the railroads



had captured most of the passenger traffic east of the Mississippi River and a large portion of the freight business, as well. Although they charged higher freight rates than the steamboats and barges, the railroads proved faster and more dependable. Thus, by the Civil War, the railroads were hauling an important share of the surplus agricultural products of the Midwest to the expanding markets along the East Coast.<sup>8</sup>

In order to produce the commodities necessary to meet growing market demands, the farmer needed more sophisticated tools and implements. The axes, hoes, scythes and wooden plows used by the pioneer farmers were inadequate for a budding commercial agriculture. Throughout the nineteenth century, more efficient farm equipment was developed--beginning with the first cast-iron plow, patented by Charles Newbold in 1797. This implement was improved continuously over the next twenty years, and in 1819 Jethro Wood patented a cast-iron plow with an innovative moldboard design and interchangeable parts. Wood's breakthrough, along with concomitant improvements in cold chipping the cutting edges of the plow, enabled farmers to till and prepare the soil with far less human labor and/or animal power.

Breaking the rich, dense prairie soils in Illinois and Iowa brought new problems, however. The light-weight, cast iron plows could not cut through the heavier prairie sod. Plowshares were easily broken off, and the rough moldboards would not properly purge (scour) the thick soil. Thus, for a time, prairie farmers had to fall back on the cumbersome wooden plows with heavier,

iron shares. Help came first from John Lane, who made a moldboard with a highly polished surface which scoured easily. In 1837, John Deere developed what became known as "the singing plow," a one-piece iron implement with steel cutting edges. By 1857, Deere was producing about 10,000 plows a year, and other manufacturers were marketing equally popular competitors.<sup>9</sup>

Concomitant with advances in plowing technology were improvements in cultivating, planting and harvesting devices. In the 1840s, a two-horse, hinged harrow with iron or steel spikes was introduced. About the same time, a field cultivator appeared that was attached to several small shovel plows that could both break soil and cover seeds. The use of grain drills for planting became increasingly popular in New York and Pennsylvania in the 1840s, and a decade later, they were used throughout the Middle Atlantic states. The practice of planting grain crops with mechanical planters or drills spread to the Midwest during and after the Civil War. In the early 1850s, Cyrus McCormick, after two decades of experimentation, was producing a highly successful mechanical reaper. This important breakthrough meant that farmers no longer had to use the slow and cumbersome grain cradles to gather their crops. More acreage could be harvested in a shorter time and with far less effort.

All the new machines and implements--plows, harrows, planters, cultivators, and reapers--gradually came into widespread use at about the same time. They were developed in the 1820s and 1830s, adopted commercially by innovative farmers in the 1840s, and more

broadly accepted in the 1850s. Because farming operations were-- and are--highly interrelated, advances in one required improvements in the others. It does little good to improve the efficiency of planting, for example, when the task of cultivating remains slow, tedious and frustrating. By the 1850s, farmers in the North and East had achieved a reasonable degree of efficiency in all aspects of grain production--from plowing to harvesting. They had become willing, though cautious consumers of improved agricultural technologies.

Pioneer farmers in the Old Northwest had, until about 1820, essentially the same experiences as settlers along the Atlantic Seaboard during the two centuries of the colonial period. The pioneer farmer first cleared one to three acres of forest land by girdling the trees and digging out the stumps. He planted corn and vegetables in the clearing, while the surrounding forests and streams provided fish, wild game, berries, nuts and other indigenous foodstuffs. As more land was cleared, the pioneer yeoman expanded his corn production and planted some wheat. The wheat was hauled to the local gristmill to grind into flour, which was consumed by the family and neighbors. Gradually, and with the aid of the newly developed farm implements and machines, the farmer expanded his operation until he was producing a small surplus which could be shipped to outside markets. By the mid-1820s, agriculture in the Northwest had taken a decided turn toward commercialization.

New York and Pennsylvania were the leading wheat-producing

states during the first quarter of the nineteenth century. Wheat production was moving steadily westward, however, and by the 1830s, Ohio had become an important producer of wheat and wheat flour. During the 1840s and 1850s, wheat production continued to move westward north of the Ohio River. By the outbreak of the Civil War, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan and Wisconsin were supplying about one-half the wheat produced in the United States. Wheat had quickly become the leading cash crop in the Old Northwest.

Hardier and higher yielding than wheat, corn was the universal grain raised by nineteenth-century American farmers. Like wheat growing, corn production also moved north and west, although much more slowly. In 1840, the first year for which there are statistics, the leading corn-producing states were Virginia, Kentucky and Tennessee. During the next two decades, a corn belt developed north of the Ohio River. By 1860, Illinois, Ohio, Indiana and Missouri had become the leading corn-producing states of the Union. Up until the late 1830s and early 1840s, corn was consumed by the farmer's family or fed to his livestock. With the increased production coming from the new northern Corn Belt, more surplus grain was available for use in the more profitable animal production. By 1860, a thriving hog slaughtering and packing industry had developed in such centers as Cincinnati, which became popularly known as "Porkopolis."<sup>10</sup>

The range cattle industry had long been associated with the frontier north of the Ohio River, where grazing land was more

plentiful. As early as 1805 cattle were driven to east coast markets from northeastern Ohio and Pennsylvania. By 1840 farmers in Ohio, Illinois and Indiana were driving cattle overland to Philadelphia, New York, and even Boston. This long, arduous and expensive process came to an end with the railroad expansion of the 1850s. The cattle-feeding industry expanded as the northern Corn Belt developed, and by 1860, more and more farmers were shipping their beef cattle by rail to the eastern markets.

Between 1820 and 1860, then, the region lying north of the Ohio River and stretching from Ohio to Iowa became America's agricultural heartland. Surplus wheat was shipped eastward through the Great Lakes to the Erie Canal or south along the Ohio and Mississippi rivers to New Orleans. Surplus corn was used to support growing hog and beef-feeding industries. By 1860, agriculture in the Upper Midwest had gradually assumed the principal characteristics of its modern commercial form. Wheat production would continue to move westward after the Civil War, but the feed-livestock business would remain as an economic mainstay of the region.

Agricultural development in New England and the Middle Atlantic states during the first half of the nineteenth century was a somewhat different story. As settlers moved west, eastern agriculture remained comparatively stagnant. Years of primitive and largely exploitative farming practices had depleted valuable soil nutrients; orchards and livestock were often poorly managed. Had it not been for the rapidly growing urban population,

competition from the West may have eliminated much of the agriculture along the Atlantic Seaboard. Instead, the growing cities of New England and the Middle Atlantic region, with their flourishing industry and commerce, created a strong demand for dairy products, poultry, eggs, vegetables, fruit and mutton. In addition, the urban dwellers needed dray horses, carriage horses and the hay and grain to sustain those indispensable steeds. These developments created a shift from general grain and livestock farming to a more highly specialized agriculture throughout the East.

The form of agricultural specialization in a particular area depended on soil type, climate and location. Market gardening and dairying developed in the immediate vicinity of the urban centers, notably around Boston, Baltimore, Philadelphia and New York. The eastern cattle-feeding industry was concentrated in the Connecticut River valley and in southwestern Pennsylvania, where there was a grain surplus. Butter and cheese production flourished in central New York, where ample grazing lands existed and where the Erie Canal provided a ready access to eastern cities. A carriage horse--the Morgan--was developed in Vermont for easy delivery to urban population centers. While farmers in New England and the Middle Atlantic states were losing their grain, pork, wool and beef markets to western producers, their diversification into perishable products and specialized equine livestock enabled many to survive and prosper during this period.

By the 1850s, there were both broad belts and highly

specialized regions of commercial agriculture established in the United States. Many farmers were still operating at a subsistence level, but east of the Mississippi River there were extensive areas in which a great many farmers were producing surplus commodities. In expanding output and creating a surplus for sale, farmers applied the cheap factor, land, to the scarce and dear factors, labor and capital, to the maximum extent possible. A surplus was created and a state of commercialization was achieved, not by increasing yields per acre, but by cultivating as many acres as was technically and economically feasible.<sup>11</sup>

Most agricultural historians agree that despite problems that regularly beset farmers between 1800 and 1865--problems of soil and livestock management, rising and falling land values, available credit, financial crashes, the need for markets, and a war that depleted their labor supply--agriculture had made great strides.<sup>12</sup> Farmers were becoming familiar with such scientific advances as soil and fertilizer analysis. Favorable economic conditions in the 1850s enabled them to buy improved implements and machines. More knowledge of animal husbandry was giving farmers better returns on their capital and labor.

Even the comforts of life were being introduced not only by the landed gentry . . . but by the ordinary farmer. Drafty log houses, with their crude interiors, were being abandoned for frame structures with decorative fireplaces, sturdy stoves with provisions for heating water, sufficient bedrooms to provide for the growing family, and a well-shuttered parlor for the entertainment of visiting clergymen, politicians, and relatives.<sup>13</sup>

Government was just beginning to show a greater responsiveness to

rural needs. Free homesteads were just around the corner, the Agricultural Division of the Patent Office, established in 1839, was publishing useful educational and statistical information, and state governments were increasingly encouraging agricultural fairs and supporting agricultural societies. Government aid to railroads was bringing modern transportation to previously isolated farms, and America's wide-open immigration policy seemed to promise more lucrative domestic markets. Finally, the election of 1860 brought to power a new party pledged to provide free homesteads, support transcontinental railroads and aid agricultural education.

In 1865, things seemed to be going very much in the farmer's favor. However, new forces were taking shape within the nation which neither farmers nor anyone else could clearly foresee. Ironically, the growing commercialization of agriculture would make the farmers increasingly vulnerable to the economic problems which would develop during the Gilded Age--problems like excessive and discriminatory freight rates, rapid inflationary-deflationary cycles, inadequate credit structures and monetary and banking difficulties. Farmers had gradually become cogs in a complicated commercial and industrial machine about which they knew very little. The next three decades would be spent trying to understand and adjust to developments which, in 1865, most farmers could not even begin to anticipate.



**America in the Gilded Age: 1865-1900**

In 1873, a year of severe and widespread economic misery in the U.S., Mark Twain collaborated with a new novelist, Charles Dudley Warner, to publish The Gilded Age. The novel's title, inspired by passages from Macbeth and King John, constitutes a triple pun associating the gilt, guilt and guilds which the authors believed characterized post-Civil War American life. More specifically, the novel focuses on the pervasive greed, dishonesty, political chicanery and intellectual superficiality during President Grant's first administration (1869-72). In stereotypes like Colonel Sellers and Senator Dilworthy, the reader finds hypocrisy, mendacity, coarseness, and naivete. For Twain and Warner, the insouciant optimism, the boisterous materialism and the self-righteous chauvinism of the era were puerile expressions of a crass and insecure period of national adolescence. The lavish balls, garish mansions and other extravagant and popularly captivating trappings of the nouveau riche were seen as awkward attempts to paint a thin veneer of respectability over frequently humble, lower-class origins. Beneath the glittering gilt coating, however, was a drab iron core of economic self interest, intellectual narrowness and cultural provincialism.

Although the Gilded Age has received little critical acclaim through the years, its title has endured as the name most often associated with the period in American history from the end of the Civil War until the beginning of the twentieth century. Perhaps the novel's major significance was its profound influence

on three generations of American historians. As H. Wayne Morgan has suggested, its picture of "bloated dreams, foolish optimism, and grandiloquence" colored most early interpretations of the period.<sup>14</sup> The Gilded Age was portrayed by scholars as a distasteful and mediocre interlude between Lincoln and Theodore Roosevelt, or as a time of wanton materialism and coarse taste, or, at best, as an unfortunate but necessary harbinger of the more enlightened Progressive Era. Vernon Parrington dismissed the period as "the Great Barbecue" and Charles Beard condemned the "cash nexus" that allegedly produced the era's vulgarities and inequities. This view was reinforced by two widely read works by Matthew Josephson, The Robber Barons (1934) and The Politicos (1938), which portray a time of unmitigated political and corporate greed, ruthlessness and corruption.<sup>15</sup> Such interpretations of the Gilded Age have withstood both the passage of time and the appearance of more sophisticated scholarly renderings. In America in the Gilded Age (1984), for example, Sean Dennis Cashman echoes the scathing judgments of earlier historians:

If the age had a motto it might well be, 'The ayes have it,' not only for the celebrated interest in voting stock, but also for the eyes that rejoiced in the glitter of gold, and the I's that define many of the pervasive social themes. Society was . . . indulgent of commercial speculation, social ostentation, and political prevarication but was indifferent to the special needs of immigrants and Indians and intolerant of black Americans, labor unions, and political dissidents.<sup>16</sup>

Although such interpretations tend to gloss over the great complexities of the period, they are certainly not without

foundation. The Gilded Age was already showing substantial tarnish by 1876. The Grant Administration was rife with corruption, mendacity and ineptitude. Despite his commendable record on the battlefield and his widely conceded personal integrity, the President proved an easy mark for individuals like Jim Fisk and Jay Gould, who unsuccessfully tried to corner the gold market in 1869 and later became, through questionable means, powerful railroad magnates. In the midst of his re-election bid in 1872, Grant was rocked by the Credit Mobilier scandal. Later, during his second term, Grant's private secretary, Colonel Babcock, conspired with a group of St. Louis distillers to defraud the government of millions in taxes. Babcock escaped punishment only because of the President's misplaced sense of loyalty. Politically naive, innocent of any real understanding of the new industrial and economic forces shaping society, surrounded by unscrupulous sycophants and purblind by his earlier image as war hero, Grant (along with his administration) became a virtual paradigm for characterizing the many ills of post-Civil War society.

Besides the political turmoil swirling around the Grant regime, the Gilded Age also witnessed the often unprincipled rise in corporate power, the amassing of vast personal fortunes by a small coterie of capitalists, brutal suppression of worker attempts to unionize, the callous subjugation of the South during Reconstruction, widespread agrarian misery, a pronounced official indifference to the plight of minorities, laborers and farmers,

and the beginnings of an increasingly jingoistic policy of international imperialism. Such developments lent credence to historical interpretations which depicted the era as a painful, crass and easily forgotten hiatus in the forward march of American social progress.

More contemporary analyses suggest, however, that the Gilded Age was a far more significant period than earlier commentators believed. Writing in 1969, Richard A. Bartlett acknowledges that "only recently have historians begun a reappraisal of the Gilded Age."

They have discovered this first era of modern America to be complicated, fascinating, and important as a seedbed of the American civilization of the twentieth century. They have found the age a mirror of the present, with the primary theme being change. The great problems were the result of the failure of all facets of the civilization to change and adjust at the same pace.<sup>17</sup>

While scholars may strongly disagree on the desirability, direction and result of such change, they generally concur on its power and scope. For Paul Boller, Jr. the Gilded Age marked the transition from a rural-agrarian federation to an industrial, urban nation-state. In the process, the "formalism" of natural law philosophy--the world view which had dominated American Enlightenment thought--gradually gave way to the concept of evolutionary naturalism.<sup>18</sup> H. Wayne Morgan suggests that even "amid bewildering changes" post-Civil War America valiantly struggled to discover its national identity. The result was the emergence of a modern, unified nation from what had been a disparate "collection of regions, varying in age, economics,

population, and social attitudes."<sup>19</sup> Edward C. Kirkland agrees that dramatic changes during the Gilded Age produced profound social and economic problems. Yet, despite its many shortcomings, the prevailing "individualistic industrial ethic of self-reliance" helped foster a "talent for business enterprise" which became the source of "that great abundance which, in later days, democracy would administer differently."<sup>20</sup>

Less favorably disposed to the sweeping changes wrought during the period, George Frederickson regarded the second half of the nineteenth century as the final triumph of "conservative nationalism." The resulting centralization and consolidation of governmental power turned the Jeffersonian vision of America into an "obvious anachronism" and ultimately "thwarted the drive for humanitarian democracy."<sup>21</sup> Similarly, Norman Pollack contends that "more than an interlude" the Gilded Age "helped to define the twentieth-century corporate order."

Ideology and politics had become synchronized to produce a total capitalistic society and culture. The result was a narrowing of historical alternatives, serving to confirm the ascendant power of business, set boundaries to political and economic democratization, and work against a more socially humane system in the twentieth century.<sup>22</sup>

Despite their widely conflicting opinions regarding the direction America took during the period, most scholars agree on two points central to the present study: 1) the Gilded Age was dominated by a prevailing business ethos that was undergoing a profound metamorphosis even at the height of its popularity and 2) the era confronted Americans with a vast array of social and

technological changes which could be, at once, exhilarating, confusing and deeply disturbing. While both developments significantly affected all segments of American society, they played especially important roles in the transformation of agricultural life during the three decades following the Civil War. Therefore, before turning to a discussion of agriculture in the Gilded Age, I would like to examine each point in some detail.

The northern businessman emerged from the Civil War as the "regnant figure in American life."<sup>23</sup> No longer compelled to compete with the southern industrial and commercial interests for economic power, the resourceful entrepreneur was essentially free to expand his business, exploit new markets and, in the process, make prodigious amounts of money. The accumulation of often staggering profits was encouraged by a number of factors including the expiration of the inheritance tax in 1870 and the abandonment of the income tax in 1872. Corporate and excess profits taxes did not exist--the bulk of governmental revenue coming from duties on selected consumer goods, including liquor and tobacco. In addition to extremely favorable tax laws, businessmen benefited from such things as the national banking system, high protective tariffs, generous land grants to the railroads and the authorized importation of contract labor. Throughout much of the Gilded Age, Democrats and Republicans alike were eager to support policies and programs which would help further business interests.<sup>24</sup>

Among other less noticeable developments, such pro-business conditions helped produce individual wealth on an unprecedented scale. John D. Rockefeller and Andrew Carnegie each amassed personal fortunes approximating a billion dollars. In 1892, the New York Tribune reported over 4,000 American millionaires including such familiar names as Cornelius Vanderbilt in railroads, Gustavus Swift in meat, Charles Pillsbury in grain, Frederick Weyerhauser in lumber, and John Pierpont Morgan in railroads and finance. By 1900, the Senate could claim twenty-five millionaires among its members, a fact which caused cynics to dub the legislative body as the "Rich Man's Club" and the "House of Dollars."<sup>25</sup>

Although the rapid accumulation of such wealth and power eventually caused widespread concern, most public criticism was not leveled at the millionaires as individual entrepreneurs. When specific businessmen were reviled, it was usually because of their leadership roles in large and powerful corporations and monopolies.<sup>26</sup> This curious distinction between public admiration of personal financial success and public outrage over corporate growth and prosperity helps to illuminate one of the most interesting and important paradoxes of the period.

Most post-Civil War Americans sincerely believed in what Irvin Wyllie has termed a "rags-to-riches" mythology.<sup>27</sup> The myth extolled the virtues of self help. It proclaimed that economic success or failure was entirely within the hands of each individual and had nothing to do with external circumstances.

Although the myth had little basis in reality, it held great sway among the people. Tycoons like Vanderbilt and Carnegie found it fashionable (and perhaps convenient) to portray themselves as self-made men who had earned their money by the sweat of their brow. Horatio Alger, Unitarian chaplain to the Newsboys' Lodging House in Manhattan, exploited the popularity of the self-help cult in a series of children's books. The virtues of determination, honesty and hard work were central to such tales as Ragged Dick (1867), Luck and Pluck (1869) and Tattered Tom (1871), all of which sold in the millions of copies.

The philosophy of self help was not unique to the Gilded Age, however. Protestant theology had long emphasized the link between economic well-being and spiritual salvation. For the Puritans, wealth was a measure of God's favor. From earliest colonial times, qualities like industry, thrift and self-reliance had received universal clerical approbation. Benjamin Franklin was not only an early proponent of the myth, but his life became the paradigm representation of the self-made man. The popularity of his writings provides ample evidence of the widespread acceptance of the myth during the first half of the nineteenth century.

Following the Civil War, the notion of "rags-to-riches" was greatly bolstered--at least on a theoretical plane--by the emergence of Social Darwinism, a new philosophy which blended large measures of Herbert Spencer's extreme version of laissez-faire economics and Charles Darwin's theories of biological



evolution. Social Darwinism held that social progress was largely the result of the struggle for subsistence. Such a view placed great emphasis on individual intelligence, skill and determination. Spencer, who coined the phrase, "survival of the fittest," seven years prior to the appearance of The Origin of the Species (1859), opposed state aid to the poor because such intervention would artificially prolong the existence of those unfit to compete in economic life. He also disapproved of protective tariffs, state banking, land grants and other governmental incursions into the market place. For many influential intellectuals and for those few businessmen familiar with it, Social Darwinism seemed to confirm the self-help creed.<sup>28</sup> Anyone with native intelligence and "pluck" could succeed in America--regardless of socio-economic background and despite unnecessary governmental meddling.

Therefore, it wasn't the fact that certain shrewd and ambitious entrepreneurs rose to the pinnacles of industrial and financial power that critics objected to. Rather, it was when some of those same businessmen sought--through a determined and sometimes unscrupulous courting of governmental favor--to consolidate economic power, reduce competition and artificially ensure profitability, that many Americans began to take umbrage. Government measures establishing protective tariffs and encouraging the formation of monopolies and trusts not only violated the precepts of Social Darwinism and the "rags-to-riches" mythology, but, perhaps more importantly, they also ran

counter to what Sidney Fine has called the "doctrine of negative state."<sup>29</sup>

Central to this traditional doctrine was the belief that free people, if left to their own devices, could solve most of their problems without government aid.

According to accepted theory . . . the ideal economy--the only one sanctioned by nature--was made up of freely competing individuals operating in a market unrestricted by man but fairly ruled by the inexorable forces of natural law. The ideal polity was achieved by bargaining among free and equal individuals under the benevolent eye of nature. It was assumed that, in economic affairs, impartial rivalry between individual entrepreneurs and free competition would automatically serve the best interests of society by preventing anyone from getting more than his fair share of the wealth.<sup>30</sup>

Implied in the philosophy of negative state were familiar Enlightenment beliefs in natural law, the inevitability of progress, the efficacy of reason and the self-sufficiency of the individual. Also implied were the more moderate laissez faire teachings of classical political economy, beginning with the physiocrats and then more fully developed by Adam Smith. This notion of laissez faire was expressed in the liberal tradition of Jeffersonian and Jacksonian democracy and, as we have seen, was also central to the agrarian creed.

When businessmen followed the "rules" of classical (or even Spencerian) laissez faire, their achievements were generally applauded, their practices widely admired and emulated. Problems began developing when some industrialists and financiers recognized that unbridled laissez faire could also mean cutthroat competition, uncertain profits and "boom-and-bust" economic

cycles. What they preferred, instead, was a rationalized business environment in which competition was reduced or eliminated, annual profitability was ensured and the economy would steadily and perpetually improve. In short, they wanted to stabilize the marketplace, and they turned to the government for help.<sup>31</sup> Thus, at the same time they were publicly extolling the virtues of free enterprise, these businessmen were privately taking steps calculated to undermine it. In so doing, they may have helped foster a new and more enlightened philosophy of governmental responsibility, but, in the eyes of many of their contemporaries (including farmers), they were violating the accepted standards of economic fair play.

The paradox surrounding the rhetoric of laissez faire versus the reality of government intervention contains an important and ironic capstone. For even as other interest groups were vehemently denouncing governmental action on behalf of business, they were simultaneously demanding that state and federal legislators and agencies take strong steps to ensure equal economic opportunity. Neither laboring nor farming interests, for example, were the least bit reluctant to call for government assistance in a variety of arenas. For the farmers, who had traditionally championed self-reliance and rugged frontier individualism, the persistent pleas for state and federal help marked a significant departure from past practices. As we shall see, however, agrarians did not abandon self help and laissez faire while they agitated for government action. Yet, like the

monopolists they frequently admonished, farmers also wanted to reduce damaging competition, stabilize commodity prices and guarantee profitability. Like the industrialists and financiers, farmers wanted government aid without government control. Thus, they, too, were pointing the way toward "the positive state . . . a new liberalism embodying something of the spirit of Jeffersonianism but ready to use government as an agency to promote the general welfare."<sup>32</sup>

The second development that is central to understanding the agricultural transformation during the Gilded Age is the sweeping and often turbulent social and technological change that characterized the era. In 1865, the U.S. population stood at 35,701,000. Twelve years later, it had increased to over 47,000,000, and by 1901, it had reached 77,584,000, with immigration accounting for about a third of the growth.<sup>33</sup> Most of the 10 million immigrants who crossed the Atlantic between 1860 and 1890 came from Britain, Ireland, Scandinavia, Holland, and Switzerland. After 1890, increasing numbers came from eastern and southern Europe, including Italy, Greece, Austria-Hungary, Russia, Rumania and Turkey.

Most of the newcomers settled in the cities, where they were joined by native Americans who had left rural areas in search of urban fame and fortune. The result was a decrease in the proportion of people living in small towns and on farms. In the last forty years of the century, the farm population grew from 19,000,000 to 28,000,00, but the non-farm population grew from

12,000,000 to 48,000,000, an increase of 400 per cent. In 1880 twenty American cities boasted 100,000 or more inhabitants, while by 1900 there were thirty-eight such urban areas. The big cities grew at staggering rates: New York from 1,912,000 in 1880 to 3,437,000 in 1900; St. Louis from 351,000 to 575,000; Pittsburgh from 235,000 to 452,000; and San Francisco from 234,000 to 343,000. Chicago recorded the most spectacular growth. In 1850, the Windy City had a population of 30,000; in fifty years it leaped to 1,699,000. Middle-sized cities like Detroit, Cleveland, Milwaukee and Omaha doubled in size during the same period.<sup>34</sup>

Although rural areas grew far less dramatically than urban centers, the farm population still increased by approximately 50 percent between 1860-1900. Lured by promises of cheap and bounteous agricultural lands on the prairies and the Great Plains, large numbers of people trekked westward during the Gilded Age. Some of the settlers were immigrants, but the majority were eastern and midwestern farmers who had decided to leave their respective agricultural regions for what they believed were the more fertile and resilient soils of the Trans-Mississippi West.<sup>35</sup> The resulting population increases in those areas had much to do with the admission of nine new states to the Union, beginning with Nebraska in 1867. Colorado was granted statehood nine years later, followed by Montana, Washington, North Dakota and South Dakota, all in 1889. Idaho and Wyoming were admitted in the following year, and, after the resolution of

the polygamy controversy, Utah became a state in 1896.

These widely dispersed people were connected by a railroad network that expanded at an even greater rate than it had between 1840 and 1860. The first transcontinental railroad opened in 1869. By 1900 America boasted 193,000 miles of iron-and-steel rails, over twice the mileage of 1880 and over five times the mileage at the end of the Civil War. The largest increase in track mileage was west of the Mississippi where the rails spread out from 12,000 miles in 1870, to 32,000 in 1880, and 87,000 by the end of the century. Railroads encouraged westward migration by offering free transportation and real estate values to potential settlers. They also stimulated industrial growth both as a giant consumer and as a conveyer of goods and services to new markets. Despite several problems associated with their development, the railroads were largely responsible for the general health of the business economy during the period and for the rapid settlement of the West.<sup>36</sup>

The dramatic growth of the railroads was but one among a myriad of major technological developments in post-Civil War America. Between 1860 and 1890, approximately 440,000 patents were issued for new inventions, including those for the steam boiler, electric lamp, telephone, telegraph stock ticker, typewriter, elevator and linotype compositor.<sup>37</sup> Such discoveries not only increased industrial growth, public knowledge and business efficiency, but they also provided the technological and commercial impetus to develop even more sophisticated and

beneficial inventions. When Grover Cleveland pressed the button that opened the 1893 Columbian Exposition near Chicago, a massive, 14,000-horsepower engine began generating the electricity to power every exhibit in Machinery Hall. Just seventeen years earlier, visitors to the Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia had gaped in awe while the Corliss engine--featured as a symbol of American industrial progress--produced a comparatively paltry 1,400 horsepower.<sup>38</sup>

The dramatic population shifts, urban growth, technological advancements and industrial expansion created great tensions in the culture. Many Americans viewed such developments with great optimism. The United States seemed on the brink of becoming one of the richest and most powerful nations in the world. Immigration and western expansion were creating new markets which, in turn, would provide greater business opportunities. Developments in transportation and communication were uniting the nation as never before. The vast array of technological improvements appeared to provide ample evidence of America's unlimited potential. Writing in 1884, the Harvard philosopher and popular historian John Fiske conveyed a sense of the exuberant faith shared by large segments of American society:

The future is lighted for us with radiant colours of hope. Strife and sorrow shall disappear. Peace and love shall reign supreme. The dream of poets, the lesson of priest and prophet, the inspiration of the great musician, is confirmed in the light of modern knowledge; and . . . we may look forward to a time when in the truest sense the kingdoms of this world shall become the Kingdom of Christ.<sup>39</sup>

For others, however, the turbulent changes brought difficult

and troubling problems which seemed to threaten the stability of American society. They pointed to the economic hardships and subsequent political unrest among many farmers and workers. They saw in the different languages and customs of immigrants a serious threat to native values and traditions. They noted that urban growth was accompanied by the proliferation of crime, poverty and moral decay. They believed that much of the era's business prosperity came at the expense of the less powerful segments of society. They viewed the accumulation of new machines and gadgets as the harbinger of cultural decadence and, ultimately, even social chaos. These feelings of anxiety and pessimism were perhaps best expressed by Henry Adams, who, while visiting the Great Exposition of 1900 in Paris, founding himself "lying in the Gallery of Machines . . . his historical neck broken by the sudden irruption of forces totally new."<sup>40</sup> For the bewildered Adams, all the newly unleashed technological power seemed to be out of control. Upon arriving in New York City in 1904, Adams dolefully observed that:

The outline of the city became frantic in its effort to explain something that defied meaning. Power seemed to have outgrown its servitude and to have asserted its freedom. The cylinder had exploded, and thrown great masses of stone and steam against the sky. The city had the air and movement of hysteria, and the citizens were crying, in every accent of anger and alarm, that the new forces must at any cost be brought under control.<sup>41</sup>

For the sensitive and exceedingly pessimistic Adams and many other Americans, the order and harmony of an earlier America had been forever been displaced by the fragmentation, confusion and



discord of industrial society.

Thus, the result of the dramatic change that racked the Gilded Age was a society torn between buoyant optimism, on one hand, and cynicism, anxiety and fear on the other. Nowhere was this ambivalence more apparent than in the agricultural sector. Continuing patterns established well before the Civil War, farmers entered the Gilded Age eagerly embracing innovative marketing practices, purchasing new, more sophisticated implements and machinery, and expanding or diversifying their farm operations. As time went on, however, agrarian optimism began to erode in the wake of sustained economic hardship, growing urban financial power and relentless social and technological change. To better understand this dramatic shift in agrarian attitudes, let us now consider the agricultural developments during the Gilded Age.

#### **The Troubled Farmer: American Agriculture Between 1865 and 1893<sup>42</sup>**

Settlement west of an imaginary line running from St. Paul, Minnesota to Fort Worth, Texas proceeded very slowly during the 1860s. The preoccupation with the Civil War and Indian troubles on the frontier slowed the tide of migration into the Great West. But homesteading rapidly increased in western Minnesota during the late 1860s after thousands of young men were mustered out of Grant's and Lee's armies. By the early 1870s, a settlement boom was well underway on the prairie regions of the Iowa-Minnesota-

Dakota-Nebraska frontier.

As in earlier periods of westward expansion, many of the new arrivals came from states just east of the frontier line. Except for the dearth of trees, the upper midwestern prairie lands, with their rolling terrain, rich brown soil and fairly dependable rainfall, were very similar to farmland in Ohio, Illinois, Indiana, Wisconsin and Michigan. Emigrants could use about the same agricultural practices to grow corn and small grains, but they could do so on cheaper land Northwest. Conventional wisdom held that the region west and southwest of St. Paul to eastern Kansas was the most promising farming area in the United States not then under the plow.

Restless native Americans and large numbers of European immigrants came to the prairies in droves. Many traveled by covered wagon pulled by yokes of oxen, while others came by rail. Often when settlers arrived, the free land was gone. Then they had to either turn back or to buy acreage from railroad agents, the state government or independent speculators. Those who had covered wagons could also take their chances further west past the 98th meridian. Some stopped on the Great Plains, while others pushed on the California and the Pacific Northwest.

While many pioneers came to the prairies entirely of their own volition, others found encouragement in the promotional activities of railroads and state and territorial agencies. Railroad recruiting officers operated throughout the East as well as in northern Europe. The railroads would frequently haul

would-be settlers into Kansas, Nebraska, Minnesota or the Dakotas free of charge and then sell them grant land for between \$2 and \$10 an acre, depending on location.<sup>43</sup> Not to be outdone, the new states and territories also established settlement or immigration agencies to promote sales of their own lands in hopes of raising revenues and increasing populations. When the established habit of pioneering was coupled with free land policies or the attractive inducements proffered by railroad companies and by state and local governments, the subhumid prairies of the upper and central frontier succumbed to settlement in a few short years after the Civil War.

As the prairies east of the 98th meridian began filling up, pioneers pushed west onto the Great Plains proper--an arid land with ten to twenty inches of annual precipitation, a short grass cover and almost entirely devoid of trees. Although scientists in the United States Geological Survey continued to warn settlers that the region was unsuitable for conventional farming, the dry governmental reports were no match for either the restless pioneering will or for the ebullient promotional rhetoric from the railroads and local communities. By 1880 settlers were taking up homesteads and buying land in the westernmost regions of Kansas. In the next decade, similar agricultural settlements had spread throughout western Nebraska and on into eastern Colorado.<sup>44</sup>

The first settlers on the Plains usually selected farming sites along streams or in river bottoms where water was readily

available and wood could be found for building. But such sites were quickly exhausted, and the farmers who came later had to establish their homesteads on the open, treeless Plains. These later settlers had to either dig deep wells or haul their water great distances. Because lumber was scarce on the Plains, settlers typically built their houses, and sometimes shelters for their livestock, out of blocks of the grass sod. Sod houses were not aesthetically pleasing and often lacked windows, but because of the thickness of the walls, they were relatively warm in the winter and cool in the summer, an important consideration given the extreme climatic vicissitudes on the Plains.<sup>45</sup>

In the 1870s, settlers in western Minnesota and the eastern Dakotas usually planted wheat as their cash crop and patches of potatoes and other vegetables for family use. Farmers in Kansas and Nebraska usually planted corn as the major cash crop and a garden for family use. But because most of these settlers came from humid areas, either in the United States or in Europe, and knew little conserving soil moisture, their cash crops often shriveled and failed. The lack of experience in farming a more arid climate was compounded by the occurrence of one weather-related disaster after the other. Droughts, hot winds, dust storms, prairie fires and grasshoppers were a constant menace to crop production. The Plains environment proved a hard and cruel teacher, and many first-generation settlers were forced to abandon their farms and either move further west to the Pacific slope or return to family and relatives in the East.

For every pioneer family that failed, another quickly came along and took its place, so that grain production on the Great Plains was firmly established by 1890. In the process, however, grain farmers encountered problems other than a hostile physical environment. One was the severe economic conditions created by a combination of factors including low commodity prices, constricted credit and high interest rates. Another was the cattlemen who competed with the farmers for the open plains lands. The business of cattle ranching on the Great Plains was exciting and even profitable after the railroads reached the area in the 1870s. Ranchers wanted to keep the range open for grazing, but grain farmers wanted to cultivate it. In some cases, the land disputes between the "sod-busters" and the ranchers were resolved legally; at other times, the differences were settled by open, and often bloody range wars. Gradually, the crop farmers prevailed by sheer force of numbers, and by the 1890s, little open range land remained. Cattle barons fenced their large ranches to keep cattle in, and the grain farmers fenced their smaller holding to keep the cattle out.<sup>46</sup>

The process of farm mechanization which was well underway in the 1840s and which reached widespread proportions in the 1850s, continued and accelerated between 1860 and 1893. The shortage of manpower on farms during the Civil War years greatly stimulated the use of labor-saving cultivators, reapers and mowing machines. The intensified use of new farm machinery occurred primarily in the Midwest, on the eastern fringe of the Great Plains, and in

California and the Pacific Northwest. Eastern farmers were concentrating on dairying and specialty crops, enterprises which had not yet been significantly mechanized. But on the vast grain-producing prairies of the Midwest and on the Plains, farmers were rapidly adopting new planting, cultivating and harvesting technologies.

The new and improved machines that made the greatest impact on cropping operations in this period included the riding, or sulky, plow, the spring tooth harrow, the seed drill, row crop cultivators, forage mowers, the twine binder, and grain-threshing machines. The grain combine also made its appearance in the far West. The early combines were propelled by huge teams of draft animals, and keeping these teams fed and sheltered was expensive and time-consuming. As a result, steam tractors began to appear on large farms and ranches in the far West in the 1890s. But they proved unreliable and dangerous. There was always the risk that sparks from an engine would set a field of ripe grain on fire. Thus steam tractors enjoyed a relatively brief period of prominence in American agricultural history before the gasoline tractor displaced it.<sup>47</sup>

Other important advances in transportation and food processing helped expand production and marketing opportunities for farmers. Both water and rail transportation improved during the Gilded Age as time in transit and shipping costs fell. The development of the refrigerator car meant that growers and distributors could ship fresh meat and produce over long distances. The birth of

the canning industry opened up a market for large quantities of fruits and vegetables which led to the development of specialized truck farming. Commercial canning of perishable commodities preserved food so that it could be easily stored, handled and transported.<sup>48</sup>

The continued settlement of the prairies and the Great Plains, along with the advances in production, transportation and processing technologies, accelerated the agricultural specialization that had gained momentum in the 1840s and 1850s. Given the comparative economies of scale, farmers in the East and Midwest simply could not compete with the western grain growers. The Northeast continued to specialize in fruit, truck crops, and dairy production--particularly dairy production. The region lying north of the Ohio River and stretching westward from western Ohio, across Indiana, Illinois, Iowa, and into eastern Nebraska and Kansas, as well as northward into the southern tiers of counties in Michigan, Wisconsin, and Minnesota, became the Corn Belt. Some of the surplus corn produced in this region was shipped to the Eastern Seaboard and some was exported abroad, but most was used to fatten the hogs and beef cattle needed to satisfy America's growing appetite for red meat. North of the Corn Belt, in the Lake States, farmers began specializing in manufactured dairy products. In the western part of this area, in Wisconsin and Minnesota, small grain production remained important in the nineteenth century. But wheat production kept moving westward until it reached the Great Plains, and there it

stopped. The Great Plains became one great wheat-producing belt from the Canadian border to northern Texas. Certain areas on the Plains (e.g., the Flint Hills of Kansas and the Sand Hills of Nebraska) that did not lend themselves to crop production became enclaves of cattle ranching, but the remainder of the Great Plains with an average annual rainfall of fifteen inches or more became one great wheat field. On the western edge of the Plains, where annual precipitation fell below fifteen inches, and in the Rocky Mountain and the intermountain regions outside the irrigated valleys, cattle and sheep ranching became firmly established in the 1880s and 1890s. The irrigated valleys of the mountain, intermountain, and Pacific regions of the Great West turned to the production of fruit and truck crops in the late nineteenth century. Although some agricultural production areas have shifted slightly in the twentieth century, the specialized regions that existed by 1900 largely remain today.

By any previous standard of measurement, agricultural change during the Gilded Age was staggering. Between 1867 and 1900 farmers put more land under cultivation than they had opened up in the previous 260 years. Between 1860 and 1900, the number of U.S. farms rose from 2,044,077 to 5,739,657, and improved farm acreage increased from 163,110,720 to 414,793,191. About 1,141,276 of the new farms and about 130,730,000 acres of improved land were added by the 19 western states and territories settled after 1860.<sup>49</sup> The more than doubling of the land in farms, the increased specialization in production, and the



widespread substitution of machines for human labor dramatically affected total farm output. Between 1870 and 1900, total farm output increased by 135 percent. Between 1870 and 1880, alone, output increased by 53 percent.

The dramatic increases in farm production were the result of more farms, more agricultural workers, more machines and more acres under cultivation. Yields per acre of wheat, corn, barley, cotton, hay and potatoes increased but slightly. In economic terms, agricultural growth in the Gilded Age was extensive rather than intensive. Between 1866 and 1900, wheat production increased almost four times, corn production three and a half times, barley six and a half times and cotton almost five times. The number of cattle on farms approximately doubled between 1867 and 1900, and the number of hogs on farms increased by about 50 percent. Output was increasing across the spectrum of commodities, but the greatest growth was in the traditional crops.

As his operation became more productive, specialized and commercialized, the farmer increasingly came to view himself as a modern businessman. The object of farming was no longer simply to make a living, but to make money. Many beef, pork, dairy and vegetable producers began selling their commodities to marketing agents, jobbers and other middlemen representing urban wholesalers and merchandisers. Following the lead of progressive Wisconsin and Minnesota dairymen, agrarians began forming their own cooperative marketing associations to more profitably sell

their products. Farmers also began adopting more sophisticated bookkeeping procedures, especially cost accounting. More sophisticated management and marketing practices were also encouraged in the agricultural press and taught in the newly emerging land-grant colleges.

As he became more concerned with efficient management and marketing, the farmer's attitude toward labor changed. He gradually came to regard himself not merely as an independent working man, but as an employer and commercial proprietor. Traditionally, the hired hand on most northern American farms had been treated like a member of the family. During the second half of the nineteenth century, the hired man was gradually moved out of the parlor and, then, out of the house. What had been an informal, egalitarian relationship between the farmer and his helpers became formal and stratified. This increasing identification with the employer class had a great deal to do with the rural hostility toward the labor movements which were occurring during the period.<sup>50</sup>

With the prevailing agricultural expansion, the increased productivity in all major commodity groups and the growing business acumen of the farmer-manager, one may well wonder why agrarians became more and more disenchanted as the Gilded Age progressed. A large part of the growing anger and resentment was the result of the "nearly continuous depressions" farmers endured between 1867 and 1898.<sup>51</sup> As production figures soared, commodity prices fell irregularly but persistently from the end of the

Civil War until 1896. The price of wheat dropped sharply from \$2.06 per bushel in 1866 to 95 cents per bushel in 1874 and then declined irregularly to 49 cents per bushel in 1894. Corn followed a similar pattern, declining from 75 cents per bushel in 1869 to 31 cents per bushel in 1878, and then to 21 cents per bushel in 1896. In Kansas, during the late 1800's, corn dropped a low as 10 cents a bushel and was burned for fuel instead of the more expensive coal. The index of prices received by farmers for all farm products (1910-14=100) declined from 119 in 1869 to 66 in 1878 and then to 53 in 1896.<sup>52</sup>

With sharply falling product prices, particularly in the 1870s and again in the 1890s, the gross returns of the average farmer also had to fall. If he was buying his land or equipment on time at a fixed price, as many were, this meant that he had to meet fixed payments out of a declining gross income. The fact that nonfarm-produced goods were falling at about the same rate as farm products was of no great consequence for most farmers because they had always held their purchases of nonfarm-produced consumer goods to a minimum. Further, although railroad freight rates were also falling during this period, the decline in the official rates did not keep pace with the decline in farm product prices. And where the railroads held monopolies in the great grain-growing regions west of Chicago, and, to a somewhat lesser extent in the East, the farmer-users were subjected to all types of rate and service discrimination and abuse. In the 1870s (to a lesser extent in the 1880s) and in the 1890s, farmers found

themselves in a situation where their gross returns were down but that their fixed financial commitments were not. When they tried to borrow money to meet their obligations, they were told that ready cash was scarce and interest rates were high. When short-term loans were available in western communities, the interest often ran as high as 3 percent a month--about double that for eastern farmers. Plowmen began to believe they were being bullied and cheated by railroads, bankers, and middlemen. It was little wonder that they began talking darkly about monopolistic conspiracies and the shadowy intricacies of high finance.<sup>53</sup>

Another important, but often ignored cause of agrarian economic woes in this period was the basic, and recurring problem of overproduction. Total farm output, it will be recalled, increased 53 percent between 1870 and 1880, but the population of the United States increased only 26 percent. In other words, approximately one-half of the increased farm output in the 1870s had to find a "market" either abroad or in the form of increased per capita food consumption at home. Farm exports did substantially increase during this period, and domestic per capita food consumption probably increased somewhat. But these two avenues of increased use, even when coupled with the large U.S. population growth, could not come close to paralleling the tremendous production surge. Ironically, then, farmers contributed to their own economic malaise even as they were becoming better producers and more efficient managers.<sup>54</sup>

The farmers on the western prairies and the Great Plains were

beset not only with economic woes, but with the tremendous physical hardships mentioned above. While the eastern or midwestern farmer might have to sell his commodities at depressed prices, at least he could generally count on having the crops to market. Prairie fires, hail, drought, and, worst of all, grasshoppers could wipe out an entire crop, leaving virtually nothing to sell. Drought and the grasshopper plagues were particularly sinister because they affected large geographic areas and decimated thousands of western farmers. Because their financial resources were limited, most of these pioneer farmers could ill afford to lose even a portion of their harvest. The loss of one entire crop meant, at best, short rations for a year. At the worst, it meant bankruptcy and, in many cases, starvation.

Destitution was widespread on the central Plains frontier in the 1870s. Economic conditions improved somewhat in the early 1880s, and the dreaded grasshopper plague seemed to have worn itself out. Farmers were learning to live and farm under semi-arid conditions. But the recurrence of widespread drought in the late 1880s and desperate economic conditions in the early 1890s caused even greater hardships on the Plains in those years.

Throughout America, but especially in the South and West, farmers responded to the hard times of the 1870s, 1880s, and 1890s by well-organized and collective business and political actions. In so doing, they at least partially abandoned traditional agrarian beliefs in self-reliance, rugged individualism and the negative state. This was the first

widespread agrarian uprising of such a nature in American history. The membership of the Patrons of Husbandry, better known as the Grange, reached an estimated 1.5 million in 1874 and continued to grow until early in 1875. The Farmers Alliance movement, which operated under several different names and which sometimes had separate organizations in the North and in the South, claimed over a million members in 1890. The Populist political party emerged in large measure out of the Farmers' Alliances and met with considerable success in 1892, particularly in the West, when over a million votes were cast for its presidential candidate, James B. Weaver of Iowa. Its reached its zenith in 1894 when it received a million and a half votes and elected seven congressmen and six senators to the United States Congress.<sup>55</sup>

The Grange attempted to help the farmer in two general ways: (1) by enacting legislation in the states for the regulation of railroads and (2) by establishing marketing, processing, manufacturing, and purchasing cooperatives for its members. In the short run, the Grange was unsuccessful in both these economic ventures. Within a few years most of the granger laws--railroad regulatory laws--were repealed or declared invalid by the courts, and most of the cooperative ventures failed financially. But, in 1876, the Supreme Court affirmed the right of states to regulate the railroads. And in their cooperative business ventures the Grangers learned some valuable lessons which ultimately helped later farmers' groups.

The Farmers' Alliances were active in everything from catching horse and cattle thieves to advocating the free and unlimited coinage of silver. On most issues they met with only limited success, but they were successful in 1891 in conjunction with the Knights of Labor and the Patrons of Industry and other reform organizations in forming the new Populist party. In order to achieve this union of farm and labor interests, the Alliance temporarily overcame a growing rural distrust of labor unions. The Populists advocated such progressive measures as a national currency issued and managed by the federal government, the free coinage of silver, a graduated income tax, government ownership and control of the railroads and telegraph lines, and the abolition of land monopolies. Although many farmers in the East and Midwest looked somewhat askance at the Populist Movement, they were in basic agreement with many of the party's platform planks--especially those relative to railroad regulation and the abolition of monopolies. A major bone of contention, however, was the silver plank. Most eastern farmers were not strapped with the same credit and cash flow burdens as their western counterparts. They felt more secure with the gold standard and regarded bimetallism as a dangerous tampering with economic laws.<sup>56</sup>

In 1892, the Populists succeeded in casting more than a million votes and two years later they increased their totals by half. Then, in hopes of exerting a major influence on the Presidency, the Populists fused with the Democrats in support of

William Jennings Bryan in 1896. It was a gamble that failed along with Bryan's candidacy, and the Populist party thereafter virtually disintegrated.

While most of the reforms advocated by Alliancemen and Populists were not enacted until the Progressive Era, agrarian political activism did lead to some significant legislative gains during the Gilded Age. At the federal level, farm-group pressure was instrumental in the passage of both the Interstate Commerce Act in 1887 and the Sherman Anti-Trust Act of 1890. Although these measures proved largely ineffectual, they at least marked the beginning of governmental attempts to regulate abusive business practices. Also in 1887, Congress passed the Hatch Act which provided for the creation of a national network of agricultural experiment stations where scientists could conduct research beneficial to farmers. Earlier agrarian political pressure had prompted the establishment of the United States Department of Agriculture in 1862. Although the U.S.D.A. was primarily research oriented, it achieved a greater degree of political standing in 1889 when President Cleveland made the Department's chief executive a secretary of agriculture. The same measure provided for an assistant secretary of agriculture to be appointed by the President.

The more exciting political action was occurring at the state and local levels. Much of this official intervention came as a direct result of increased agrarian agitation through the Grange and Farmer's Alliance. While the federal government was mouthing



the rhetoric of laissez faire and the negative state, the Grangers were securing at least temporary state legislation setting rates and rules for railroads. In such strong Alliance regions as Minnesota, Iowa, Nebraska, Kansas and the Dakotas, state and local governments regularly wrestled with the problem of helping their destitute settlers. Sometimes these governments sponsored voluntary relief organizations that raised funds within the state and in the East. In Minnesota during the difficult winter of 1871-72, Governor Austin appealed to the public for contributions of cash and food to assist the suffering settlers. A relief fund of nearly \$20,000 was created and distributed to impoverished families in amounts ranging from \$5 to \$25 to buy food and seed for the coming year. On some occasions, the state governments approved emergency relief legislation earmarking funds for food and seed. In February 1872, the Kansas legislature passed a relief law in the amount of \$2,000 for the purpose of helping farmers buy corn, oats and wheat seed. Such humanitarian acts, as limited as they were, helped many pioneer families survive. They also provided an enlightened contrast to such deplorable measures as President Cleveland's veto of a bill to distribute free seed to draught-stricken Texas settlers in 1887.<sup>57</sup>

Increasingly, farmers attempted to use the power of government to create an economic system that was more responsive to their needs. It was true that during the first half of the nineteenth century, agrarians had consistently urged federal support for

liberalized land distribution policies, agricultural colleges and institutes and the establishment of an independent department of agriculture. To achieve these ends, agricultural leaders calmly encouraged farmers to write letters to their congressmen, and local agricultural societies sent redundant, but polite resolutions calling for state and federal action. During the 1870s, 80s and 90s, however, agrarians exerted organized, and often strident political pressure on the federal government to curb the power of great monopolies, to create a more flexible and liberal monetary system, and to reform the tax system. They largely failed in these efforts because they did not fully understand the complexities of the economic system which they sought to reform and because they could not match the power of the entrenched economic interests which they sought to regulate. But the hard lessons they learned would help future agrarians win important political battles throughout the twentieth century--victories that accumulated even as the numbers of American farmers continued to decline.

But the "Golden Age" of agriculture was well beyond the purview of those farmers struggling through Gilded Age. Despite their attempts to combat hard times with technological improvements, better management strategies, and concerted political pressure, economic conditions continued to deteriorate, especially in the West. In retrospect, it is easy to see that farmers were operating as if a free enterprise system still existed when forces were already at work to ensure its demise.

They were becoming more sophisticated small businessmen just as the economic world was becoming dominated by large corporations. Further, they were becoming more politically aggressive at a time when the political system was being massaged and manipulated by interest groups more organized and more powerful than they were.

The hard-working yeoman could scarcely understand these developments, let alone anticipate them. All he knew was that he was operating his business with greater efficiency and producing more and better crops. Yet, he found himself battling debt, monopolies, low prices and tight credit. Although he was aligned against great combinations of industry and finance, the average farmer had assimilated the ideal of opportunity and business success to the extent that he found it as difficult to join forces with the wage labor below as to sympathize with the great accumulations of capital above. Increasingly, he found himself isolated from forces and events he felt powerless to control. It is little wonder that his traditional optimism gave way to pessimism and cynicism. He was no longer convinced that agriculture offered a superior way of life, and his faith in the agrarian creed began to erode.

He had thought himself the nation's mainstay, source of its values, but occupied a minority economic status. The system that had lightened labor and increased productivity extended his reach but not his grasp.<sup>58</sup>

As H. Wayne Morgan observes, it was not easy for the proud, self-sufficient yeomen to accept sole responsibility for their economic troubles.<sup>59</sup> As their fiscal woes mounted and their frustrations deepened, many farmers looked for others to blame.

Hostility toward mortgage companies, banks, railroads and food processors coalesced into a widespread belief in economic conspiracy. Many farmers were convinced they were victims of a large, powerful and carefully coordinated "money trust." This belief was fueled, in part, by the various injustices that financiers and industrialists had perpetrated against farmers and, in part, by the age-old agrarian distrust of anything associated with the city. In a more salubrious economic environment, this traditional anti-urbanism could be tempered by the argument that growing cities provided more customers and greater marketing opportunities. During hard times, however, the city once again became a den of vice and corruption, the home of shadowy and conspiratorial bankers, brokers, lawyers and middle men--all of whom were out to get the farmers.<sup>60</sup>

While monopolies, trusts and railroad cartels may have been legitimate objects of agrarian enmity, immigrants were not. Toward the end of the 1880s, U.S. immigration patterns began to change, with more and more people arriving from southern and eastern Europe. Like most Americans, farmers had eagerly welcomed the foreign-born from western Europe and the British Isles throughout the 1860s, 1870s and early 1880s. By the early 1890s, however, agrarians were vehemently denouncing America's open-door policies. It is difficult to determine how much of this ethnic intolerance was the result of deteriorating economic conditions and how much was due to the inability or unwillingness to accept racial and cultural differences. Whatever the

reasons, farmers increasingly objected to the alleged ignorance, immorality and anti-Americanism of the newcomers. The immigrants were seen as an inferior caste, and farmers wanted them barred from America's shores.

The immigrant was not the only innocent target of agrarian resentment. Like most Americans during the Gilded Age, farmers became increasingly intolerant of Native Americans and Blacks. Agrarian perceptions of the Indian reflected the common stereotypes, ranging from the savage and treacherous warrior-brave to the begrimed, child-like primitive. Blacks were regarded as indolent, conniving, and perpetually good natured. While these racial stereotypes had long existed in rural America, they were rarely found in the northern agricultural press prior to 1870. As the Gilded Age wore on and economic conditions worsened, racist humor and commentary appeared with increasing frequency in a great many farm papers.<sup>61</sup>

All the agrarian responses to industrial America--both the progressive and retrogressive--commonly appeared in the agricultural papers during the Gilded Age. Less and less was written about the fundamental relationship between agriculture and democratic government or the rugged virtue of the American yeoman. Poetic tributes to the farmer and farming largely disappeared from the pages of the agricultural press. Increasingly, editorials and letters focused on such matters as cooperative associations, monopolies, politics and immigration. In the process, the image of the farmer in the agricultural press

changed from the heroic yeoman of yesteryear to the businessman-nativist which, in many ways, it remains today.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Paul W. Gates, The Farmer's Age: Agriculture, 1815-1860, Vol. III of The Economic History of the United States (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960), pp. 402-3.

<sup>2</sup>John T. Schlebecker, Whereby We Thrive: A History of American Farming, 1607-1972 (Ames, Iowa: Iowa State Univ. Press, 1975), pp. 151-3 and Fred A. Shannon, The Farmer's Last Frontier: Agriculture, 1860-1897, Vol. V of The Economic History of the United States (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1945), pp. 126-8.

<sup>3</sup>Earl W. Hayter, The Troubled Farmer, 1850-1900 (DeKalb, Ill.: Northern Ill. Univ. Press, 1968), p. 4.

<sup>4</sup>The information in the following section was primarily compiled from: Percy Wells Bidwell and John I. Falconer, History of Agriculture in the Northern United States, 1620-1860 (Washington, D.C., 1925; rpt. New York: Peter Smith, 1941); Willard W. Cochrane, The Development of American Agriculture: A Historical Analysis (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minn. Press, 1979, pp. 13-77; Gates, The Farmer's Age; and Schlebecker, Whereby We Thrive, pp. 57-137.

<sup>5</sup>Allan G. Bogue, From Prairie to Corn Belt: Farming on the Illinois and Iowa Prairies in the Nineteenth Century (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1963), pp. 29-46.

<sup>6</sup>Schlebecker, pp. 57-70.

<sup>7</sup>References to the moving frontier line correspond to a map based on census data from 1800-1860 in Ross M. Robertson, History of the American Economy, 2nd ed. (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1964), p. 108.

<sup>8</sup>Schlebecker, pp. 93-6.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., pp. 102-3.

<sup>10</sup>Cochrane, The Development of American Agriculture, p. 72; Gates, pp. 169-72.

<sup>11</sup>Cochrane, pp. 76-7.

<sup>12</sup>Gates, pp. 398-420.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., pp. 418-9.

<sup>14</sup>H. Wayne Morgan, "Toward National Unity," in The Gilded Age, ed. H. Wayne Morgan, 2nd ed. (Syracuse: Syracuse Univ. Press, 1970), p. 1.

<sup>15</sup>Matthew Josephson, The Politicos: 1865-1896 (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1938); The Robber Barons: The Great American Capitalists, 1861-1901 (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1934).

<sup>16</sup>Sean Dennis Cashman, America in the Gilded Age: From the Death of Lincoln to the Rise of Theodore Roosevelt (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1984), p. 4.

<sup>17</sup>Richard A. Bartlett, "General Introduction," in The Gilded Age: America, 1865-1900, ed. Richard A. Bartlett (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1969), pp. 1-2.

<sup>18</sup>Paul Boller, Jr., American Thought in Transition: The Impact of Evolutionary Naturalism, 1865-1900 (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1969), pp. xi-xiii.

<sup>19</sup>H. Wayne Morgan, "Toward National Unity," p. 3.

<sup>20</sup>Edward C. Kirkland, Industry Comes of Age: Business, Labor, and Public Policy 1860-1897, Vol. VI of The Economic History of the United States (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1961), pp. 408-9.

<sup>21</sup>George M. Fredrickson, The Inner Civil War: Northern Intellectuals and the Crisis of the Union (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), p. 188.

<sup>22</sup>Norman Pollack, in Syllabus for History 335: "The Gilded Age: Foundations of Modern American Capitalism," Michigan State Univ., Spring Term, 1983, p. 1.

<sup>23</sup>Sidney Fine, Laissez Faire and the General-Welfare State (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1956), p. 96.

<sup>24</sup>Fon W. Boardman, Jr., America and the Gilded Age: 1876-1900 (New York: Henry Z. Walck, 1972), pp. 14-33; R. Hal Williams, "'Dry Bones and Dead Language': The Democratic Party" in The Gilded Age, ed. Morgan, pp. 129-48; and Cashman, America in the Gilded Age, pp. 214-54.

<sup>25</sup>John Tipple, "Big Businessmen," in The Gilded Age, ed. Morgan, p. 16; Boardman, American and the Gilded Age: 1876-1900, pp. 39-60; and Cashman, pp. 47-53.



<sup>26</sup>Tipple, "Big Businessmen," pp. 15-17. Professor Tipple notes that when Carnegie and Rockefeller stepped down from corporate leadership to become private citizens, "the rancor against them almost ceased. Instead of being censured for past actions . . . they were praised as benefactors and good citizens." (p. 16).

<sup>27</sup>See Irvin G. Wyllie, The Self-Made Man in America: The Myth of Rags to Riches (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1954).

<sup>28</sup>According to Paul Boller, Jr., it was social scientists, journalists and economists who read and understood Spencer and Social Darwinism. Carnegie was one of the few (if not the only) prominent industrialists well-versed in Spencerian thought. Most businessmen preferred to portray themselves "in terms of hard work and Christian stewardship, not in terms of Social Darwinist concepts." American Thought in Transition, pp. 52-6.

<sup>29</sup>Fine, Laissez Faire and the General Welfare-State, pp. 3-14.

<sup>30</sup>Tipple, p. 18.

<sup>31</sup>Fine, pp. 96-110.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>33</sup>Population figures were taken from Boardman, p. 11 and Cashman, p. 13.

<sup>34</sup>Boardman, p. 106.

<sup>35</sup>Shannon, pp. 35-41; Boardman, pp. 102-4; and Cashman, pp. 87-93. As Shannon notes, between 1870 and 1880, every state east of the Mississippi (except for slight gains along the Atlantic coast) showed a net population loss due to western migration. This included the states of Iowa and Missouri which, in the previous decade, had experienced significant population gains (p. 39).

<sup>36</sup>Fred A. Shannon, The Centennial Years, ed. Robert Huhn Jones (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1967), pp. 264-7; Boardman, pp. 62-3; Cashman, pp. 26-34; and Schlebecker, pp. 93-6.

<sup>37</sup>Cashman, pp. 13-4.

<sup>38</sup>Shannon, The Centennial Years, pp. 278-9 and Cashman, pp. 10-2.

<sup>39</sup>John Fiske, The Destiny of Man (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1884), pp. 118-9, quoted in Paul F. Boller, "The New Science and American Thought," in Morgan, The Gilded Age, p. 253.

<sup>40</sup>Henry Adams, The Education of Henry Adams, Modern Library ed. (1918; rpt. New York: Random House, 1931), p. 382.

<sup>41</sup>Adams, The Education of Henry Adams, p. 499. Adams' was not a solitary voice crying out in what he saw as the wilderness of industrial America. While discussing the public reaction to evolutionary naturalism, Paul Boller suggests that both scientists and laymen believed that the new creed, which substituted "flux for fixity" and "chance for constancy . . . threatened to replace design with disorder and the absolute with the absurd." (American Thought in Transition, p. 21.)

<sup>42</sup>The information in the following section was primarily compiled from: Gilbert C. Fite, The Farmer's Frontier, 1865-1900 (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966); Robert G. Athearn, High Country Empire: The High Plains and Rockies (New York: McGraw Hill, 1960), pp. 179-256; Shannon, The Farmer's Last Frontier and The Centennial Years, pp. 161-199; Cochrane, The Development of American Agriculture, pp. 78-121; and Schlebecker, Whereby We Thrive, pp. 138-205.

<sup>43</sup>A typical railroad promotion advertisement appeared on the inside front cover of the January 1877 issue of the Nebraska Farmer. A portion of the copy reads: "The Burlington and Missouri River Railroad company in Nebraska has for sale a large body of the Choicest Farming Lands in the West. Which it offers on most favorable terms of payment, to those in search of homes in this new and fertile state. These lands are situated in the various Counties tributary to the Company's Road . . . THE SOIL IS A RICH LOAM of the best quality, slightly intermixed with sand, and is unsurpassed in fertility. The area of cheap agricultural lands is rapidly diminishing, and within a very few years there will be practically none left. Nebraska represents the western limit of the rich prairies of America, and only asks that farmers in the overcrowded Eastern states will come and help develop her great resources."

<sup>44</sup>Athearn, High Country Empire, pp. 179-203.

<sup>45</sup>Everett N. Dick, The Sod-House Frontier, 1854-1890 (New York: D. Appleton-Century Company, 1937 carefully recounts actual living conditions on the western prairies.

<sup>46</sup>Shannon, The Farmer's Last Frontier, pp. 197-207; Athearn, pp. 127-151; 179-204.

<sup>47</sup>Schlebecker, pp. 174-98.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid., pp. 164-73.

<sup>49</sup>Fite, The Farmers' Frontier, 1865-1900, p. 223.

<sup>50</sup>Paul H. Johnstone, "Old Ideals Versus New Ideas in Farm Life," in Farmers in a Changing World: The Yearbook of Agriculture, 1940, ed. Gove Hambidge (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Dept. of Agriculture, 1940), pp. 144-52; Schlebecker, pp. 168-9.

<sup>51</sup>Schlebecker, p. 161.

<sup>52</sup>Parity is defined as "that price of a unit of farm product for the period in question which will give that unit a purchasing power equal to the purchasing power that it had in 1910-14." (Cochrane, pp. 383-4.) Those years became the basis of the parity price index (100) because they were years in which farm prosperity was at an all-time high. The period has become known as the "Golden Age of Agriculture." Any index which falls below 100 indicates weakened commodities prices and declining prosperity.

<sup>53</sup>Shannon, The Centennial Years, pp. 161-180; Hayter, pp. 3-11; Fite, pp. 215-222; and Athearn, pp. 204-211.

<sup>54</sup>Cochrane, pp. 93-96.

<sup>55</sup>Literature on the Grange, the Farmers Alliance movement and Populism is extensive. Besides brief treatments in most of the works cited in this chapter, see Solon J. Buck, The Granger Movement (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1913); John D. Hicks, The Populist Revolt (1931; rpt. Lincoln: Univ of Nebraska Press, 1961); Fred A. Shannon, American Farmers' Movements (Princeton: Van Nostrand, 1957); Norman Pollack, The Populist Response to Industrial America (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1962) and Robert C. McMath, Jr., The Populist Vanguard (New York: Norton, 1977).

<sup>56</sup>Shannon, The Farmer's Last Frontier, pp. 315-28.

<sup>57</sup>President Cleveland's veto of "An Act to Enable the Commissioner of Agriculture to Make a Special Distribution of Seeds in the Drought-Stricken Counties of Texas, and Making an Appropriation Therefor" in Bartlett, pp. 140-2. At least one notable exception to federal indifference toward agrarian misery was the U.S. Army. Units stationed in Nebraska and Kansas began the unauthorized feeding of hungry farmers in the early 1870s. Congress approved the practice in 1875, and army units distributed nearly two million rations to over 100,000 people in Minnesota, Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas, Iowa and Colorado in the spring of 1875. (Cochrane, p. 97.)

<sup>58</sup>H. Wayne Morgan, "Populism and Agriculture," in The Gilded Age, p. 156.

<sup>59</sup>Ibid., p. 155. As Professor Morgan points out, "agrarians were not united in discontent." Many more prosperous eastern and midwestern farmers had little sympathy with some of the Alliance and Populist measures, especially those related to currency regulation. But, if the agricultural press is any indication, farmers across the country shared many viewpoints, including hostility toward monopolies and inconsistent freight rates and support for cooperative marketing arrangements.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid., pp. 150-8; Athearn, pp. 204-216 and Fite, pp. 55-74.

<sup>61</sup>The increased hostility toward immigrants, Native Americans and Blacks during the Gilded Age was not confined to the farmstead. In fact, agrarian responses reflected a culture-wide trend toward nativism and racism. (Boardman, pp. 93-110 and Cashman, pp. 102-109.)

## **CHAPTER 4--Farmers in the Vanguard: Economic and Political Progressivism, 1873-1893**

The stirring tributes to the American yeoman that had sprinkled the pages of the early nineteenth-century agricultural press began to diminish by the late 1840s and early 1850s. References to farming as America's fundamental pursuit and to the farmer as the nation's moral beacon and the backbone of democratic government became increasingly infrequent. By the 1870s, the yeoman image had virtually disappeared from the columns of the farm papers. The letters, poems and speeches that had so frequently proclaimed the yeoman's moral and economic superiority rarely appeared. As the nineteenth century progressed, farm editors and their readers became more concerned with the commercial and technological dimensions of agriculture and less preoccupied with the moral and philosophical aspects. They also became more attuned to the importance of cooperation and somewhat less committed to rugged individualism and self-sufficiency. Throughout the post-Civil War period, this cooperative ethos found expression in both the economic and political arenas.

This agrarian emphasis on commerce and technological improvement was not new, but the acceptance of economic and political cooperation was unprecedented. Since the American

Farmer made its debut in 1819, the agricultural press consistently encouraged commercial and technological progress, while talk of cooperative enterprises was limited to the social and, occasionally, the local political arenas. As previously discussed, however, the second half of the nineteenth century witnessed a multitude of dramatic changes which profoundly affected rural life. The rapid development of new technologies, the growth of foreign and domestic markets, the increased transportation capabilities and renewed westward expansion exerted tremendous pressure on farmers to "become cogs in a vast and infinitely complex economic machine."<sup>1</sup> Despite the anxiety and bewilderment they experienced in the midst of such tumultuous changes, farmers wasted little time lamenting the passage of a simpler, more secure way of life. Instead, in their time-honored fashion, farmers looked industrial America straight in the eye, rolled up their sleeves, and went to work.

If commercial agriculture could be considered a religion, then its "Holy Trinity" might well be Efficiency, Productivity and Profit. Many of the traditional practices associated with subsistence farming were forsaken in the wake of commercialization and specialization. Writing to the Prairie Farmer in 1868, a reader argues that:

The old rule that a farmer should produce all that he required, and that the surplus represented his gains, is part of the past. Agriculture, like all other business, is better for its subdivisions, each one growing that which is best suited to his soil, climate, and market, and with its proceed purchase his other needs.<sup>2</sup>

Several years later, a correspondent to The Nebraska Farmer

explains that "under pioneer conditions the object of agriculture was simply one of maintenance." Although farming was strenuous, the problems were relatively simple. "The only question at the end of the year was whether enough had been produced to last the family and their animals until another year." Under current conditions, the writer continues, the "object of farming is not primarily to make a living, but it is to make money."<sup>3</sup> By 1890, the editors of The Farm Journal can confidently proclaim that farming is "now a manufacturing business."

There are two ends to the business, producing cost at one end, and selling price at the other, and between lie the profits. If we cannot get more price when we sell we must be at less cost when we produce, or the space between the two will be . . . too narrow for profit to find any standing room.<sup>4</sup>

It stood to reason that if agriculture was a business, then the best way to be a successful farmer was to become a shrewd businessman. Despite the traditional agrarian animosity toward the city and the concomitant suspicion of urban economic complexities, most farm management changes were inspired by the practices of urban businessmen. In a letter to the The Country Gentleman, B.G. Packard asserts that "the business of farming is a strictly honorable one, and, if rightly conducted, one of the most healthy, pleasant and profitable employments that a man can engage in [*italics mine*]." Packard recommends that if one wishes to be a successful farmer, "he must be as intelligent and must understand his business as thoroughly as he who is a successful business merchant or professional man."<sup>5</sup> The editor of the Western Agriculturist agrees that successful farmers are,

"active business men, who make every moment count."<sup>6</sup> Equally succinct is a correspondent to Farm and Fireside: "Farming is a business, and the man would make a real success of it nowadays must be a good business man. He must be an all-around business manager."<sup>7</sup>

Being an adept manager could entail many different things, depending on who was offering the advice. In some cases, the recommendations were very general. B.R. Black, associate editor of The Farm Journal, suggests that "old methods, and old stock, and old implements, and old habits, and old prejudices, and old everything else" that cannot meet the "high standards raised by the upward march of farm practice . . . must be abandoned."<sup>8</sup> Wilmer Atkinson, the widely respected editor and publisher of The Farm Journal, contends that producing good crops is only half the farmer's job. "[T]he biggest half is making money out of the crop." He concludes that it is "this (the merchant) side of the farmer [which] needs development."<sup>9</sup> In a letter to The Nebraska Farmer, Ira Gower maintains that "order, method, system, calculation, are just as essential in agricultural pursuits as in trade. Prosperity and success can never be attained without them in any undertaking."<sup>10</sup> A March 1874 editorial in the American Agriculturist asks farmers whether they are willing to "practice the closest economy."

Are we truly economical in our farm management? Do we spend our time and labor to the best advantage? Are we getting full returns from our horses, cows, sheep, and pigs? . . . We hope no reader of the Agriculturist will let the present month of comparative leisure go by without doing everything that can be done to



facilitate the labors which will press upon us in a few weeks.<sup>11</sup>

At other times, the agricultural editors and their correspondents provided specific advice on how agrarians could become a more profitable businessmen. An anonymous correspondent to The Nebraska Farmer lists several "principles of good farming." The farmer "who would succeed well, and derive pleasure as well as profit from his calling, must manifest an active and abiding interest in his profession." In addition, the farmer must increase his productivity by "maintaining the fertility of his soils," and he must "seek with watchful eye to improve his market facilities" because it is transportation costs "that eat up the profits."<sup>12</sup> Writing to The Nebraska Farmer, R.W.F. avers that the farmer must become a "political economist-- understanding thoroughly the economic laws of value, exchange, labor, capital, credit, foreign trade, tariff, and taxation."<sup>13</sup> The best advice Andrew Fuller, editor of Moore's Rural New-Yorker, can offer is for the farmer to keep accurate business records because "not one in ten keeps any record of expenses in order to ascertain exactly what it costs to produce as bushel of corn or a pound of meat." Also holding up the urban merchant as the paradigm, Fuller concludes that farming will become more profitable once farmers begin using "as accurate and thorough systems of bookkeeping . . . as in the mercantile pursuits."<sup>14</sup> For Ohio farmer John Gould, the best way to make money in farming is to own a dairy. "The dairy is uniform in its labor requirements; there is a daily demand for its products; and there

are as many avenues by which produce may be cheapened as in any other business enterprise."<sup>15</sup>

Despite the diversity of opinion on how to become a successful farmer-entrepreneur, there were some views of sound management shared by most farmers. First, there was general agreement that the commercial farmer must employ reliable and energetic help, and that his hired hands should be well managed. Therefore, labor management became a business problem for the farmer. Secondly, it was generally conceded that to become more productive, a farmer must make prudent use of advanced farm technology, usually machinery. Finally, the more progressive farmers were advancing the cause of cooperative marketing associations in order to help offset the high costs of transportation, middlemen and food processing.

As he became more interested in adopting sound labor management practices on the farmstead, the husbandman began to more closely identify with the urban employer. The traditional feelings of equality between the farm owner and the hired man had been based on an informal and personal relationship. The newer management theory, on the other hand, emphasized a more legalistic conception of contractual rights and obligations. In the process, a definite class distinction developed between the farmer-proprietor and his hired hands. This new class consciousness is apparent in an 1893 editorial in The Nebraska Farmer.

If a man is a good overseer, and is also handy at tinkering about the chores of the farm, he can well afford to have plenty of good help on the farm. That is what a farm is for. It is a sort of machine shop, a consumer of labor, so to speak. the more intelligent labor that can be brought to bear within proper bounds toward the production of various farm crops the better for all concerned.<sup>16</sup>

The very fact that labor management became viewed as a business problem on America's farms tended to underscore the social and economic distinctions between employers and employees. J.N. Muncey, writing to Farmers Review in 1886, maintains that "one of the most difficult things with which the farmer has to contend is that of labor. I regret to say that the average quality of farm labor is very inferior."<sup>17</sup> The editors of The Farm Journal also find that the "one great obstacle the farmer has to contend against is the scarcity of good household help. . . . One hundred thousand good girls are wanted in American farm houses to help do the work!"<sup>18</sup>

Because reliable help was so hard to find, the hiring process became especially important to the farmer. In the "Household" section of the American Agriculturist, Addie Archer devotes a lengthy column to the issue of "hired men on a farm." After commenting on the scarcity of "good help," Addie Archer suggests that the way to find good workers ("temperate, honest, neat men") is to pay fair wages and treat the workers with "proper respect." Even after those "with the proper character" are hired, it is a good idea for the employer's daughters to "always maintain a ladylike deportment that may save them future annoyance. 'Familiarity breeds contempt,' is often sadly proved with hired

men."<sup>19</sup> A correspondent to The Western Plowman also warns his fellow farmers to exercise a great deal of caution when hiring new employees.

We have known so many cases where young men and boys, sons of prosperous and good farmers, have been ruined through learning the vices of immoral hired men. . . . To escape this danger it is not necessary, by any means, to keep the hired men and boys apart, but rather to have a care in regard to the morals of those we hire.<sup>20</sup>

Farmers were also advised to hire people who are kind to animals, to provide neat rooms for the help, and to let the farm hand know "that you have a high appreciation of good work and that nothing is as provoking than to have the stock half fed, the gate left half open and the horse untied."<sup>21</sup> The editor of The Lancaster Farmer advises his readers to plan ahead in order to keep hired men busy when "stormy days abound." One idea is to "have a slate in the tool-house or barn, and note down during pleasant weather what can be done in rainy weather."<sup>22</sup> Finally, there is the observation sent by a reader of The Farm Journal and happily published by the editors:

Every Saturday evening I give my 'hired man,' who lives in a snug little house of his own not too far from the barn, half a dozen or so of the last week's papers, including the Farm Journal, and . . . he grows more valuable and more satisfied year by year.<sup>23</sup>

Besides being an effective manager of his hired labor, the progressive farmer, like the merchant and manufacturer, must also keep abreast of the most recent technological developments. Farmers in the second half of the nineteenth century equated increased productivity almost exclusively with new agricultural machinery. In a letter to The Western Plowman, L.L. Jones ("an

Illinois farmer") insists that the "multiplication of labor-saving machines, the many new inventions and discoveries are making farms more productive and lessening manual drudgery."<sup>24</sup> The editor of The Nebraska Farmer contends that if the farmers on the plains and prairies fail to make use of new planting and harvesting machinery, their production will be "too small to give them a subsistence."

But when he turns over the pliable soil with his gang plow, at the rate of four acres per day, and with his ingenious seeder sows his eight acres per day, and with the aid of machinery, simplifies and reduces the work, he draws encouragement . . . with every breath; he is constantly urged to new conquests of the soil, and time finds him steadily gaining ground.<sup>25</sup>

In a more colorful expression of the same sentiment, an Indiana farmer contends that the farmer who "for pecuniary or other reasons," fails to incorporate new machinery into his operation "will always scratch a poor man's head, while his progressive neighbor will be loaning him money to keep his farm out of the hands of the sheriff."<sup>26</sup>

Besides the economic advantages provided by advanced technology, there are also the "moral effects." According to J.W. Warr, editor of The Western Plowman, farm machines not only increase production, but also take away the dread of manual labor which has made rascals of many men who were naturally not viciously inclined." Departing dramatically from the traditional agrarian belief in the nobility of manual labor, Warr insists that machines like the riding plow and the steam thrasher have "emancipated" farmers from "slavery."

With the facilities provided for making Mother Earth yield up her treasures without a great amount of the usual accompaniment of the "sweat of the brow," farming will become the easiest and most attractive of vocations.<sup>27</sup>

Increasingly, it was technology--not the traditional and inherent virtues associated with farming--that would ennoble the farming profession and ensure its continued respectability. Writing to the Kansas Farmer after visiting the Columbian Exposition in 1893, James Underwood proclaims: "Every farmer and every farmer's son will view the exhibits in the Agricultural Hall with a thrill of pride and satisfaction in the advances of his profession."<sup>28</sup>

The purchase and use of the new farm implements were not the relatively uncomplicated procedures they once were. As the editor of the American Agriculturist indicates, "farm machinery now represents a large portion of the farmer's capital, frequently more than livestock." Because of the great value of the new machinery, the farmer must attend to proper maintenance. Moreover, because machinery is "most profitable when it is used by a man of intelligence," the editor urges agrarians to "study mechanics, not only that they may know how to use and care for their machines, but how to improve them and invent new ones."<sup>29</sup>

The agricultural papers devoted countless column inches to the merits of new mechanical devices. Three brief examples will suffice here. In 1872, a correspondent to The Lancaster Farmer wrote a lengthy letter outlining the many advantages of the steam plow. After listing the improvements made in a variety of other agricultural implements, the writer explains that comparatively

few advances have been made in plowing. After witnessing a demonstration of the Williamson Road Steamer and Steam-plow in the autumn of 1872, the correspondent reports:

The Bloomsdale exhibition of the work and capacity of this plow, seems to have been highly satisfactory to a very large number of the most intelligent agriculturists and machinists who witnessed its operations, and was in a measure looked upon as the inauguration of a new era in agriculture.<sup>30</sup>

Also addressing the topic of plowing, an American Agriculturist reader extols the advantages of the swivel plow. After experimenting with the plow on his own farm, the writer concludes that "the efforts of the plow makers have been industriously turned of late to the improvement of these plows with great success."<sup>31</sup> Equally typical is an editorial in The Nebraska Farmer which considers the merits of the Randolph header, a device designed to remove the grain heads from wheat during harvest. "We have seen this machine work, and it proved equal if not superior to any header in use. Headed wheat is of the finest quality . . . and the expense is not half as much as in any other way."<sup>32</sup>

It stood to reason that if a farmer's success was dependent upon his business acumen, then a dearth of managerial and merchandising ability could spell economic difficulty. Agrarians were certainly not oblivious to the fact that a great many of their brother farmers were under severe financial duress during the Gilded Age. Many of those commenting in the agricultural papers justly attributed at least part of the blame to poor business practices. Writing to The Ohio Farmer in 1877, an

anonymous correspondent straightforwardly states that the "reason why so many men fail to make farming a success is simply because they fail to make it a business." The farmer who does not "inform himself of his business and work in an intelligent manner . . . is not attending to his business and is destined to fail."<sup>33</sup> The editors of the American Agriculturist agree that farm bankruptcies rarely occur when the farmer "minds his business, and refrains from speculations."<sup>34</sup> In 1890, J.B., a Lancaster, Pennsylvania farmer, concedes that "times are hard--in some localities very hard indeed." After mentioning some instances of economic privation in the West and South, he instructs the farmer to:

. . . practice economy and wise business judgment, utilizing everything produced on his farm to the best advantage, avoiding all wastes, and above all things eschewing the long-credit store account and the money-lender as he would a pestilence."<sup>35</sup>

The Indiana Farmer reports the case of "a young homesteader" who purchased a Buckeye Reaper, but had to go into debt to finance it. "He took the fatal step and gave his note for the machinery, hoping and trying to believe against his better judgment that his crops were sure to turn out well."<sup>36</sup> Other thoughtful commentators, while usually recognizing that poor management was a major cause of failure, also realized that there were other reasons for farm failures besides individual ineptitude. In calm and well-reasoned arguments, these individuals suggested that a major reason for farm failures was because agrarians were not always able to compete in a fair and honest market. Regardless



of how efficiently and progressively a farmer might manage his operation, there were elements beyond his control. Writing The Western Plowman, N.J. Shepherd contends that the "farmer suffers by dishonesty in trade as much as manufacturers." Shepherd reiterates the critical distinction farmers made between fair business practices and those employed by the "trusts and monopolies" which "combine to lower the price of what they have to sell even below the cost of producing it to eliminate all competition from the field."<sup>37</sup> But if the individual farmer was prevented from competing in a free market because of combinations and associations formed by transportation companies, storage facilities, processors and financiers, then what was he to do? Although he believed in laissez faire, he was discovering that free competition simply did not exist. Instead of clinging to what were rapidly becoming outmoded economic strategies, farmers decided to use some of the same tactics that were being so successfully employed by their corporate antagonists. In almost diametric opposition to traditional values and beliefs, post-Civil War agrarians decided to join together on both economic and political fronts in a concentrated effort to improve their conditions.

Organized economic cooperation among farmers was a phenomenon of the Gilded Age.<sup>38</sup> Traditionally, farmers had joined together primarily for social interaction or for mutual protection on the frontier. They had remained fiercely independent in regard to economic and political matters. As economic hardships mounted

following the Civil War, many farmers were willing to sacrifice some of their rugged individualism in order to speed fiscal recovery. The major impetus to the formation of agricultural cooperatives was increased profitability. Farmers believed that they could lower their costs and increase their net earnings if they formed and operated their own cooperative marketing associations. They could control price, and they could eliminate the overhead that went to middlemen and transportation companies. Initially, the plan was relatively simple. The cooperative would sell goods to its members at a fair retail price, and, at the end of the year, the members would divide the profits based on the amount of business each member had done during that year. In farming communities, the cooperatives would also market commodities produced by its members.

The first major co-operative effort was the establishment of Granger stores after the Civil War. Although most of these enterprises failed, a few proved very successful and provided models for similar activities by the Farmers' Alliance and smaller co-operative organizations. During the late 1880s and early 1890s, some extremely successful cooperatives emerged, including The Johnson County (Kansas) Co-operative Association, The Delaware Fruit Exchange, the California Fruit Union and The American Live Stock Commission. Despite the economic vicissitudes experienced by some of these early co-operatives, they were almost universally supported in the agricultural press.

In 1892, F.M. Hexamer, editor of the American Agriculturist,

penned a lengthy analysis of the agricultural co-operative movement. After discussing both the Granger efforts and those of the Farmers' Alliance, Hexamer maintains that the successful cooperatives are those which "were started on a hardpan basis, and managed with fidelity to business principles." Despite some failures and setbacks, he concludes that "co-operation has passed through its baptism of fire, and is destined to be a leading influence in the agriculture of the future."<sup>39</sup> Hexamer's view was typical of the prevailing attitude expressed in the farm press. For the most part, the entire farm press, even in the more conservative eastern regions, supported these embryonic cooperative marketing associations, regardless of whether they were established by the Grange, the Farmers' Alliance or smaller agrarian organizations.

In The Nebraska Farmer, George H. Simmons, takes issue with those farmers who "say that it is all folly to talk to them about establishing co-operative enterprises." Instead they should "put their heads together and determine that at least a part of the money that is drawn from them every year to enrich the merchants shall be retained among themselves to work for them and their families."<sup>40</sup> The editors of the American Agriculturist agree that after years of seeing their grain "pass from their hands at low rates brought about by combinations of speculators and dealers," farmers have "finally learned to combine . . . and set their own price upon the world's food." The editorial closes with the reminder that "in union is strength."<sup>41</sup> While advising

Alliance leaders to "go slowly" and "to be careful of their material," in his letter to the New England Farmer, O.P. Laird concludes that "commercial organization is a necessity, and in time will accomplish for farmers what can be done in no other way."<sup>42</sup> Similarly, R.L. Smythe, a correspondent to The Ohio Farmer, contends that among many favorable influences on farmers, the Grange teaches that "what is for the interest of one farmer is for the interest of another; and that it is only by mutual economic cooperation that they can protect and advance their own interests."<sup>43</sup>

Whether the co-operative association was of large, national proportions, or whether it was regional or commodity specific, the agricultural editors and their readers were seldom reluctant to voice at least cautious support. S.S. Randall, in a letter to the American Farmer, argues that many of the advances in dairying have come about as a result of "co-operation and association."

The monthly gatherings for sales of farm animals in Madison county, Ohio, have saved immense sums from the clutches of middlemen; association for importing or buying animals of the best blood should be more numerous. . . . There is no reason why comparative isolation should lead to positive hermitage.<sup>44</sup>

In 1886, the Kansas Farmer printed a letter from R.G. Head, president of the International Range Association, a cattlemen's co-operative in Denver. Following the correspondence, the editors indicate strong support for the association.

The Range Associate can provide its members with such information as will enable them to avoid overcrowding the markets, and distribute shipments to points where needed for consumption. These results will save ranchers enormous losses incurred in the past from pooling of the

largest buyers engaged in the canning and dressing meat trade who fix prices to suit themselves without regard to the laws of supply and demand.<sup>45</sup>

Even comparatively minor instances of cooperative association seldom escaped note in the agricultural papers. Orange Judd, editor and publisher of The Prairie Farmer, applauds midwestern wheat farmers for withholding their harvest from the market in order to force prices up. "It was 'risky' to take the course you did, but a spirit of brotherhood and cooperation prevailed to the ultimate benefit of all concerned."<sup>46</sup>

While most of the co-operative efforts relative to economics were generally applauded in the pages of the farm press, there was not the same unanimity insofar as political efforts were concerned. It was true that almost everyone agreed that farmers must exert political pressure on their elected officials. The disagreement came on precisely how they should do this. Some editors and readers espoused the traditional agrarian advice to write to congressmen and senators, to vote and to try and avoid the narrow perspective of party politics. Other, more progressive farmers--many of whom belonged to the Grange or the Alliance--advocated organized voting and lobbying efforts and other measures which were far removed from old agrarian beliefs in political autonomy. The result was a distinct agrarian ambivalence regarding cooperative political action, especially where party politics was concerned.

A good example of this rural ambivalence was the manner in which the farm press reacted to the first effort to form the

People's Party in Cincinnati in 1891. Although the farm papers had been favorably disposed to both the Grange and the Alliance, they were not exactly sure what to make of the Populist Party. Some of the western papers endorsed the new party, while those in the East and Midwest expressed views ranging from cautious optimism to bewilderment. Interestingly enough, there was almost no overt hostility evident in any of the agricultural papers surveyed for this study--even in the East. (This was a marked contrast to the reception afforded Populism in the eastern popular press.) The views expressed by Elbert S. Carman, editor of The Rural New-Yorker, were typical of those found in much of the eastern farm press. In an editorial written shortly after the Cincinnati convention, Carman reviews the various "demands of this new party" with a great deal of interest and a good measure of uncertainty.

We do not propose to discuss the wisdom of these demands now. . . . There will be ample opportunity for discussion during the year that must elapse before these candidates can be voted for. The convention has either made a blunder or has taken a wise political step. History alone will show which name its action deserves. . . . We shall watch the growth of this new party with the greatest interest and keep our readers thoroughly informed as to its progress and development.<sup>47</sup>

Papers in the Midwest were much more enthusiastic about the movement. According to the Farm, Stock and Home (Chicago), "formidable, aggressive new parties are necessary to scare old ones into spasms of good behavior. When reform, with large, well organized forces behind it, marches upon an old party as an enemy, storms its citadels and makes wholesale captures of its

soldiers and supplies, then there may be some hope of getting favorable concessions from the frightened old fellow."<sup>48</sup> The editors of The Indiana Farmer suggest that there are many "thoughtful men who believe that farmers have real grievances and nothing but a radical change in the politics of the country will heal them."<sup>49</sup> Although the editors of The Ohio Farmer are violently opposed to the Populist's Sub-Treasury Plan, such proposals as "free coinage, no alien ownership of land . . . a just income tax, rigid and honest national control of all public means of communication and transportation" and the direct election of the President and Senators are "all principles that will be indorsed by large number of the farmers of the country."<sup>50</sup> Such editorial responses tend to debunk the still popular view that the People's Party held little appeal to farmers in the more established agricultural regions.

Other than a reluctance to become enmeshed in the web of party politics, the editors and readers of the farm papers generally encouraged political activism. It would be fair to say that most agreed with the sentiment expressed in "A Song For the Grangers," which appeared in The Ohio Farmer in 1874.

We're a band of happy brothers,  
Working for ourselves and others;  
Taking counsel of our mothers,  
In the work we have to do.

We will purify the nation,  
From unjust legislation;  
And will dignify our station  
By daring to be true.

For long we bore the iron strokes  
 Ere our gallant captain bravely spoke,  
 And freed us from the galling yoke  
 Of monopolies and middle men.

We will fight against oppression,  
 Defying retrogression;  
 Whilst our motto is progression,  
 As it ever should have been.

We shall see the farmers rising,  
 And his works will be surprising;  
 There will be no temporizing  
 When monopolies go down.

So let us sing our jolly songs,  
 When Grangers meet in merry throngs  
 To right the people's wrongs,  
 In every inland town.<sup>51</sup>

In an 1879 issue of The Prairie Farmer, "W.L." expresses a similar enthusiasm for cooperative political action. The writer proclaims that "at long last," the "agricultural community is beginning to appreciate that it must act as a body to induce legislation, both state and national." The writer goes on to encourage farmers "to keep posted on current matters, by action in convention, and especially insisting with members of the legislature and congress, both orally and by letter, that their just wants shall be attended to."<sup>52</sup> Wilmer Atkinson of The Farm Journal agrees with the Illinois correspondent that farmers have not fully appreciated and used use the political power they have at their disposal. "Their numbers, their intelligence, their conscience, their conservative temper, all entitle them to a commanding political influence in both National and State affairs."



The indications are that Samson is growing restive in his bond, that he is turning himself about in preparation for some move that will startle the lookers on, and waken the people to a true knowledge of the situation. . . . Any one with a weak ear may detect the sound of distant thunder; and the signs are that the whole heavens will soon be overcast--not as a portent of evil, but of good for our common country.<sup>53</sup>

A year later, the Journal established a special section, "Pulling Together," which featured "notes and news of Organization among farmers--The Grange--The Alliance--The League." "Pulling Together" included letters from farmers throughout the country, as well as short news items about co-operative efforts. This section, and The Rural New-Yorker's, "Farm Politics," also established in 1891, were the first two expressly political sections established in the agricultural papers.

The traditional rural bias against politics and politicians took a somewhat ironic turn during the last half of the nineteenth century. Increasingly, farmers talked of banding together to replace the professional politicians with those who were more favorably disposed to agrarian interests. As "J.L." suggests in a letter to the New England Farmer, "the point is to elect 'favorable' men to the legislatures and Congress as corporations do. If in a republican district elect a republican who will look to the farmers' interests; in a democratic district elect a democrat who will do what is right."<sup>54</sup> A correspondent to The Nebraska Farmer, referring to recent Alliance conventions in South Dakota and in Pennsylvania, writes that the Alliancemen "want men, not politicians, business management of the country's

affairs, not politics, and an honest administration."<sup>55</sup> This lack of integrity among political office holders also concerns Kansas farmer, C.N. Waters, who informs readers of The Farm Journal, that the people of his state "expect to save \$800,000 in taxes next year by turning out of office some of their lawyers and putting honest men in their stead. A pretty good job, we would say."<sup>56</sup> If, however, honest men were not to be found outside their ranks, then farmers were willing to take the next step and elect their own to office.

Like the spirit of political co-operation, the notion of electing farmers to political office was rather unique to the Gilded Age. Although farmers had long considered themselves the mainstays of democratic government, they had generally avoided the political arena, preferring instead to exert pressure on elected officials via the ballot box or in writing. As the perception of corruption among politicians increased during the Grant years, many agrarians felt that the only solution was to encourage more farmers to aspire to elected office. Writing to the Maine Farmer, in 1889, G.T. Powell informs readers that "there is not a farmer in the U.S. Senate. Isn't it high time that good 'farming men' are elected to office, and if the old parties do not put such men up, then the kind they do put up will be knocked down."<sup>57</sup> Similarly, E.S. Phelps, in a letter to The Nebraska Farmer, considers "Farmers as Legislators." During a conversation with a neighbor, Phelps suggests the possibility of "looking up a qualified farmer for our next legislature." His

neighbor responds that "the Republicans are talking of nominating a lawyer for that place, and I have said I will vote for no lawyer for such a place." Whereupon, the correspondent agrees with his neighbor and asserts that it is time that farmers began "attending their own affairs, in the legislative hall as well as on the farm."<sup>58</sup>

Any candidate, farmer or not, who was favorably disposed to agrarian interests could count on a warm reception in the agricultural papers. Several farm papers, for example, applauded the election of William A. Peffer of Kansas to the U.S. Senate in 1890. The Farm Journal featured Peffer in its "Portrait Gallery," the following spring, along with the editorial comment that he "enjoys the distinction of being the only specially chosen representative of farm interests in that body."<sup>59</sup> In 1892, the American Agriculturist featured a similar profile of Congressman William Hatch, "a farmer, lawyer and democrat."<sup>60</sup> The New England Farmer featured the "strong and earnest face" of Col. Leonidas L. Polk shortly after his election to the presidency of the National Farmers' Alliance. The accompanying editorial notes that "the earnestness and efficiency with which Col. Polk has worked in the interest of farmers . . . establishes his excellent qualifications for the leadership of one of their leading organizations."<sup>61</sup>

Although the election of friendly politicians was a major priority for agrarian activists, they certainly did not confine their efforts to the ballot box. Despite a long tradition of

disparaging almost any form of governmental largess, farmers became increasingly strident in their demands for public assistance. Like most other dimensions of their cooperative activism, this marked a major departure from the philosophy of rugged individualism that farmers had long prided themselves on. From among the numerous examples of agrarian demands for governmental assistance during the Gilded Age, I have selected two for consideration here: the oleomargarine controversy and the grasshopper relief effort.

A paradigm example of the way American farmers banded together to protect their own interests was the bitter and prolonged struggle to prevent the marketing of oleomargarine.<sup>62</sup> Artificial butter, called oleomargarine, was developed in France in the late 1860s as a substitute for the expensive and easily spoiled fresh market butter produced primarily by individual farmers. In 1873, the United States Dairy Company purchased the patent and began commercial manufacture of the substitute butter in New York City. By 1887, there were thirty-seven American concerns producing the oleomargarine, including such food processing giants Armour & Company in Chicago.

The introduction of a substitute butter product into the American market naturally aroused the ire of agricultural interests, especially dairymen. As Earl Hayter indicates, the battle to ban oleomargarine from the American market was one of the longest and bitterest controversies in the history of the food's industry.<sup>63</sup> For over a decade, farmers and their

agricultural editors waged a relentless struggle to ban the product from the American market, using every conceivable argument to convince legislators to take action in their behalf. The editor of The Cultivator and Country Gentleman writes that oleomargarine is "a combination of filth, dead animals, and waste fat all thrown together . . . and one can detect a smell and stench beyond description as well as the accompanying pile of bone and meat scraps piled high around the building."<sup>64</sup> The Prairie Farmer notes with approval that the Elgin [Ill.] Board of Trade "provided for the appointment of a committee to visit the State Capital, and urge upon the Legislature the necessity of passing the bill now before it, for the protection of the legitimate dairy business against the manufacturers of bogus competing products."<sup>65</sup> Writing to The Nebraska Farmer at a time when the U.S. House of Representatives was considering a bill to regulate oleomargarine, W.G. Whitmore urges "every dairyman in Nebraska write to his representative in congress and to members from other states whom he may know, urging them to vote for this bill."<sup>66</sup>

O.M. Druse, editor of the same Nebraska Farmer urges his readers to take even more militant action. Druse calls for a "universal boycott" of "every marketman who deals in imitative butter." In addition, he wants Congress to "levy a tax of not less than ten cents per pound on all that is manufactured."<sup>67</sup>

The legitimacy of the agrarian arguments concerning the substitute butter were debatable, but the results of their

efforts were clear. Under pressure from farm groups and agricultural publications, several states passed legislation restricting the production and sale of oleomargarine. In 1886, when a federal regulatory law went into effect, at least a half a dozen states, including such dairying strongholds as New York and Pennsylvania, had enacted laws prohibiting the manufacture and sale of oleomargarine within their borders. Although the battle over "bogus butter" would continue in the courts and legislative halls well into the twentieth century, the combined efforts of farmers throughout the country had resulted in notable success.

In the case of the grasshopper pestilence, there was no doubt about the legitimacy of agrarian demands for government assistance, but, this time, the results were disappointing. The locust infestations plagued the Great Plains throughout the early 1870s. The grasshoppers could wipe out an entire crop in a matter of minutes. After two, three and even four consecutive years of this pestilence, many Plains farmers were on the verge of bankruptcy and, in some cases, starvation. Swallowing a great deal of their traditional pride, the farmers in the areas of infestation asked for governmental assistance to help rid them of the grasshopper menace. In a letter to the Kansas Farmer, R.M.D. refers with favor to a Minnesota program in which "a county government subsidized the capture of grasshoppers" in the amount of one dollar per bushel. He suggests that "in its wisdom," the Nebraska Legislature, "will devise some systematic plan for a grand, concerted action against the foe."<sup>68</sup> Looking well beyond

the state capitol, the editor of The Nebraska Farmer argues that "if anything can be done at all in averting this evil, it must be done by national means." He suggests that in addition to providing food and monetary assistance to the stricken settlers, Congress should "create a commission that shall have for its object a thorough investigation of the principal insect pests of our agriculture."<sup>69</sup> A Dakota farmer, writing to The Prairie Farmer, is more adamant about governmental aid in the wake of the grasshopper plagues.

Congress owes it to the farmers, the most noble of its citizens and the true pioneers of democracy, especially to those of the West . . . that some effort be made to relieve them . . . of this insect burden which is doing as much as any other to crush them.<sup>70</sup>

Agricultural papers in the East were also sympathetic to the plight of the western farmers. They were also more than willing to use some of the traditional language of the agrarian myth to help buttress their demands for governmental assistance. The editor of The Ohio Farmer asks readers not only to send contributions of "food, clothing or money," but that they also "urge [their] elected representatives in Congress to provide speedy assistance" to these "bold, hardy and adventurous pioneers of Western civilization upon whom all else depends."<sup>71</sup>

Both of these episodes reflect the growing willingness of the farmer to engage in the politics of self-interest. In so doing, farmers were overcoming a traditional reluctance to become immersed in the political process of which they had always been suspicious. They were also combating the traditional tendency to

try and solve their own problems without outside help. On both the political and economic fronts, farmers were developing and using new strategies to cope with the pressures of industrial America. Although, some of their efforts lacked a great deal of sophistication, farmers were at least taking some small strides forward. On economic and political fronts, agrarians began to "walk" during the Gilded Age, thereby paving the way for even more dramatic twentieth-century achievements in both arenas.



## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Paul H. Johnstone, "Old Ideals Versus New Ideas in Farm Life," in Farmers in a Changing World: The Yearbook of Agriculture, 1940, ed. Gove Hambidge (Washington, D. C.: U. S. Dept. of Agriculture, 1940), p. 140.

<sup>2</sup>"How We Have All Advanced," Prairie Farmer, 13 Jan. 1868, p. 17.

<sup>3</sup>H. H. Davenport, "The Educated Farmer," The Nebraska Farmer, 7 Feb. 1883, p. 47.

<sup>4</sup>"We, Too, Are Manufacturers," The Farm Journal, Nov. 1890, p. 198. During the 1870s and 1880s, many of the farm papers expanded their editorial staffs. For example, The Farm Journal, established in 1877, had five associate editors by 1890. Therefore, it is not always possible to determine the author of a particular editorial. Such is the case here.

<sup>5</sup>B. G. Packard, "Farming as a Business," The Country Gentleman, reprinted in the Western Agriculturalist, June 1878, p. 1.

<sup>6</sup>T. Butterworth, "Boil It Down," Western Agriculturalist, April 1879, p. 1.

<sup>7</sup>Farm and Fireside, 1 Oct. 1892, p. 1.

<sup>8</sup>B. R. Black, "Old Ways and New Ways," The Farm Journal, Oct. 1888, p. 172.

<sup>9</sup>Wilmer Atkinson, "The Farmer as Merchant," The Farm Journal, Nov. 1887, p. 130 as quoted in Johnstone, "Old Ideals Versus New Ideas in Farm Life," p. 145.

<sup>10</sup>Ira Gower, "Farmer's Debt," The Nebraska Farmer, Aug. 1879, p. 189.

<sup>11</sup>American Agriculturalist, March 1874, p. 82.

<sup>12</sup>"Principles of Good Farming," The Nebraska Farmer, March 1877, p. 4.

<sup>13</sup>R. W. F., "Importance of Agriculture," The Nebraska Farmer, Jan. 1877, p. 9.

- <sup>14</sup>Andrew S. Fuller, "Profit in Farming," Moore's Rural New-Yorker, 10 June 1876, p. 380.
- <sup>15</sup>John Gould, "Capital Versus Brains in the Dairy," American Agriculturalist, Sept. 1892, p. 530.
- <sup>16</sup>H. E. Heath, The Nebraska Farmer, 30 March 1893, p. 222. The Nebraska Farmer changed from a monthly to a bi-weekly in 1885.
- <sup>17</sup>J. N. Muncey, "Farm Labor," Farmers Review, reprinted in The Nebraska Farmer, 1 April 1886, p. 104.
- <sup>18</sup>The Farm Journal, Sept. 1890, p. 164.
- <sup>19</sup>Addie Archer, "The Hired Men on a Farm," American Agriculturalist, June 1892, p. 374.
- <sup>20</sup>J. A. Van Allen, "Engaging Help," The Western Plowman, Jan. 1886, p. 219.
- <sup>21</sup>J. N. Muncey, "Farm Labor," p. 104.
- <sup>22</sup>S. S. Rathvon, "Stormy Days on the Farm," The Lancaster Farmer, Sept. 1878, p. 142.
- <sup>23</sup>B. S., "The Farm," The Farm Journal, Oct. 1891, p. 185.
- <sup>24</sup>L. L. Jones, "New Inventions," The Western Plowman, May 1886, p. 320.
- <sup>25</sup>J. T. Clarkson, The Nebraska Farmer, Jan. 1877, p. 7.
- <sup>26</sup>Indiana Farmer, "Machinery on the Farm," The Indiana Farmer, 13 April 1884, p. 191.
- <sup>27</sup>J. W. Warr, "The Moral Effect of Improved Farm Machinery," The Western Plowman, Feb. 1889, p. 101.
- <sup>28</sup>James Underwood, "Agricultural Machinery at the World's Fair," Kansas Farmer, 14 Sept. 1893, p. 571.
- <sup>29</sup>American Agriculturalist, Dec. 1874, p. 442.
- <sup>30</sup>R., "Fawks' Steam Plow," The Lancaster Farmer, June 1873, p. 106.
- <sup>31</sup>L. L., "Swivel Plows," American Agriculturalist, June 1874, p. 212.
- <sup>32</sup>J. C. McBride, "The Randolph Header," The Nebraska Farmer, May 1879, p. 108.

33"Making Farming a Business," The Ohio Farmer, March 1877, p. 12.

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52W. L., "Farmers and Legislation," The Prairie Farmer, 12 May 1879, p. 103.

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61"Col. L. L. Polk," New England Farmer, 30 Oct. 1890, p. 348.

62For a thorough discussion of the "Bogus Butter Controversy," see Earl Hayter, The Troubled Farmer, (DeKalb: Northern Illinois Univ. Press), pp. 60-81.

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64"Bogus Butter," The Cultivator and the Country Gentleman, 22 Jan. 1885, p. 77.

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66W. G. Whitmore, "Attention Dairymen of Nebraska," The Nebraska Farmer, 1 May 1886, p. 138.

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<sup>69</sup>C. V. Riley, "The Grasshopper," The Nebraska Farmer, Jan. 1877, p. 19.

<sup>70</sup>M. McNeil, "Congressional Aid," The Prairie Farmer, 2 Feb. 1877, p. 8.

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**CHAPTER 5--Anti-Urbanism, Xenophobia and the Emerging Paradox:  
Social Retrogression, 1873-1893**

Despite the farmer's efforts to use the most advanced agricultural technology, to become a more efficient business manager, to develop cooperative marketing arrangements and to exert organized political pressure on state and local government, his economic condition did not appreciably improve during the 1870s and 1880s, and it worsened during the early 1890s. As we have seen, his efforts were not entirely in vain. His farm had become more productive, many of his cooperative associations had, in varying degrees, proven successful, and his political exertions had prompted landmark regulatory legislation and vaulted some of his agrarian compatriots into political office. Such notable accomplishments often provided small consolation, however, in the face of perpetually depressed commodity prices, a deflated currency, high interest rates and chronically reduced cash flows. For the farmer, life had become a frustrating and unacceptable non sequitur: as he became better at his business, his economic condition deteriorated. Even the cautious agrarian optimism over such hard-fought legislative victories as the Granger Laws, the Interstate Commerce Act and the Sherman Anti-Trust Act was quickly dissipated by the reluctant enforcement of those measures and by the uniformly ineffectual prosecution of the few offenders ever brought to trial. Gradually, the

disillusionment born of dashed hopes flared into open and often bitter resentment.

It is not difficult to understand why farmers became increasingly bewildered and angry during the Gilded Age. Not only had their economic system broken down, but so, too, had the political and legal institutions which they had counted on to redress their economic grievances. They began to doubt the efficacy of their traditional beliefs in hard work, economic fair play, representative government and legal justice. It seemed that powerful and sinister forces were working to undermine the old, established rural verities--forces many farmers could not fully understand or hope to effectively control. Under such circumstances, ratiocination and cool objectivity tend to erode. Farmers, like most people, were naturally reluctant to accept personal responsibility for economic failure; they would rather ascribe external culpability. In their efforts to first explain and then to assign responsibility for their troubles, it was entirely predictable that farmers would focus their collective gaze on an old nemesis: the city.

The city was viewed as the base for the powerful and ruthless monopolies, trusts and corporations. It was home for the bankers, speculators, lawyers, middlemen, politicians and other frequent targets of agrarian wrath. It was commonly believed that the wealthy and extravagant lifestyles enjoyed by these cunning urbanites was the direct result of a ruthless and cooperatively contrived agreement to exploit farmers and wage

laborers. These assorted evils appeared to be compounded in the early 1890s when the cities began swelling with the growing number of southern European immigrants who were flowing onto American shores. For many farmers, these newcomers brought the poverty, ignorance, crime and alien ideologies that would ultimately undermine American values and institutions.

This is not to imply that the resentment and hostility directed at America's cities was completely unjustified. As we have seen, many of the charges against urban-based businesses were well founded, and much of the subsequent agrarian economic and political activism was legitimately inspired. But, in many cases, the pages of the agricultural papers also betrayed anger and hatred that were indiscriminantly directed. Ubiquitous villains were obscurely identified and arbitrarily associated; grievances were vaguely defined. As discussion turned to such matters as corporate conspiracy, immigration restriction and subjugation of the Indian, the rhetoric often became shrill and, at times, even paranoic.

Among the wide array of evil-doers consistently castigated in the agricultural press, monopolies were easily the most pronounced. Frequently, the letters and editorials contained general, all-inclusive references to monopolistic abuses. Writing to the Farmer's Friend in 1879, G.H.S. contends that "the middle belt" of America has become "the predator field for the vicious transporting monopolies, whilst the money monopolies are sapping and subordinating every Christian industry of our land."<sup>1</sup>



In a letter to the Country Gentleman, R.L.L. compares monopolies and trusts to a "tidal wave . . . that has been slowly lifting its gigantic form into sight, so sinister in motive and rapid in growth" that it threatens to "crush and trample all interests but its own in the dust."<sup>2</sup> M.J. Lawrence, editor of The Ohio Farmer, asserts that "these monopolies" have:

. . . gained their ascendancy and power by stealth and treachery, and by a base betrayal of the confidence of a too confiding nation; and by systematic frauds, and gigantic swindlings, that may well put the Tammany ring and all other thieves and swindlers to the blush.<sup>3</sup>

Writing to The Ohio Farmer in 1874, A.W.H. decries the "hordes of monopolies that infest our land." Among the hordes, the correspondent includes "speculators, lawyers, and petty and persistent office holders to be found in every city in the land."<sup>4</sup> These and other "monopolistic leeches," according to a reader of the Maine Farmer, buy their "bread and meat, and in many cases their whiskey" with the money they have "robbed and wrung from the pockets of unsuspecting farmers."<sup>5</sup>

More often, the agricultural editors and their subscribers identified somewhat more specific corporate targets, although the obstreperous rhetoric remained the same. Beginning in the late 1860s, the railroads were easily the most frequent objects of agrarian wrath. These attacks were ironic because, for many years, the agricultural press had heartily encouraged railroad expansion. In 1849, the New England Farmer proclaims that "the favorable influence of railroads on agriculture is becoming more and more known and appreciated in all parts of the country."

Among many other advantages, the railroad can provide the means by which "farmers in the interior can have their animals carried to a market in a short time, at a moderate expense, and without injury."<sup>6</sup> Almost a decade later, the editor of The Indiana Farmer maintains that the "populous East cannot emigrate West without paying tribute to our Railroads. The great West cannot go East without doing the same."<sup>7</sup> In 1858, a correspondent to The Ohio Farmer, suggests that "it is too common to look upon the [the railroads] as huge monopolies." More enlightened public opinion recognizes that:

The Railroad men are more deeply interested than any other class of men in the clearing of our ground, the opening of our farms, the improvement of Agriculture . . . and the education of all our people. . . . Let us not, then, as farmers, mechanics and traders, regard the Railroad interest as antagonistic to our own.<sup>8</sup>

As late as 1877, even the western farm journals were extolling the virtues of the railroad companies. A Kansas Farmer reader reports that the "railroad companies are offering as choice farming property as ever was created, within a few miles of their lines."<sup>9</sup> Similarly, J.T. Clarkson, editor of The Nebraska Farmer, exclaims that the Nebraska Territory is "supremely fortunate" to have so many of her acres in the hands of the railroads because "no real estate can be purchased upon terms more easily available." Even when settlers have been unable to make timely mortgage payments, the railroads have demonstrated "the utmost leniency and liberality."<sup>10</sup>

Before long, however, the railroads were bearing the brunt of

the blame for prolonged hard times on America's farms. By 1890, the same Nebraska Farmer that had so enthusiastically endorsed railroad land sales in the late 1870s was advising its readers that "the ignorant farmer who votes bonds to aid in railway building does not understand his own interests. Railways are good servants but hard and cruel masters."<sup>11</sup> In his angry letter to The Prairie Farmer, V.P. Richmond avers that recent railroad rate increases were primarily the result of "monopolistic greed . . . reckless management and ruthless piracy." The railroads had undertaken "chimerical projects that resulted in disastrous failure," and now these "enemies of the people" were attempting to recover their losses by "conspiring to rob honest, rate-paying people."<sup>12</sup> An editorial in the Western Plowman suggests that the true culprits are the railroad owners." These human sharks should be bridled, their big incomes taxed out of existence." The writer wonders "who will punish these frauds and swindlers . . . who trample on the rights of people while holding up their brazen faces in cool defiance of the law."<sup>13</sup> Interestingly, expressions of agrarian hostility to the railroad monopolies were not confined to the western farm papers. In an 1891 letter to The Rural New-Yorker, L.H.R. writes:

The greatest curse of New England today is the railroads that are robbing her people and driving them from their homes to seek new places in the West. The Western people seem to think that they are the only people who are oppressed by the railroad kings; but they are mistaken, as their brothers in New England are being robbed even worse. . . . Within the next ten years we will see the railroad kings all dethroned, and our land will be ruled by the people for the people.<sup>14</sup>

Writing to the Philadelphia and Albany-based Country Gentleman, C. M. Clay complains bitterly of the "railroad robbers" who, with their "criminal combinations in our cities," have created a situation where "every honest man's house (his boasted 'Castle') in the Republic is in a state of siege, and he can go neither in nor out without a permit from the gluttonous banditti."<sup>15</sup> Even the more conservative agricultural papers in the Northeast occasionally joined the fray. The venerable New England Farmer contains a fiery, anti-railroad editorial translated from the Allgemeinem Zeitung. According to Carl Laudenschlager, "railroad corporations have grown up to a great and wanton political power . . . and have, through stealth and cunning, attained a most powerful and ruthless influence over all branches of public administration, legislation and courts of justice."<sup>16</sup>

While the railroads were probably the most frequent recipients of agrarian invective, they were just one among a broader host of alleged evil-doers. For J.W. Warr, editor of The Western Plowman, the "greatest and greediest of all monopolies" was the American Telephone and Telegraph Company. This "blood-sucking corporation" is "guilty of serious crimes against the people," including "extortion and public robbery." Warr further asserts that if a person dies in a home unequipped with a telephone, and the death occurs because help is late in arriving, "the company which deprived that house of the use of one of its instruments is chargeable with that person's death."<sup>17</sup> An equally irate Jacob Funck, writing to The Nebraska Farmer in 1890, contends that the

culprits "robbing and enslaving farmers everywhere" are "capitalists and money lenders," those "Christian gentlemen" who "cheat people out of 20 to 30 and even 50 per cent on every dollar."<sup>18</sup> Orange Judd, the highly influential editor of The Prairie Farmer, believes that farmers must be especially wary of corporate advertising because of the "deliberate and extensive swindling" found in "multitudes of bogus and fraudulent advertisements put forth by great business concerns." These advertisements cost their "victims hundreds of thousands of dollars . . . and more probably into the millions."<sup>19</sup> A subscriber to the same publication insists that the "shyster, Shylock lawyers" perpetrate "nine-tenths of all the swindling upon farmers" by means of "quibbling words or phrases, often ingenious enough to deceive any but a sharp lawyer accustomed to examine the import and bearing of every word written down."<sup>20</sup> A correspondent to the Michigan Farmer suggests that "the real foes of farmers," are the "grain gamblers," those whose business is little more than "a gigantic and commercial evil." The writer goes on to report that the grain brokers "by great stealth and cunning" were able to defeat the Hatch Anti-Option Bill despite "a strong majority in both the houses . . . and the manifest and just will of nine tenths of the entire people."<sup>21</sup>

Although the finger pointing was usually directed at monolithic corporate entities or at occupational groups, an editor or correspondent would occasionally mention specific individuals. The editor of The Nebraska Farmer, for example,

maintains that the true enemies of the farmers are millionaires like "the Armours, Goulds and that class of men" who have made their money "from the starvation wages paid their employees."<sup>22</sup> Still basking in the euphoria surrounding the passage of the Sherman Anti-Trust Act, Jonathan Periam, editor of The Prairie Farmer, happily reports that the "millionaire sharks like Rockefeller and Gould seem finally to be in a bad way." Periam hopes that the "courts will now crush out these blood suckers and conspirators against the people," and all their "rampant and villainous bribery of professional promoters and politicians."<sup>23</sup>

For some commentators, the major threat to agrarian interests lurked on the other side of the Atlantic. The farm papers were filled with denunciations of alien land ownership and of collusion between powerful European and American financiers and monopolists. Condemning what he believes is the dangerous proliferation of European land speculators in the United States, a correspondent to The Farm Journal predicts that America will soon be ruled by "the landlord and tenantry system of the old world." These new landlords, "European noblemen, principally English, and their brethren of the syndicates, who are buying up and controlling our lands and industries," are "worse than invading armies."<sup>24</sup> On July 4, 1891, Rural New-Yorker editor Herbert Collingwood reports that Baron Hirsch, "the multi-millionaire philanthropist of Europe, who has already donated several millions of dollars for the amelioration of his Hebrew coreligionists," is planning to establish 250,000-acre,

"Israelitish colony of agriculturists" in North Carolina. In a sardonically anti-Semitic tone, Collingwood wonders whether "these Children of Israel," who after the "last 2,000 years of attention to trade and financiering . . . among bricks and mortar and behind counters," will be "out of place laboring in our green fields and between plow handles."<sup>25</sup> Approximately five years earlier, the New England Farmer had warned its readers about foreign landlords. After excoriating the "alien land speculators" who were residing in America, the writer takes up "another class of these same land owners about whom the public knows little or nothing, but who cause a world of misery and degradation."

These are the alien absentee landlords who own large estates in this country, and . . . to get money to hoard or squander abroad, grind the faces of their American tenants, and introduce into this free country the worst features of the cruel landlordism that has for centuries cursed shackled Ireland. . . . We want neither alien land-grabbers, alien landlords, nor, above all, Irish landlordism in this country. Away with every vestige of them.<sup>26</sup>

Others were convinced that American and European capitalists were constantly conspiring to keep farmers in economic bondage. One such individual was D.H. Pingrey who, in a disjointed letter to The Prairie Farmer, blames the economic panics of 1873 and 1874 on "vast enterprises, involving the capital of both European and American managers." These "powerful big money interests," had formed a "marvelous, hydra-headed octopus whose vile tentacles reach even into the legislative halls and courts of law."<sup>27</sup> In a similar argument, the editor of The Ohio Farmer

contends that the U.S. Treasury (because of the "base surrender of spineless politicians," those "servile tools of money power," ) is entirely "in the clutches of British bankers and their Wall Street agents and allies."<sup>28</sup> For Elbert S. Carman of The Rural New-Yorker, the major reason the "most powerful republic on earth," has been unable to control "the most powerful trust on earth--the Standard Oil," is that the latter has, "for predatory purposes," established "a combination with the Rothchilds."<sup>29</sup>

While the agricultural press remained consistently hostile to foreign land barons and financiers throughout the Gilded Age, the attitudes toward immigration changed dramatically. During the most of the 1870s and into the early 1880s, the farm papers generally welcomed the newcomers, especially those from Western Europe and the British Isles. These people were considered industrious and skillful farmers who could greatly contribute to the settlement of the prairies and the Great Plains. Some of the western states and territories sent agents and promoters to the eastern cities and even to Europe in an effort to convince large numbers of immigrants to settle in their respective areas. Advertisements by railroad companies and speculators contributed to the boomerism reflected in the rural papers. Beginning in the mid 1880s, however, the mood in the agricultural press began to change. Editors and readers began questioning the desirability of "unrestricted" immigration as more people from southern and eastern Europe began to arrive. As economic conditions became increasingly worse in the early 1890s, the agrarian doubts about



the "open door" turned to xenophobia. The "fear of the stranger" which gripped the entire culture was as prevalent on the farm as it was in America's cities and towns.<sup>30</sup>

In April, 1873, the American Farmer ran a front page editorial entitled "Immigration." The writer (probably publisher Samuel Sands) notes the "immense upheaving among the agricultural classes of England," and conveys with obvious approval recent information from Britain that approximately 100,000 "agricultural laborers are destined for Minnesota, in the U.S." The article also incorporates an enthusiastic report in the Country Gentleman that plans were underway to establish "an immense English colony in Kansas."

All the preliminary arrangements are being made, and buildings are now being erected for the reception of immigrants--laws are to be framed for the moral and intellectual training of the people; a railway station has been established on the Pacific Railway, called Victoria, and in the spring the most active operations will commence in regard to settling the colony.<sup>31</sup>

C.M. Cochrane, writing to the Maine Farmer in the same year, also notes that "English agricultural laborers are becoming restive. Many of them refuse to except [sic] the wages offered by the farmers and emigration to Brazil is threatened. Why not to the United States?"<sup>32</sup> The competition for foreign settlers was not limited to the international arena. In the May, 1879 issue of The Nebraska Farmer, J.C. McBride writes that many newly-arrived immigrants "are unnecessarily excited over a story that every one that goes to Kansas gets that 'forty acres and a mule,' together with other necessities in starting a farm." Those who choose to

settle in his state "get all that, and more too, . . . if they will work for it. Nebraska does well by everybody that works."<sup>33</sup>

Some western states, including Kansas, Nebraska and Texas, established immigration associations to encourage foreign settlement. In their frequent advertisements in the midwestern and eastern agricultural papers, these associations welcomed "the intelligent and worthy from all lands and countries."<sup>34</sup> Further, they promised to "aid the immigration of honest people . . . whose presence will enhance the value of our lands--and will add to our society and contribute to the prosperity of our State."<sup>35</sup> Such promotional advertising apparently caught the attention of The Prairie Farmer editors who proceeded to chide their own Illinois officials for failing to more aggressively encourage immigration. They recommend that the state should send a trained recruitment delegation to the Paris Exposition in 1878. Those selected to go must not simply "put on style and hob knob with the magnates." Rather, they must "be alive to business, and by statistics, charts and maps . . . present plainly to the rank and file of the people proposing to emigrate, the resources of the country."<sup>36</sup> At times, the pro-immigration rhetoric was reminiscent of the earlier tributes paid to the yeoman. In a letter to The Prairie Farmer, "Elgin," exclaims that it has been the "hardy European immigrant" who has:

. . . kept the march of civilization steadily flowing West; who has worked hand in hand with our own people in subduing vast fertile tracts; made states to teem with the busy hum of industry; built cities, and made hitherto waste places, to teem with their burthen of agricultural wealth.<sup>37</sup>

Writing from a more philosophical perspective, the editors of Moore's Rural New-Yorker wonder about the long-range consequences of foreign settlement in America.

What will be the final result of the mixture of the races and particularly of those so widely separated as are the Caucasian and the Mongolian, if they ever mix--time alone can determine. Enough for us to welcome all whose condition will be improved by their coming among us. We know nothing of what the great future has in store for our country, but should remember that men's years are only God's moments and as He has made of one blood all nations of the earth, they should strive to live together in . . . peace and unity.<sup>38</sup>

Just ten years later, the Rural New-Yorker's earlier magnanimity and Christian tolerance toward immigrants had been supplanted by nagging doubt. In one of his many editorials on the subject, J.S. Woodward provides figures indicating that while the number of "skilled" immigrants coming to the United States between 1880 and 1885 increased by 91 per cent over the previous five-year period, the number of "unskilled laborers" increased by 313 per cent.

The greatest increase in this undesirable class came from Italy, Prussia, and Hungary, the immigration from which is nearly all unskilled, cheap, and poverty-stricken. During the last five years the aggregate increase from these three countries was 94 per cent more than the rest of Europe. Is immigration any longer a blessing is becoming one of the questions of the day.<sup>39</sup>

Later in the same year, B.C.C. asks a similar question in his letter to The Ohio Farmer. "We have welcomed the world to our doors. Is it not about time to modify that welcome? Uncle Sam is no longer 'rich enough to give us all a farm.' The old gentleman should not injure himself by his gifts outside the

family."<sup>40</sup> Not all the commentary in the early 1880s was so politely put. In a tone that became more commonplace in the 1890s, Wilmer Atkinson, the editor of The Farm Journal, complains that while the United States has regulations to quarantine foreign cattle, it "hasn't sense enough to protect [its citizens] from brutality, disease and vice the effete monarchies are daily casting upon our shores in the shape of human beings."<sup>41</sup>

By 1890, the nativist sentiment in the agricultural press had hardened. Questions regarding the advisability of continued open-door policies were replaced by widespread demands for restrictive legislation. In the September 1890 issue of The Farm Journal, the redoubtable Atkinson was calling for a national "barrier against the immigrant that cannot produce a clean bill of health and morals."<sup>42</sup> Five months later, a correspondent wrote in wholehearted agreement with the Journal's editorial stance:

What this country needs is to shut down the bars against indiscriminate immigration. We need to exclude convicts, tramps, anarchists, cranks, and lazy, sickly, and vicious people of every sort. We have taken all the foreign trash of this kind into our national stomach than we can digest, and more, too.<sup>43</sup>

Reporting rumors circulating in the spring of 1891 that several thousand "objectionable European immigrants" were planning to enter the United States through Canada, the editors of The Rural New-Yorker demand "some means for damming this foul stream of foreign pauper and criminal immigration across our northern border."<sup>44</sup>

Such xenophobic flames were further fanned in the fall of 1892

when Asiatic cholera broke out on an immigrant ship in New York harbor. The agricultural press strongly supported the subsequent bill, restricting all immigration for one year, which was reported out of New Hampshire Senator William E. Chandler's committee. Writing to The Ohio Farmer early in 1893, Eli Kirk condemns those politicians opposed to the Chandler bill. Referring specifically to Senators Mills (Texas) and Vest (Missouri), Kirk contends that "such party leaders . . . are willing to imperil the lives of the citizens of this whole country, including themselves and their families, and to destroy the World's Fair, and to bring on untold evils too numerous to detail."<sup>45</sup> The editor of Farm and Fireside agreed, averring that the Chandler bill will "draw the lines taut enough to keep out all undesirable foreign elements."<sup>46</sup> To provide scholarly confirmation of its restrictionist editorial stance, the same paper published a xenophobic letter from an "eminent German historian."

Immigrants are coming here in solid blocks of thousands, who have little more in common with the American people than the human shape; they come with the set purpose of forming and remaining separate colonies amid the community; they do not assimilate with the American stock; they do not enter into social or moral union with it; they are neither able or willing to do so.<sup>47</sup>

The editors closely concurred with the historian's view, adding that "every such colony is a center of foreignism hostile to American institutions" and a "source of evil to the colonists themselves, and to their American neighbors."<sup>48</sup>

Such ardent nativism wasn't limited to the eastern

agricultural press. Many of the same midwestern and western papers which had so enthusiastically encouraged immigration to the prairies and plains in the 1870s had done an editorial about-face by the early 1890s. The Prairie Farmer's Periam was particularly vehement in his denunciation of unrestricted immigration.

In relation to the subject of immigration into the United States the editor . . . has, for two years, been outspoken upon the fact that criminals, paupers, beggars, diseased and crippled persons, have been deliberately shipped here through the connivance of governments of Great Britain and some European states. . . . our lax discipline of public officials has allowed this yearly swarm of vicious and other undesirable persons to spread themselves over our cities, have filled our penitentiaries, reformatories and asylums to overflowing, overrun our cities and even villages with a population not only undesirable but absolutely vicious and dangerous.<sup>49</sup>

Periam's remarks reveal a curious combination of the previously discussed belief in international conspiracy and an almost psychotic fear of immigrants. Unlike earlier commentators, he makes no distinction between desirable and undesirable peoples; rather, his xenophobia is indiscriminate and universal. The same is true of "A Farmer," who, in a letter to The Indiana Farmer, links pro-immigration policies to capitalist desires for cheaper labor.

Brother farmers, let us awake to the great danger that foreign immigration is inflicting upon the country. If monarchical forms of government create paupers and criminals, let them take care of them. . . . Let us not assist capitalists to turn out native born Americans and substitute cheaper foreign labor in their places by remaining silent to this great evil.<sup>50</sup>

Somewhat more typical of the views expressed in the western agricultural press are those of H.E. Heath, editor of The

Nebraska Farmer, who believes there is still room in America for the "law-abiding" and "liberty-loving" immigrant. Unfortunately, Heath continues, "those types of people have become exceedingly rare, and the inflowing tide is now laden with the flotsam and jetsam of pauperism, crime and anarchy. Immigration now brings with it contagious elements destructive to American civilization."<sup>51</sup>

Like many other Americans, farmers associated immigration and anarchy primarily because of the Haymarket Square incident in 1884.<sup>52</sup> Following the sentencing of the eight men convicted of the bombing (seven of whom were foreign-born) on August 20, 1886, The Rural New-Yorker denounces "those alien wretches who gloried in their antagonism to law, reason, decency and the peace and welfare of the civilized world."<sup>53</sup> A reader of The Maine Farmer writes that "the worthless lives of these alien anarchists are but a poor compensation" for their "nefarious designs and wanton and willful destruction of valuable lives."

Their execution on the gallows will be a stern warning to an exotic class of criminals from foreign shores for whom there is no room in any corner of this broad land. Would that their punishment be inflicted quickly and properly.<sup>54</sup>

When Governor John Altgeld pardoned Fielden, Neebe and Schwab, the three surviving anarchists, in 1893, the increasingly xenophobic agricultural press reacted predictably. The editor of Farm and Fireside suggests that the Governor has "dishonored the fair name of Illinois."<sup>55</sup> His journalistic counterparts at the Kansas Farmer concur with the New York Sun that "Altgeld

evidently believes that a foreign-born American is better than a native-born American."<sup>56</sup> A correspondent to The Prairie Farmer wonders how the Illinois governor knows more than his state's Supreme Court and calls for the "deportation of all persons known ever to have been connected with anarchistic or other secret societies against the government."<sup>57</sup>

Agrarian xenophobia could, at times, be somewhat more subtle. An interesting example is how native farmers viewed the manner in which their foreign-born neighbors engaged the entire family in farm work. A New England farmer suggests that the major reason foreigners "are increasing proportionately on our farms" is because "they are more willing than American farmers to make farm help of their wives and children--I almost said drudges."<sup>58</sup> In The Ohio Farmer, M.E. Williams agrees that "woman and child labor prevail among the foreign farmers of America." Although the practice might "bring individual prosperity," to the offending farmer, his economic well-being comes at the expense of "making beasts of burden of his wife and child."<sup>59</sup> A.H. Washburn hopefully predicts that as foreign farmers become more sophisticated managers, their increased use of advanced agricultural technologies will:

. . . drive the women and children from the grain field . . . and emancipate the boys and girls who should be in school and the wives and mothers who should be superintending household affairs, controlling and educating their children, improving their own minds, or taking needed rest and recreation.<sup>60</sup>

Interestingly enough, the one notable exception to the strident agrarian xenophobia during the Gilded Age was the



pervasive pro-Chinese sentiment articulated in the agricultural press. Many farm editors and their readers were denouncing the 1892 extension of the Chinese Exclusion Act at the same time they were clamoring for tighter restrictions on European immigration. When the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of the Exclusion Act a year later, the Ohio Farmer's Lawrence was outraged:

Let America hide her head in shame, and never lift up her voice in defense of human freedom and all the sacred, God-given rights of humanity, until she repents of her wicked persecution of a weak, inoffensive, defenseless people in our midst. . . . The Greary law is unjust, absurd, unchristian.<sup>61</sup>

A few years earlier, The Rural New-Yorker reports that California fruit and vegetable growers find their Chinese laborers "steadier, more faithful and more trustworthy," than other laborers in the region.<sup>62</sup> After considering the popular argument that Chinese workers took jobs from needy native Americans, Pennsylvania farmer L.C. Stalnaker concludes that "no complaints of Chinese 'cheap labor' can be made by those who wish expulsion of the Celestials from the State."<sup>63</sup> S.S. Rathvon, editor of The Lancaster Farmer agrees that "arguments that have been advanced that this Chinese cheap labor would reduce ten or twenty millions of our people to serfdom is entirely absurd."<sup>64</sup> It is not clear why many farmers were favorably disposed to the Chinese. Part of the reason might be that the comparatively few Chinese in America lived primarily on the West Coast and exercised very little influence on northern U.S. agriculture. Perhaps a better explanation is the fact that California fruit and vegetable

growers preferred the hard-working, courteous, and often less expensive Chinese laborer to any of the available alternatives. Eastern and midwestern farmers who were consistently troubled by a shortage of good hired hands could appreciate the need for reliable, industrious and phlegmatic help.

While agrarian feelings about European immigrants turned increasingly hostile during the late 1880s and early 1890s, their attitudes toward Native Americans moved in a somewhat opposite direction. During the 1870s, when settlers and the military were still engaged in armed conflict against various western tribes, the agricultural press reflected widespread outrage, bitterness and hatred. As the more militant tribes ceased hostilities and were moved onto reservations, the rural anger softened into disdain, pity or what might be termed a condescending anthropological curiosity.<sup>65</sup>

In angry response to reports of hostilities between white settlers and the Cheyenne, Kiowa, Comanche, and Arapaho Indians, the Ohio Farmer's M.J. Lawrence asserts that "these Indian massacres . . . of the most blood-chilling nature . . . will make every citizen almost wish for the entire extermination of the red skins."<sup>66</sup> Writing to the Michigan Farmer in 1874, M.M. Frisselle denounces the "bloody warfare against the whites," by "savages who indiscriminantly attack trading ranches, settlements and emigrant trains."<sup>67</sup> In a letter to The Lancaster Farmer, R.N. Hood draws on Social Darwinism to support ardent racists, like General William Sherman, who were advocating the annihilation of

the Native American. "The law of the survival of the fittest . . . shows conclusively that the Indian must give way, and his entire extermination is only a matter of time."<sup>68</sup> Less erudite is the opinion of a Nebraska farmer who, while discussing ways to eliminate stray felines from around the barnyard, suggests that "dead cats, like dead Indians, are very good ones, and as fertilizers are not to be despised."<sup>69</sup>

When news of Custer's defeat at the Little Big Horn reached the East in early July 1876, anti-Indian phobias reached new heights of fury. Writing less than three weeks after the battle, Andrew S. Fuller, editor of Moore's Rural New Yorker, expresses "surprise, horror and indignation" over the "Montana Massacre."

Yes, we admit that our mental vision is not sufficiently acute to see of what good to themselves or to anybody else are the American Indians. They fill a place in the history of the world--but apparently that place is now wanted and they must give way. We are believers in Manifest Destiny to the extent that reconciles us to the idea of their entire and speedy extermination.<sup>70</sup>

The editor of the New England Farmer believes that "as a race that, in so long a time as it has been known, has made no progress, has not shown one particle of inventive talent and that proves incapable of civilization is certainly but little use in this world."<sup>71</sup> Years later, when much of the anti-Indian hysteria expressed in the agricultural papers had dissipated, bitter memories of Little Big Horn remained. In 1890, a news item in The Nebraska Farmer about Sitting Bull's death was followed by a terse editorial comment: "It is a good thing for the citizens along the border that the vicious and snaky old

Indian, Sitting Bull, has passed in his checks. He was always trouble, and his removal to the happy hunting grounds will save the government a great deal of trouble and expense."<sup>72</sup>

For many agrarians, complete extermination was too brutal a solution to the "Indian Problem." In a letter to The Cultivator and Country Gentleman, W.C. suggests that "what the country wants is not to get the Indian race out of the way, but to get rid of the cruelty and vice which make the race unsafe neighbors."<sup>73</sup> The way to do this, the writer continues, is to introduce the Indian to "the manners and customs of civilized life" and to the "stimulus of industrious neighbors, who know how to live by agriculture, and can teach others the lesson."<sup>74</sup> Writing to the Kansas Farmer in 1875, R. McCabe proffers a similar strategy to "improve the Red Man."

Coddling is a poor help to civilization and manhood. Clothing a savage with blankets and the trappings of civilization does not change the inside of him. If you make him earn the blanket that he wears, and clothe his own family, and lay up stores of provisions for the future, you have taught him new virtues, and put him on a new basis for living.<sup>75</sup>

A correspondent to The Nebraska Farmer agrees that "if we expect to 'make the wilderness blossom as the rose', it will have to be done by holding the Indians in check and not by being so lenient."<sup>76</sup>

Some agrarians were willing to concede that the Indian might make a passable farmer, but, of course, he would never prove the white man's equal. This condescending magnanimity is apparent in an 1893 letter in Farm and Fireside:

Regarding the Indian as a farmer from the standpoint of vantage occupied by his thrifty white neighbor, he does not always shine with an undimmed luster . . . but taking him as a man who while still a savage and with all the instincts of a wild, free life, untrammelled by an agricultural acquaintance, he is really not so bad a farmer after all.<sup>77</sup>

Others, like Rural New-Yorker editor Carman, were not so sure that the Indian could ever be taught to farm effectively, especially on reservations.

It is against the best interests of the Indians that they should be allowed such vast areas of land, of which they can make no use. They are not advanced enough in civilization, and are too poor and shiftless, to engage in agriculture or stock raising successfully. The buffaloes, on which they mainly depended for support, have been nearly exterminated, and at present they would starve on the results of hunting over these large areas.<sup>78</sup>

Writing to the American Agriculturist from Denton County, Texas, in 1892, W.L. Moore is hopeful that the rapid settlement of the Oklahoma Territory will enable white settlers to "finally annex and govern the various reservations in the Indian Territory." This would be an auspicious development, according to Moore, because the "Indian lands are fertile and unused." Whereas the Indian does not appreciate the fecundity of the reservation lands, the "civilized white man uses them to best advantage."<sup>79</sup>

After once belligerent tribes had been subdued, they then became something of a curiosity to the readers of the agricultural press. Different tribes were profiled, usually in the rapidly expanding entertainment sections of the farm papers. In the mid 1870s, for example, both The Cultivator and Country Gentleman and The Ohio Farmer printed stories about the

Modoc Indians. A Modoc band under the leadership of Captain Jack had surrendered on June 1, 1874, after holding a far superior force at bay near Tull Lake in northern California. Captain Jack was subsequently hanged for the murder of General E.R.S. Canby, and the Modocs were removed to a reservation in Oklahoma.<sup>80</sup> The article in The Cultivator and Country Gentleman appeared approximately one year before the surrender and focuses on "the savage nature and the nomadic habits" of the Modocs. "Once a numerous, powerful, and warlike people, like the tribe of Ishmael, their hands were ever raised against all others, and their aggressive spirit kept them in continual warfare." Later, after explaining that their dramatic decrease in numbers was largely result of their "deadly conflicts with the early settlers of northern California and southern Oregon," the correspondent concludes that "the bloody atrocities of these Arabs of the West are still too well remembered."<sup>81</sup> Writing to The Ohio Farmer a short time after the Modocs had been moved to the Yuapaw Reservation in Oklahoma, M.J. Lawrence employs a supercilious and comically paternalistic tone. After observing that "the recent war seems to have completely cowed" the Modocs, Lawrence turns his attention to individual members of the tribe.

Scar-face Charley and Bogus Charley, the first and second chiefs of this tribal remnant, are still in authority, and their commands are respected, but they no longer bear themselves with their former haughtiness. The males pass their time in drinking, smoking, shooting with the bow and arrow, playing ball, etc., evidently resolved to bestow no thought upon the morrow. Steamboat Frank has become literary in his tastes, and is actually making some progress in learning to read. . . . The eyes of Princess Mary

filled with tears when the name of Captain Jack was mentioned, while the widow of the departed chief still blackens her face and lives in seclusion.<sup>82</sup>

Other tribes were portrayed in even less complimentary lights. The peaceful Meewoc Indians of northern California were the subject of an article entitled, "Interesting Savages," which appeared in The Cultivator and Country Gentleman in 1889. According to the writer, the Meewocs have "the most degraded and superstitious beliefs . . . from the baby basket to the grave." Although there are "some specimens of noble physical stature," the "utter weakness, puerility, and imbecility of their conceptions, and the unspeakable obscenity of their legends, almost surpass human belief."<sup>83</sup> The gentle Digger Indians of the Pacific Northwest fared little better in an article by Maggie Downing Brainard, which appeared in the American Agriculturist in 1892. Brainard begins by suggesting that the Diggers "are considered the lowest type of the red man. Depravity is stamped on every feature." She follows with a detailed description of the "repugnant and loathsome" Digger diet and concludes with a squeamish description of how grasshoppers are "captured and prepared for serving."<sup>84</sup>

By the early 1890s, information about Native Americans had moved from the news and editorial pages to the feature sections of the farm press. Most articles focused on Indian customs, superstitions and domestic habits. Native Americans were variously depicted as unclean, child-like, and aboriginal. Unlike the immigrants or the monopolists, they were not blamed

for agrarian problems. Once the Indian no longer represented a threat to agricultural expansion, he became, like the Negro, a somewhat amusing and harmless diversion from the everyday monotony and the economic woes of farm life.

Prior to the 1870s, Black Americans were rarely discussed in the pages of the northern agricultural press. When the subject was raised, it was generally in reference to the evils of southern slavery. It may very well be that jokes and anecdotes ridiculing the Negro occasionally appeared in the earlier farm papers, but in all the issues surveyed for the present study, only one such example emerged. In the June 1843 issue of The American Agriculturist, the author of "Sketches in the West--No. 1," includes a vignette about meeting a "colored man" on his way to the Louisville market to sell some vegetables and poultry. Impressed by the quality of the man's produce, the author asks:

"Sambo, you are a genius to grow such carrots, a scientific agriculturist. Did you every read Davy or Tull?"

"Tull," he replied with a grin, "who be he? Dog that tree de coon?"

Then the author asks the Negro how he raised such large chickens. Before the Negro can answer, the author's impatient driver urges his horses forward, whereupon the frustrated correspondent concludes the tale:

Will any Kentuckian please to furnish us with the peculiar manner that the colored people so delicately fat their fowls, the knowledge of which, to our great regret, we were cut off from obtaining of the re-doubtable Sambo?<sup>85</sup>

It is difficult to explain why such bigotry was so rarely found



in the agricultural press before the Civil War. What is clear, however, is that, along with xenophobia and nativism, it became much more pervasive during the last three decades of the nineteenth century.

Most agricultural papers established separate humor sections or columns in the years after the war. This was part of a general trend toward making the papers more appealing to the entire family. Often these sections would contain several jokes, usually presented in dialogue form. In The Ohio Farmer, for example, the humor page was entitled, "Anecdotes and Fun," and a preponderance of the ethnic humor was directed at Black Americans. The Michigan Farmer featured "Chaff from the Gleaner," which also frequently denigrated the Negro. What is interesting is that no other ethnic groups, including the Irish, were as consistently ridiculed in the northern agricultural press. Typically, the jokes would emphasize the Negro's ignorance, cunning, indolence and other stereotypical qualities long attributed to him by whites. In the June 27, 1874 issue of The Ohio Farmer, a white minister asks Tom, his only Black parishioner, who "could not read or write a word," why he was so busily taking notes during the sermon:

[Minister] "What were you doing in church?"

[Tom] "Taking notes, mass; all de gentlemen take notes."

[Minister] "Bring your notes here and let me see them."

Tom brought his notes, which looked more like Chinese than English.

[Minister] "Why, Tom, this is all nonsense."

[Tom] "I thought so, massa, all the time you was preaching it."<sup>86</sup>

In the "Chaff from the Gleaner," section of the Nov. 28, 1876

Michigan Farmer:

An old negro man from Harris County was approached yesterday on the street here by one of his race with the question how he had voted at the recent Presidential election. "Well, I tell you wha 'tis; I ain't voted yet, and I ain't gwyne to vote till I see who is 'lected."<sup>87</sup>

At times, the Negro was used as a humorous and innocuous means of conveying a moral message to readers. In the March 1886 issue of the Western Plowman, "a good colored man" tells the following story to his fellow church members (all white):

"Breddren, when I was a boy I took a hatchet and went into de woods.--When I found a tree dat was straight, big, and solid, I didn't touch dat tree; but when I found one leaning a little and hollow inside, I soon had him down. So when de debbil goes after christians, he don't touch dem dat stand up straight and true, but dem dat lean a little and are hollow inside."<sup>88</sup>

In almost every case, the humor in the jokes and anecdotes focused on the Negro's alleged ignorance and his colorful dialect. In a lengthy tale called, "Provisions of Civil Rights," these racist stereotypes are combined with another, the Negro's insatiable appetite. The anecdote begins when Josiar, a "sapient-looking darkey oscillating between 20 and 25 summers" begins discussing the Civil Rights Bill with Uncle Billy, "an old Negro."

"Well, Uncle Billy, Summer's Swivel Rights bill has has passed de Senate ob de United States widout a murmer."

"Is dat so, Josiar? "

"Jess so, Uncle Billy. And say, Uncle Billy, we cullid pussons is gwine to see whose pervisions is in de pot."

After discussing several "provisions" of the legislation, Uncle Billy, who has been somewhat less than attentive during the dialogue interrupts Josiar:

"Stop right dar, Josiar. Ef dar's pervisions in dat bill, I want a sack ob flour dis berry minnit. Dam de smokin' in de ladies car, and de gehography, and Latin, and italic coffins! I want de pervisions, Josiar. Dey's all dar is in de bill wuff a dam cent!"<sup>89</sup>

Not only was the Black man depicted as an entertaining ignoramus, he was also often portrayed as a conniving petty thief. "'Say, Sambo, what the price of dem ar gloves you got on?'" / "'Don't know, sure,' said Sambo, 'de merchant had just stepped out when I got um. He! he!'"<sup>90</sup> In an anecdote appearing in The Ohio Farmer, this alleged proclivity for stealing was juxtaposed to the Negro's superstitious nature.

A darky was once attempting to steal a goose, but a dog raised an objection, and Sambo retired. The next night during a thunder shower, he attempted it again, and just as he was on the point of getting away with the fowl, the lightening struck close by, and the noise nearly frightened to poor fellow to death. Dropping the goose, he started away, muttering, "Peers ter me der am a mighty lot of fuss made 'bout a common goose."<sup>91</sup>

Occasionally, this racist humor would appear in the advertising and children's sections of the agricultural papers. The February, 1892 issue of the American Agriculturist, for example, contains an advertisement for Powell's Soluble Phosphates," a garden fertilizer produced by W.S. Powell & Co.

The ad, which includes an offer of free seeds, features a derisive cartoon caricature of a smiling, barefoot Black man sitting with a large watermelon slice on his lap offering a forkful to the reader.<sup>92</sup> The "Boys and Girls" section of a subsequent issue of the American Agriculturist contains "The Pumpkin Pie Tree," a short story by Agnes Carr Sage. The story, which is also accompanied by offensive illustrations, tells how Ananias Crow, "a lank Negro boy," beguiles "Little Juan and Juanita Pettitoes" out of a freshly baked pumpkin pie. Crow is variously referred to in the saga as a "son of Africa," "worthy namesake of the Bible falsifier," and a "certain, naughty black Crow." The gullible brother and sister are "bright scholars," and "happy little white folks."<sup>93</sup> Regardless of their intent, such derogatory depictions of Black Americans helped reinforce the racist stereotypes that remain to this day.

On rare occasion, agricultural editors and their readers seriously considered the relative merits of Black farmers. The parallels between the stereotypes revealed in the humor and the more sober perceptions of Black farmers are instructive. In a letter to The Cultivator and Country Gentleman, T.B. Baldwin notes that since the end of the Civil War, "a goodly number of our ex-slaves . . . own their own land, stock and farm tools." After admitting that most Negro farmers are "persevering and frugal," he considers their agricultural acumen.

Our negro farmers nearly all follow the pioneer system of farming, using little or no manure, and the simplest plows and other tools. The negro is no man for machinery, and could never farm with 'patent' plows, harvesters or any

complex implements. . . . In short, the negro is naturally non-progressive. He has enough of the faculty of imitation to follow his old master's simple methods of farming, but he has no faculty for "catching on" to new ideas.<sup>94</sup>

A similar view is expressed in The Farm Journal. Although the Negro has "made some good educational progress", in many instances, "his 'book learning' cannot be put to practical use."

The negro's naturally indolent nature will ever be a barrier to his progress. He is a childish, good-natured, careless sort of a being, easily satisfied with life.<sup>95</sup>

The editor of the Indiana Farmer concludes a brief discussion of the Negro in agriculture by asserting that "the proverbial 'rainy day' seldom disturbs the mental equilibrium of the average darkey, and he makes but little provision for it. His motto seems to be: 'Let us eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die.'"<sup>96</sup> Herbert Collingwood, co-editor of The Rural New-Yorker, takes a somewhat more tolerant, though equally condescending view in regard to "The Negro Question." For Collingwood, the key to the Black man's progress in America is education, but education not in the sense of making the "negro simply 'smart' and more capable of rascality," but rather that "higher and broader education that will place 'a white man's soul in a black man's skin.'". . . If the negro is worth working he is worth improving."<sup>97</sup> Those few agrarians, like Collingwood, who seriously pondered the fate of Black Americans, arrived at the same conclusion they (and others) had in regard to Native Americans: if these minority peoples are willing to listen to white farmers, and if they are willing to work hard, then perhaps

they can learn to adopt progressive agricultural practices.

The period between 1897 and 1910 was one of sustained economic recovery for American agriculture. In describing the confidence that prevailed among most Americans at the dawn of the new century, Walter Lord emphasizes that "even the usually discontented farmers were happy."<sup>98</sup> The gradual return to prosperity revived agrarian hopes that the good life could be achieved on the farm. As farmers' optimism grew, their hostility diminished. By the beginning of the twentieth century, there was little mention of monopolistic abuses or international conspiracies in the farm press. Nor was much said about immigration restriction. And if they weren't laughing at ethnic stereotypes on the humor page, they were proffering popular theories on how to "uplift" the Black and Native American. Yet, while the bitterness, hatred and pervasive paranoia that characterized agrarian thought during the Gilded Age had indeed subsided, it did not disappear. These retrogressive dimensions of agrarian thought would reemerge throughout the twentieth century whenever "times got tough down on the farm."

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>G.H.S., "The Duty of the Hour," Farmer's Friend, July 1879, p. 156.

<sup>2</sup>R.L.L., "Power of Monopoly," Country Gentleman, Feb. 1873, p. 37.

<sup>3</sup>M.J. Lawrence, "The Farmers' Movement," The Ohio Farmer, 31 Jan. 1874, p. 71.

<sup>4</sup>A.W.H., "New Cincinnati Grange," The Ohio Farmer, 14 Feb. 1874, p. 103.

<sup>5</sup>C.S. McIntosh, "Monopolistic Leeches," Maine Farmer, 24 April 1886, p. 217.

<sup>6</sup>"Railroads," New England Farmer, 24 Nov. 1849, p. 394.

<sup>7</sup>"Indiana Railroads," The Indiana Farmer, Dec. 1858, p. 284.

<sup>8</sup>J.H. Hale, "Railroad Men of Ohio," The Ohio Farmer, 14 June 1858, p. 297.

<sup>9</sup>"Choice Land Available," Kansas Farmer, 24 Feb. 1877, p. 61.

<sup>10</sup>J.T. Clarkson, The Nebraska Farmer, Jan. 1877, p. 6.

<sup>11</sup>H.E. Heath, "Topics of the Times," The Nebraska Farmer, 3 July 1890, p. 499.

<sup>12</sup>V.P. Richmond, "The Railroad Problem," The Prairie Farmer, 31 March 1877, p. 100.

<sup>13</sup>J.W. Warr, "Railroad Barons," The Western Plowman, Feb. 1876, p. 211.

<sup>14</sup>L.H.R., "Railroads Robbing Eastern Farmers," The Rural New-Yorker, 18 July 1891, p. 530.

<sup>15</sup>C.M. Clay, "The Railroad Robbers," Country Gentleman, April 1891, p. 284.

<sup>16</sup>Carl Laudenschlager, "Victory of the Grange," New England Farmer, 23 Oct. 1875, p. 312.

<sup>17</sup>J.W. Warr, "Patent Laws," The Western Plowman, May 1886, p. 320. After the Dowd case was resolved in Nov. 1879, Western Union assigned all its telephone patents to The Bell Company and removed itself from the telephone business. The following year, all the remaining phone companies were reorganized as The American Bell Telephone Company which, in 1885, became The American Telephone and Telegraph Company. See Sean Dennis Cashman, America in the Gilded Age (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1984), pp. 22-6.

<sup>18</sup>Jacob Funck, "Why the Mortgage Takes the Farm," The Nebraska Farmer, 3 July 1890, p. 500.

<sup>19</sup>Orange Judd, "Extensive Swindling," The Prairie Farmer, 5 Sept. 1885, p. 344.

<sup>20</sup>L. Harrison, "Humbug Exposures," The Prairie Farmer, 30 May 1885, p. 344.

<sup>21</sup>R.S.S., "What are Legislators For?," Michigan Farmer, 17 Feb. 1874, p. 54.

<sup>22</sup>O.M. Druse, The Nebraska Farmer, 1 Dec. 1886, p. 353.

<sup>23</sup>Jonathan Periam, "When Rogues Fall Out," The Prairie Farmer, 21 July 1890, p. 8. The fact that the captains of industry and finance were seldom mentioned by name appears to support the view that agrarians were far more concerned about the concentration of corporate and monopolistic power than they were about the proliferation of millionaires. The Goulds and Rockefellers were reprehensible individuals not because they had made a great deal of money, but because they had employed strategies which violated the precepts of laissez faire (p. 118, n. 26).

<sup>24</sup>"Pulling Together," The Farm Journal, Sept. 1890, p. 158.

<sup>25</sup>Herbert W. Collingwood, The Rural New-Yorker, 4 July 1891, p. 500.

<sup>26</sup>"Away With Alien Landlordism," New England Farmer, 6 Feb. 1886, p. 92.



<sup>27</sup>D.H. Pingrey, "What Is the Remedy?," The Prairie Farmer, 10 April 1875, p. 113. Interestingly enough, Pingrey suggests that the best way to combat the international money interests is for agrarians to invest in railroad expansion. In this way, the farmers will make more money and thereby become less dependent on the "bankers and money lenders." Such tortured logic was more common among the readers of the agricultural press than it was among the editors.

<sup>28</sup>M.E. Williams, "The Populists," The Ohio Farmer, 13 July 1893, p. 30.

<sup>29</sup>E.S. Carman, The Rural New-Yorker, 4 July 1891, p. 500.

<sup>30</sup>John Higham, Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism 1860-1925 (New York: Athenaeum, 1963), pp. 35-105. Higham suggests that between 1885 and 1897, "fear of the stranger accumulated on all sides, mounting into hatred, bursting into violence, and intruding into politics. Nativist movements occupied a significant place among the rising currents of national feeling that swept the decade (p. 68)." Also see Cashman, pp. 102-9.

<sup>31</sup>Samuel Sands, "Immigration," American Farmer, April 1873, pp. 125-6.

<sup>32</sup>C.M. Cochrane, "English Laborers," Maine Farmer, 21 May 1873, p. 207.

<sup>33</sup>J.C. McBride, The Nebraska Farmer, May 1879, p. 101.

<sup>34</sup>Advertisement for the "Texas Land and Immigration Association," The Prairie Farmer, 6 Jan. 1877.

<sup>35</sup>Advertisement for the Kansas Land Association," The Rural New-Yorker, 15 July 1876, p. 45.

<sup>36</sup>"Emigration," The Prairie Farmer, 12 May 1877, p. 148.

<sup>37</sup>Elgin, "European Immigrants," The Prairie Farmer, 3 Feb. 1877, p. 37.

<sup>38</sup>Andrew Fuller, "Where is the Great West?," Moore's Rural New-Yorker, 24 June 1876.

<sup>39</sup>J.S. Woodward, "Is Immigration a Blessing?," The Rural New-Yorker, 29 May 1886, p. 356.

<sup>40</sup>B.C.C., "More Immigrants," The Ohio Farmer, 2 Oct. 1886, p. 302.

<sup>41</sup>Wilmer Atkinson, The Farm Journal, Aug. 1883, p. 126.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., Sept. 1890, p. 164.

<sup>43</sup>Frank W. McDowell, "Get Those Bars Up!," The Farm Journal, Feb. 1891, p. 308.

<sup>44</sup>E.S. Carman, "Advices from New England," The Rural New-Yorker, 18 April 1891, p. 308.

<sup>45</sup>Eli Kirk, "The Immigrant Question," The Ohio Farmer, 2 Feb. 1893, p. 92.

<sup>46</sup>Farm and Fireside, 1 Jan. 1893, p. 1.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid., 1 July 1893, p. 1.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid.

<sup>49</sup>Jonathan Periam, "Restricting Immigration," The Prairie Farmer, 14 Jan. 1893, p. 8.

<sup>50</sup>A Farmer, "Prohibit Foreign Immigration," The Indiana Farmer, 2 Jan. 1892, p. 8.

<sup>51</sup>H.E. Heath, "Topics of the Times," The Nebraska Farmer, 1 Dec. 1892, p. 1.

<sup>52</sup>Higham calls the Haymarket Affair "the most important single incident in late nineteenth century nativism." Strangers in the Land, p. 54.

<sup>53</sup>E.S. Carman, The Rural New-Yorker, 28 Aug. 1886, p. 564.

<sup>54</sup>A Patriot, "Anarchists," Maine Farmer, 4 Sept. 1886, p. 370.

<sup>55</sup>"Current Comment," Farm and Fireside, 15 July 1893, p. 1.

<sup>56</sup>"Pardon of Anarchists," Kansas Farmer, 29 July 1893, p. 5.

<sup>57</sup>E.W. Doran, "Pardons for Three Anarchists," The Prairie Farmer, 1 July 1893, p. 8.

<sup>58</sup>A Vermont Farmer, "The Law of Wages," New England Farmer, 15 June 1893, p. 430.

<sup>59</sup>M.E. Williams, "Woman and Child Labor," The Ohio Farmer, 13 July 1893, p. 30.

<sup>60</sup>A.H. Washburn, "Machine Labor vs. Child Labor," The Ohio Farmer, 17 May 1893, p. 357.

<sup>61</sup>M.J. Lawrence, "Excluding the Chinese," The Ohio Farmer, 1 June 1893, p. 430.

<sup>62</sup>E.S. Carman, "Chinese Labor on the Farm," The Rural New-Yorker, 20 March 1886, p. 188.

<sup>63</sup>L.C. Stalnaker, "The Chinese Laborer," The Rural New-Yorker, 3 April 1886, p. 203.

<sup>64</sup>S.S. Rathvon, "Chinaman or White Man, Which?," The Lancaster Farmer, July 1873, p. 121.

<sup>65</sup>Personal interview with George Cornell, Director of the Native American Institute, Michigan State Univ., 8 Sept. 1987.

<sup>66</sup>M.J. Lawrence, "Indian Outrages," The Ohio Farmer, 1 Aug. 1874, p. 72.

<sup>67</sup>M.M. Frisselle, "Savage Attacks," The Michigan Farmer, 17 Feb. 1874, p. 54.

<sup>68</sup>R.N. Hood, "The Indian Question," The Lancaster Farmer, June 1875, p. 93.

<sup>69</sup>"Put a Period to Them," The Nebraska Farmer, 17 July 1890, p. 533.

<sup>70</sup>Andrew S. Fuller, "The Montana Massacre," Moore's Rural New-Yorker, 15 July 1876, p. 44.

<sup>71</sup>"About the Savage," New England Farmer, 2 Aug. 1876, p. 217.

<sup>72</sup>H.E. Heath, The Nebraska Farmer, 25 Dec. 1890, p. 916.

<sup>73</sup>W.C., "The Indian Territory," The Cultivator and Country Gentleman, 18 Sept. 1873, p. 603.

<sup>74</sup>Ibid., p. 604.

<sup>75</sup>R. McCabe, "Improving the Indian," Kansas Farmer, 12 Nov. 1875, p. 312.

<sup>76</sup>M.J.C., The Nebraska Farmer, 18 Dec. 1890, p. 898.

<sup>77</sup>Cancega, "The Indian as a Farmer," Farm and Fireside, 15 July 1893, p. 3.

<sup>78</sup>E.S. Carman, "Proposed Curtailment of Indian Reservations," Rural New-Yorker, 7 Aug. 1886, p. 517.

<sup>79</sup>W.L. Moore, "Oklahoma and Indian Territory," American Agriculturist, Aug. 1892, p. 495.

<sup>80</sup>Angie Debo, A History of the Indians of the United States (Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1970), pp. 212-3.

<sup>81</sup>"Scraps of Modoc History," The Cultivator and Country Gentleman, 10 July 1873, p. 447.

<sup>82</sup>M.J. Lawrence, "Modocs at Their New Home," The Ohio Farmer, 20 June 1874, p. 213.

<sup>83</sup>J.R. Thomas, "Interesting Savages," The Cultivator and Country Gentleman, 8 May 1889, p. 302.

<sup>84</sup>Maggie Downing Brainard, "The Digger Indian and Their Food," American Agriculturist, Oct. 1892, p. 605.

<sup>85</sup>"Sketches in the West," American Agriculturist, June 1843, pp. 68-9.

<sup>86</sup>"Anecdotes and Fun," The Ohio Farmer, 27 June 1874, p. 414.

<sup>87</sup>"Chaff from the Gleaner," Michigan Farmer, 28 Nov. 1876, p. 383.

<sup>88</sup>Western Plowman, March 1886, p. 266.

<sup>89</sup>"Provisions of Civil Rights," The Prairie Farmer, 27 Aug. 1880, p. 226.

<sup>90</sup>Indiana Farmer, 6 Feb. 1892, p. 8.

<sup>91</sup>"Anecdotes and Fun," The Ohio Farmer, 4 July 1874, p. 14.

<sup>92</sup>"We Give Garden Seeds Away," American Agriculturist, Feb. 1892, p. 168.

<sup>93</sup>Agnes Carr Sage, "The Pumpkin-Pie Tree," American Agriculturist, Feb. 1892, pp. 659-60.

<sup>94</sup>T.B. Baldwin, "The Negro in Agriculture," The Cultivator and Country Gentleman, 28 Aug. 1890, p. 677.

<sup>95</sup>"Negro Farmers," The Farm Journal, May 1891, p. 130.

<sup>96</sup>"Farming and the Negro," Indiana Farmer, 4 Feb. 1889, p. 7.

<sup>97</sup>Herbert Collingwood, "The Negro Question," The Rural New-Yorker, 26 Dec. 1891, p. 900.

<sup>98</sup>Walter Lord, The Good Years: From 1900 to the First World War (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1960), pp. 2-3.

## CONCLUSION

### **Yeomanry Transformed: The Image of the American Farmer in the Northern Agricultural Press at the Close of the Nineteenth Century**

If the redoubtable Thomas Green Fessenden could have returned to the editorial offices of the New England Farmer in 1893 and spent a few hours browsing the pages of recent issues of the agricultural paper he founded, he would have been pleased by much of what he read. He would note with approval the admonitions against "liquid hell fire," grog shops and saloons. He would heartily agree with the Springfield farmer who writes about the "obvious connection between the vile tobacco weed and heart failure." He would also concur with the correspondent who warns rural youngsters to avoid the allurements of the large cities, suggesting instead that they "stay home on the farm." The number of new mechanical devices would perhaps surprise but certainly not shock the old Federalist. And all the sound, hard-headed advice shared by the Farmer's readers and editors would remind him of the halcyon days when he first established the venerable farm paper.

But, like other inquisitive and sensitive souls in late nineteenth-century Boston, Fessenden would also find much in the pages of the paper that was confusing--and even frightening. He

would be disturbed by the talk of agrarian destitution in the West and of the formation of a new political party to help ameliorate the situation. He would find most distasteful the harsh and bigoted denunciations of immigrants and the condescending, racist humor directed at the Negro. He would wonder about the references to the Grange and the Alliance and trusts and monopolies and foreign syndicates and conspiracies. And he would search in vain for a poem which, like his own verse over a half century before, extols the special virtues of the American yeoman.

What Fessenden might soon have surmised is that many of the noble characteristics traditionally attributed to the farmer were no longer evident in the farm papers. Rarely was there any mention of the yeoman's Divine sanction or his unique and salubrious relationship with Nature or his inherent moral virtue. No longer did the pages of the farm press resound with the proclamations that farmers were the healthiest and the most self-reliant of all Americans and that agriculture was the "fundamental employment of man." Seldom was the farmer portrayed as the patriotic hero of American independence, the linchpin of democratic government and the symbol of American progress and prosperity. If such sentiments were expressed at all, they were usually used to bolster more pragmatic arguments for economic co-operation or legislative action.

The image of the farmer that emerged from the agricultural press during the second half of the nineteenth century was far

more ambiguous and complex than that of the classical yeoman. On the one hand, he is the practical, progressive businessman who manages his farm operation in much the same fashion as the successful merchant conducts his urban enterprise. He carefully selects his employees on the basis of their character and work ethic and then takes time to prepare them for the tasks they will perform. He frequently familiarizes himself with the latest technological developments appearing on the market so that he can make prudent purchasing decisions regarding the probable return on his investment. He schools himself in the mechanic arts to better maintain and use the new implements he decides to buy. He learns the principles of bookkeeping and cost accounting so he can determine precisely how much it costs him to produce a bushel of wheat or a pound of beef. At the same time, he keeps a sharp eye on the commodity markets so that he knows when to sell his crops or his livestock for the best prices.

Not only is he a prudent business manager, but also he is a progressive marketing strategist. While still staunchly independent, he is now willing to work co-operatively with his fellow farmers in the economic interest of all. He can put narrow self-interest aside and agree with other agrarians on production goals, ceiling prices and selling strategies. And he is even willing to risk his hard-earned savings in the process.

He can also extend this same co-operative spirit into the political arena. He agrees to join with other farmers to elect politicians who are favorably disposed to agrarian interests.



He will, if properly aroused, mount sustained and telling political pressure to secure favorable legislation. He can support most of the political efforts of such groups and the Farmers Alliance and the People's Party--even though he doesn't always agree with what he believes are some of their more radical measures. Occasionally, he even pens politically-inspired diatribes to his farm editors.

Yet, there are other, less favorable aspects of this new image of the American farmer. Sometimes his distaste for monopolies, trusts and certain classes of urban professionals is expressed in the language of paranoia and hatred. He is capable of harboring a genuine loathing for those who may diverge from his standards of ethnic acceptability. He is susceptible to mass hysteria and can occasionally lock arms with his most ardent enemies in response to perceived threats from the outside. He can also betray a meanness of spirit in his attitudes toward powerless minority groups, urging, for example, the "uplifting of Negroes" at the same time he is using humor to denigrate the Black and the Native American.

What actually emerged from the pages of the farm press at the end of the Gilded Age was not so much an image as a realistic portrait of the American farmer. No longer was the agrarian character shrouded by a mythic veil. The conflicting patterns of agrarian thought and deed that emerged from the farm press help explain many subsequent developments in agricultural history. The progressive-retrogressive duality makes it somewhat easier to

understand, for example, how farmers could endorse the development of the Farm Bureau in the 1920s then later view that development as a conspiracy among bankers and politician. It also helps to explain how many farm organizations could open their arms to Socialists and Communists in the 1930s, and then arbitrarily expel them a few months later. It may also provide some reasons to explain why some farmers vent their economic frustrations at county meetings, while others mount "tractorcades" to Washington, while still others form right-wing, para-military survivalist organizations or turn weapons on their bankers, lawyers, and even themselves. For the most part, however, the same thing that Oscar Handlin wrote about the Populists can also be said for most American farmers. They were, and are, "neither saints nor sinners, but men responding to the changes that were remaking America in their time." In so doing, the American farmer has demonstrated some of the very worst aspects of the American character--as well as some of the very best.

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