

Book Reviews

Agricultural Distress in the Midwest Past and Present. Edited by Lawrence E. Gelfand and Robert J. Neymeyer. Iowa City: University of Iowa, Center for the Study of the Recent History of the United States, 1986. ix, 111 pp. Tables, notes. \$9.95 paper.

In 1986 the Center for the Study of the Recent History of the United States sponsored a conference in Ames, Iowa, to examine the current farm crisis from a historical perspective. With the cooperation of the State Historical Society of Iowa, the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library, and the University of Iowa, the proceedings were published under the title, *Agricultural Distress in the Midwest Past and Present*. The volume consists of a brief foreword by Lawrence E. Gelfand, professor of history, The University of Iowa, and four essays by distinguished scholars in the fields of history, economics, and agricultural science.

The first essay, "American Farmers and the Market Economy, 1880-1920," by Walter T. K. Nugent, professor of history, University of Notre Dame, explores the period of agricultural crisis from the late nineteenth century through the First World War. Drawing on his earlier study of populism, Nugent discusses changes in the structure of the farm economy which transformed farming into a highly mechanized business whose fate was closely tied to developments in "metropolitan America." Nugent's essay offers little that is new, but his primary theme that modernization forced many marginal farmers off the land is a useful reminder that many elements of the current farm crisis are deeply rooted in the past.

The most comprehensive essay in this slim volume is David Hamilton's "From New Era to New Deal: American Farm Policy Between the Wars." An assistant professor of history at the University of Kentucky, Hamilton, who wrote his Ph.D. dissertation on agriculture during the Hoover years, provides a useful survey of recent scholarly literature and a provocative discussion of the debate during the 1920s and 1930s about farm policy and the role of agriculture in American life and thought. Drawing on the previous work of such historians as Louis Galambos, Alfred D. Chandler, Robert Cuff, Robert Wiebe, and Ellis W. Hawley, Hamilton suggests that traditional progressive, neo-consensus, and New Left approaches to the study of agriculture be-

tween the wars fail to give sufficient attention to the organizational and institutional changes of the period which accelerated the integration of agriculture into the modern industrial state. While many agrarian spokesmen resisted government efforts to make farming more rational, efficient, and controlled, reformers, particularly in the Bureau of Agricultural Economics, embraced the philosophy that the farmers' only hope for the future was to develop a sound land use policy, to plan production to respond to the needs of a highly volatile market economy, and to modernize their farming operations. Organization, not ideology, Hamilton argues, determined the fate of United States agriculture.

The remaining essays in the book are by Stanley R. Johnson, director of the Center for Agricultural and Rural Development, department of economics, Iowa State University, and Norman Borlaug, distinguished professor of international agriculture, Texas A & M University. Johnson's essay, "Midwest Agriculture and the Food Security Act of 1985," is primarily concerned with projecting the possible impact of the farm bill on agriculture in the future, but also provides a number of useful charts that demonstrate the magnitude of the current crisis. Borlaug's contribution, "The Current Crisis in Global Perspective," is a transcription of an extemporaneous speech he gave at the conference. Borlaug, who was named Nobel Laureate in 1970 for his contribution to the Green Revolution, particularly while he served as director of the International Maize and Wheat Improvement Center (CIMMYT) in Londres, Mexico, recounts his nearly forty years of experiences in genetic research assisting less advantaged areas of the world increase agricultural production to feed their poor and hungry.

The book will be of interest to students who wish to place the current farm crisis in historical perspective. There are, however, several major deficiencies in the collection. First, although the essays of the history of United States agriculture prior to World War I are helpful, an essay on changes in agriculture following the Second World War is missing. Many of the problems facing farmers in the United States today are rooted in the period before World War II, but the current farm crisis also needs to be understood as the result of more recent technological changes. John L. Shover, in his book, *First Majority, Last Minority* (1976), and Gilbert Fite, in his recent history of United States agriculture, *American Farmers: The New Minority* (1981), have demonstrated that the development of hybrid seeds, the spread of electricity, the increasing use of fertilizers and pesticides, new irrigation techniques, and new machinery have revolutionized agriculture during the past half century. The economic life of the American farmer today is radically different from that of his counterpart of only fifty years ago.

Book Reviews

Technology has transformed the American farm and has dramatically changed the role of the farmer in American life and thought. An essay tracing these developments would have added significantly to the importance of the book.

A second deficiency in the book is the failure of the various essays to make a serious effort to compare and contrast the earlier periods of crisis with the current period of agricultural distress. The point is made that farmers have experienced crises before, but differences between previous crises and the crisis of the 1980s are largely ignored. As a result, the historical perspective promised by the book is frequently lacking. Each of the essays has merit, but they deal with such disparate topics that the collection lacks unity and focus.

The causes of the current farm crisis may be, as this book suggests, part of a recurring pattern that has dominated the development of American agriculture since the late nineteenth century, but that should not obscure the fact that there are profound differences between the earlier periods of crisis and the 1980s. The current farm crisis, like the crises in the nineteenth century and the 1930s, has resulted in a major debate about the future of American agriculture. The social, political, and cultural context of that debate, however, has changed almost beyond recognition since Franklin D. Roosevelt ushered in the New Deal some fifty years ago. The farm population has been reduced to a small minority; the political influence that farmers routinely expected can no longer be counted upon; and the farmer has become a highly capitalized businessman in search of profit. Modernization has robbed American farmers of the imagery and ideology that has defined their place in American society since the founding of the Republic.

KEARNEY STATE COLLEGE

MICHAEL W. SCHUYLER

Coxey's Army: An American Odyssey, by Carlos A. Schwantes. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985. xii, 321 pp. Map, illustrations, notes, index. \$22.95 cloth.

The depression of 1893 has long attracted the interest of historians. In recent years scholars have stressed the impact of that depression on the nation's politics, economy, and foreign relations. They have emphasized broad developments rather than the particular episodes that figured prominently in the works of earlier students, such as the bitter Pullman strike and railroad boycott; the dramatic "Cross of Gold" speech and whistle-stop presidential campaign of William Jennings Bryan; and the desperate marches on Washington, D.C., of groups of the unemployed, most famously that led by Jacob Coxey. Carlos

Copyright of Annals of Iowa is the property of State of Iowa, by & through the State Historical Society of Iowa and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.