

Book Reviews

Farmers' Organizations, by Lowell K. Dyson. Greenwood Encyclopedia of American Institutions 10. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1986. ix, 383 pp. Bibliographies, index. \$55.00 cloth.

This encyclopedia of national and regional farm organizations of all types, thriving and defunct, is a useful reference tool for historians of American agriculture and of Iowa. The author, an Iowa native and author of *Red Harvest: The Communist Party and American Farmers* (1982), is a respected agricultural historian. Here one can find mainstream, conservative, and radical organizations; tenant and farm labor unions; and general essays on cooperatives, commodity groups, and similar topics. Ethnic organizations include black, Filipino, Hispanic, and Jewish farmers or farm workers. Dyson's essays, ranging from a brief paragraph to more than a dozen pages in length, are arranged in a single alphabetical sequence with numerous cross-references and a good index. His sources are often too limited to permit a full description of an organization, but a typical entry supplies background information, historical coverage, analysis, organizational structure, estimated membership, and a brief essay on sources. One shortcoming is the failure to provide full bibliographical citations to printed sources, especially articles. Appendixes list headquarters by state (there are seven in Iowa) and heads of significant organizations, concluding with a membership table.

Iowa-based farm organizations are not the only ones that have been important in Iowa history. Since 1920 the American Farm Bureau Federation (AFBF) has been enormously influential in writing national farm legislation affecting the state's economy and in lobbying on many other issues. The author's format forbids discussion of state chapters, but the Iowa Farm Bureau Federation, one of the larger state bureaus, supplied several AFBF presidents and has had considerable power in state politics. The Iowa-based Farm Holiday Association (1932-1937), led by the colorful Milo Reno, encouraged farm strikes, most successfully at Sioux City. Other farm organizations with a greater or lesser impact on Iowa and its neighbors are the commodity groups, cooperatives, 4-H clubs, the National Farmers Organization, the National Farmers Union, and the United States Farmers Association. All have

lengthy essays. In his account of claim clubs, studied most intensively for early Iowa, Dyson sides with Allan Bogue in discrediting Benjamin Shambaugh's older interpretation of them as protectors of frontier settlers against speculators.

Historians of farm movements traditionally discuss agrarian political parties, such as the Greenbackers, the Populists, and the Farmer-Laborites. Another volume of the publisher's series covers specific parties badly, but Dyson's essay on political parties is succinct and authoritative. Other mentions of political parties, major and minor, are well indexed.

One author cannot realistically describe all organizations in one volume. In topical articles Dyson refers his readers to the *Encyclopedia of Associations* for specific breed, fruit, and vegetable associations as well as commodity and other groups. Lists of those associations are not included.

The Great Depression and other times of economic difficulty have contributed to the proliferation of farmers' organizations. The farm crisis of the 1980s is no exception. Dyson's encyclopedia is current enough to include the American Agriculture Movement, which arose in the 1970s, and its split into two parallel organizations. One of the new organizations of this decade, the North American Farm Alliance, has an entry, but the Iowa Farm Unity Coalition has only a passing reference in the NAFA essay along with several other state farm activist groups. Prairiefire Rural Action in Iowa, Groundswell in Minnesota, Missouri Groundswell, Women Involved in Farm Economics (WIFE), and the National Save the Family Farm Coalition are among newer candidates for inclusion if a second edition is ever published.

This solid reference work contains a wealth of information on more than a hundred organizations and topics. As the author points out, most of them have never before had reliable historical accounts. Dyson pleads for scholarly histories of the Grange, the Farm Bureau, black farmers' groups, and many other significant organizations. Until his challenge is met, *Farmers' Organizations* will be the first place to look for readable historical accounts of most farm groups. Dyson will not please all readers as he criticizes the policies of organizations both left and right and comments on the abilities of many of their leaders. The bibliographies are generally restricted to farm organization newspapers and secondary works, rarely mentioning manuscript sources. This reflects at least in part a disturbing condition that limits research on this topic: all too often organization publications are rare or missing. Readers of the *Annals of Iowa* should encourage agricultural and historical libraries to preserve the papers of farm activists, the records of farm

organizations, and newsletters, newspapers, and other publications of farm organizations, new and old.

As an encyclopedia containing lively and reliable essays, Dyson's work is useful for the history of Iowa and for all regions of the United States. It goes far in filling a major gap on farmers' movements in the still developing field of American agricultural history, and it provides a foundation for further research.

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EARL M. ROGERS

Land Fever: Dispossession and the Frontier Myth, by James M. Marshall. Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1986. viii, 239 pp. Appendixes, notes, bibliography, index. \$21.00 cloth.

James M. Marshall offers an account of failure on the American frontier. It is based on the autobiography of one man, Omar Morse (1824–1901), who pioneered on the land in three different places on the agricultural frontier in Wisconsin and Minnesota. Morse's "autobiography," written at various times over thirty years, runs to seventy printed pages; another twenty pages of his letters are included in an appendix.

Morse is a farmer without capital who goes into debt at high interest rates to develop ever more marginal land. He is also unlucky. His wife is often ill, and the doctor's bills are an added burden on his already straitened account ledger. In the end, Morse loses three farms, his wife dies, leaving him with three small children, and he struggles to make a life for his impoverished family by unremitting labor in the woods and in the fields. It is a story both bitter about grasping bankers and high-priced doctors and filled with sardonic humor about his own foibles. Morse's life is a story repeated many times on the frontier, a story of hard work and bad luck.

On either side of Morse's straightforward and sometimes moving account, Marshall has included an introduction and a long essay around the theme of "dispossession," the forced eviction of pioneers from their homesteads. He subtitles his analysis "Dispossession and the Frontier Myth," and he argues that dispossession, not success, was the theme of land taking, that the vision of a garden of plenty for individual settlers on their own quarter-section tracts was a myth. To sum up his views, he uses the phrase "the unweeded garden" (8–9). Marshall finds much to support his dark-hued thesis in his analysis of literary figures and their works and in folklore and popular songs. He fails to recognize, however, that Hamlin Garland wrote not only about failure; he wrote about the limiting aspects of agrarian life, whether

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