

Book Reviews

from the students and the people of Iowa. These traits undermined his presidency. Moreover, one point of chapter six suggests that the Old Armory Temporary (known as Old Pink) was burnt by students (215), when the fire was officially caused by faulty wiring (an aside, p. 216). Jerry Sies may have made a citizen's arrest of Senator Tom Riley, but he also made one of Howard Bowen that is not mentioned. And the hostility that students felt toward Iowa Book and Supply Company was primarily due to the attempts of that bookstore to force out competition (notably Hawkeye Bookstore) and to gouge students on returned book reimbursements. These are, however, minor matters when compared with the overall quality of this work.

One last word should be said about the photographs. This is a particularly rich collection. Most are carefully placed and explained. There is some chronological displacement in the first chapter, but after all these were more difficult to locate. The collages at the end of each chapter are very effective.

For historians, alumni, students, faculty, and Iowans, this is a book not to be missed. It is a model for future pictorial histories of educational institutions.

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Is There a Moral Obligation to Save the Family Farm?, edited by Gary Comstock. Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1987. xxvii, 427 pp. Tables, references, suggested readings, index. \$34.95 cloth, \$12.95 paper.

This book, obligated to answer the question of its title, is between a rock and a hard place as much as is the family farm. It offers no unqualified answer, but refuses to put on a tragic mien. The Jeffersonian family farm, lauded as the backbone of American democracy, is no more. In its place, however, is the working small farm inhabited by part-time farmers whose outside income exceeds crop income but who strongly desire to sustain their agrarian lifestyle.

Contemporary family farming depends upon mechanization, agricultural science and sophisticated management; there is little nostalgia here about slopping the pigs and plowing the furrow behind a mule. The gold old days were terribly hard work with little reward. The problem is whether there are enough family farmers left to be statistically, culturally, and politically important. They are not economically significant; they are not among the 160,000 "primary farmers" identified by the USDA back in 1980 and not among the 50,000 corporate superfarms promised (or threatened) for the 1990s. And, over the last fifty years, have those who are left become, unwittingly and unwill-

ingly, heavily subsidized clients of an increasingly reluctant federal government?

The central ethical question of the book is twofold: how much can the family farm be measured (1) according to cost-benefit analysis in the framework of the open marketplace, the trend of the 1980s, or (2) according to a higher "service" the family farm offers to its inhabitants and to the nation. Americans have historically taken pride in their unselfish personal support of shared or public values which cannot be measured by the marketplace, such as health, well-being, safety, the environment, and, uniquely, the traditional family farm as symbol of America's heartland. And Americans have put their money where their mouths are. As citizens and as taxpayers, Americans continue to offer vocal and financial support (as in the farm bills of 1985 and 1986) to a component of the population which is less than one percent of its total. Today, the support may be more vocal and emotional than pragmatically effective, but it is real and passionate. Nevertheless, it must be admitted that the mythic power of the "farm lobby" in Washington has been fatally eroded.

The courage of the book is signalled by Comstock's attempt, after examining the spread of options, to define the family farm: "an agricultural operation that is owned by a family or family corporation, has gross annual sales of between forty thousand dollars and two hundred thousand dollars per year, and does not hire more than 1.5 person-years of labor" (15). Simultaneously, Comstock admits that this is an economic measuring stick which does not take into account Wendell Berry's forceful reminder, in Comstock's paraphrase, that "the essence of the family farm is not its capacity to make money but its capacity to connect people with land, nature, and the past" (15). Scylla and Charybdis are here to stay.

Is there still a place in industrialized, urbanized, consumerized America for the decentralized "cottage industry" of independent family farming? Gary Comstock has edited a bold book whose authors address the issues directly, and often in direct but creative exchanges with each other. Such different but influential contributors as Gregg Easterbook, Luther Tweeten, Michael Novak, and Jesse Helms conclude that the few remaining family farmers will succumb to the law of supply and demand; it is sad but inevitable and probably desirable. Comstock calls these "modernizers." Others, such as Wendell Berry, Jim Hightower, Marty Strange, and Tom Harkin would agree with Maurice Dingman, "If we lose the farms, then we have lost the soul of our nation." Comstock calls these "agrarianizers." Historian Richard S. Kirkendall is joined by sociologist Paul Lasley and economist Neil E. Harl in a solid assessment of the long-term and short-term historical

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roots of the family farm dilemma; the past offers no clearcut answers except a continued decline. While editor Gary Comstock offers a balanced and fair variety of writings, it is clear that his heart is with saving the family farm. The title of the book is a rhetorical question. Unfortunately, the book does not offer a definitive answer; perhaps that is asking too much.

This book should become required reading for all agricultural policy analysts, farm-state legislators, actors in the infrastructures of rural society and food production (including the bankers and federal loan bureaucrats), and farmers and consumers. It tackles in different sections the current state of farm policy and the moral "duty" of Congress; the history leading to today's crisis-level dilemmas; the role of university-based social scientists, pragmatic ethics, and the largely-neglected contribution of Christian theology; and not the least, whether the family farm supports a better way of life—an object of hope needed by all Americans—which stands above economic efficiency.

Editor Comstock concludes with five moral arguments on behalf of family farms. He finds that the arguments from emotion, efficiency, stewardship, and cultural identification contain fatal flaws but offer important lessons. The argument from mutual responsibility, he says, can provide sufficient reason to save a pragmatically workable version of the family farm. This ethic of responsibility, according to Comstock, covers personal, family, and societal obligations, caring for one's land, duties to future generations to preserve the farm environment, abstract ideals of equity and justice, and self-knowledge. "We must discover economic structures and communal arrangements that allow us to meet these obligations. . . . To the extent that family farms help us fulfill our duties to one another, to unborn generations, and to God's created world, it is our duty to help them survive" (417).

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