

sippi River which transported settlers and goods in the county's early years, the railroad lines built across the county in the nineteenth century, and the state and interstate highways constructed in the twentieth century accelerated the centralization of regional economic life and sapped local vitality from county life—hence the title of the book.

The implications of this theme for local history are diverse and complex and need more development elsewhere, but the fact that this local county history addresses it at all merits the attention of local and regional historians throughout the Midwest. In addition, the large-format book is well produced, with print that is easy to read, many interesting photographs unobtrusively scattered throughout the text, and few of the typographical errors and infelicitous phrases that usually characterize under-edited locally published history.

*The Law of the Land: Two Hundred Years of Farmland Policy*, by John Opie. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987. xxi, 231 pp. Maps, charts, illustrations, notes, index. \$25.95 cloth.

REVIEWED BY MARK FRIEDBERGER, CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

This handsomely produced book is something of a puzzle. Based almost entirely on secondary sources, *The Law of the Land* is essentially a textbook rather than a conventional historical monograph. Yet textbooks usually attempt to provide a balanced viewpoint of the subject matter. Here, however, the author does not hide his biases: Opie is highly critical of the legacy of two hundred years of bungled policy. This is not to say that the history of American land policy from the nation's founding until the 1980s does not merit critical evaluation, but given the situation in which agriculture has found itself in the past few years, it is a pity that Opie simply sought to summarize past research instead of providing a fresh evaluation with some new work of his own. It is as though the author had difficulty placing the book with a publisher in the early 1980s. Then along came the farm crisis, and *The Law of the Land* found an outlet. In an era when rural history is as lively a field as any, Opie has failed to take advantage of an opportunity to provide us with fresh insights or a work of synthesis with which to move ahead.

The first several chapters deal with the effect land laws had on settlement. The author provides us with a potted history of the passage of legislation, and the implementation of those laws. He then discusses policies as they applied to arid lands, and especially as they concerned the delivery of water to western states, such as California. Before discussing the present and future state of agriculture, Opie

devotes some time to the conservation movement and the land ethic. The book has a frustrating presentist tone to it, for the author continually leaps forward in time to the eighties as if to remind the reader what a mess a land policy guided by the profit motive has become.

Opie is not afraid to offer his readers suggestions that might correct this sorry situation. He zeros in on the impropriety of the rectangular survey system for an efficient late twentieth and twenty-first century agricultural enterprise, but he fails to note Diller's study of a Nebraska farming community which exhaustively explored the possibility of scrapping the grid system in the 1930s, and found that although the landscape of the grid system had many disadvantages, substituting something else was utterly impractical. Perhaps more important, Opie suggests that the family farm as an economic organization requires reevaluation, but again he fails to take into account the well-worn argument that in America's heartland, where grain and livestock producers still retain some importance, the so-called dialectic of the family farm makes substituting some other entity unrealistic. The staff and line model of corporate agriculture, where managers sit at computers and employees haul manure, is not a practical alternative to family labor. The unstructured nature of cornbelt farming, where the weather, the needs of livestock, and the management of the farm all compete for the time of the hard-pressed operator, make the family form of organization secure against other alternative forms. Family farming is self-exploitive, and is a hard, risky, and dirty way of life. As such it holds little attraction for those not brought up in a farming environment, and is partly why agriculture is an ascribed rather than achieved occupation.

I found this book disappointing, for besides the rhetoric it includes little that is new. Yet perhaps the author has had the last laugh, for in an age when historical monographs that document events in excruciating detail have miserably low sales, Opie's text is already in its second printing.

*Farm Families and Change in Twentieth-Century America*, by Mark Friedberger. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1988. x, 282 pp. Tables, notes, index. \$28.00 cloth.

REVIEWED BY ROBERT P. SWIERENGA, KENT STATE UNIVERSITY

The farm crisis of the 1980s rivaled the 1930s in intensity and severely threatens the survival of the family farm. *Farm Families and Change* provides a historical perspective on changes in American agriculture in the twentieth century, particularly the impact of industrialized agri-

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