

# Family Farming in the Midwest in the Early Twentieth Century: A Review Essay

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*A Good Day's Work: An Iowa Farm in the Great Depression*, by Dwight Hoover. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2007. viii, 211 pp. Illustrations, index. \$26.00 cloth.

*Little Heathens: Hard Times and High Spirits on an Iowa Farm during the Depression*, by Mildred Armstrong Kalish. New York: Bantam, 2007. 292 pp. Illustrations. \$22.00 cloth.

*Days on the Family Farm: From the Golden Age through the Great Depression*, by Carrie A. Meyer. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007. x, 264 pp. Illustrations, appendixes, notes, index. \$17.95 paper.

IN THESE BOOKS, we have three midwestern tales. In many ways, the worlds they describe are quite similar; in other ways, these stories illustrate the uniqueness of individual family histories that are often subsumed under the larger category of midwestern family farming. Each of these books tells the story of family farming, but each family was very different.

Dwight Hoover's book, *A Good Day's Work*, is the classic family farming tale. Hoover was born in 1926 on his family's farm in Mahaska County, Iowa. His father's operation was part of a larger family concern, including the farms of three uncles and his paternal grandfather. Unlike the authors of many similar books, Hoover is careful to point out the web of connections that made his family's farm a going concern. Not only did the

immediate family—Hoover, his parents, and his siblings—contribute to running the farm, but the uncles, aunts, cousins, and grandparents did as well. Hoover writes, “One of today’s common misconceptions is that the family farm, at least as it existed in the early years of the twentieth century, was worked by a farmer with the aid of his wife and perhaps his small children. That farm work required the efforts of several *adults* [emphasis in original] does not seem to be widely recognized” (7). Farms survived because so many individuals cooperated.

As Hoover comments, his family’s farm was as much a part of the nineteenth century as the twentieth. The farm employed family labor and provided a large proportion of the family’s necessary food. An enormous garden bordered the front of the house. The family also raised, killed, and cured its own meat. Horses provided the power on the farm. A tractor would not make its appearance on the farm until the late 1930s. The family participated in a threshing ring, and Hoover’s mother cooked the prodigious meals necessary for a successful threshing party. Hoover explains how, and when, the family moved to modernize its operation.

One of the great strengths of *A Good Day’s Work* is Hoover’s attention to detail. Season by season, he explains how he and other members of his family accomplished agricultural tasks. For anyone wanting to know the how and why of planting, harvesting, and picking, this is the book. He also describes the problems involved with raising various types of animals, and he does not avoid the unpleasant. Lambs, for example, will eat themselves to death. The reader will also learn the tricks involved in preparing animals successfully for competition at the state fair. *A Good Day’s Work* provides a wealth of information that would otherwise be lost when the author’s generation, which largely left agriculture through education and World War II, is gone.

Mildred Armstrong Kalish’s *Little Heathens* is a very different story. Kalish spent most of her youth in and around her grandparents’ home in Garrison, Iowa. Like Hoover’s, her story is one of extended family. Unlike Hoover’s, however, it was anything but the typical family. For reasons only vaguely known to Kalish, her grandfather evicted her father from the family, probably due to “bankruptcy, bootlegging, and jail time” (11). Kalish’s

mother had to fall back on her parents for help. During the school year, Kalish, her mother, and siblings lived in town with her rigid, very religious grandparents. During the summer, the fatherless family moved to a farm owned by her grandparents, across the road from an aunt and an uncle. Kalish, like Hoover, lived within a broad grouping of extended family. Everyone shared the work and the fun.

And there was fun. In spite of Kalish's assertion that her childhood "came to a virtual halt when I was around five years old," when the family moved to Garrison, her engaging book is filled with tales of a life happily lived (11). As with Hoover, the great strength of the book is in its details. Kalish provides careful descriptions of such topics as cooking, washing, and milking, but she also devotes a great deal of space to the fun that could be had in the process. Readers also learn how rural Iowans celebrated traditional holidays; Kalish even includes menus and recipes. She also shows how families cared for their disabled members and coped in times of sickness and death. Like Hoover, Kalish does not avoid the unpleasant; she describes adult reactions to disabling injuries to family pets, providing blessedly prompt euthanasia. Other topics rarely broached in memoirs, such as contraception, abortion, and menstruation, also receive their due. Kalish provides a full view of the emotional weight and importance that everyday activities carried.

Particularly interesting is Kalish's discussion of growing up and getting out. As a teenager, she decided that farm life was not her future, and she began taking the necessary steps to make a life outside of agriculture. Like many of her generation, her ultimate avenue outward came in the form of World War II. Kalish served in the Coast Guard as a radio operator, and she used her benefits from the G.I. Bill to obtain a higher education.

Hoover's book is a methodical discussion of Iowa farming during the Great Depression; Kalish's is a romp. Both demand rereading to fully appreciate all of the painstaking detail that went into their writing. The best way to read these two books is as a pair, first reading Hoover to obtain the carefully written agricultural background, followed by Kalish, to grasp more of the emotional context within which family life was lived during the depression years.

Carrie A. Meyer's *Days on the Family Farm* is also the story of an extended family, that of May and Elmo Davis, who farmed in northern Illinois. The Davises married in 1901 and made their home within a short distance of their parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins in Guilford Township, Winnebago County, Illinois. Unlike the average farm couple, however, they did not have children. The Davises' wedding picture, taken January 1, 1901, clearly shows the arthritis that would shortly cripple May and confine her to a chair for the rest of her life. Meyer, a grandniece of the Davises, brought together May's brief diary, the couple's financial records, and family lore to write this farm's story.

In many ways, Meyer's book rounds out this set with a detailed discussion of the economics of family farming in the first years of the twentieth century. Because of May's disability and a lack of child laborers, the Davises relied heavily on hired men and women and extended kin. Theirs was a small operation, and they felt no need to expand it, having no children to inherit the land. This conservative approach to farming meant that while others suffered from overexpansion in the 1920s and 1930s, May and Elmo did not. Even as they aged and their income failed to match their expenses, their savings and investments made continued operation possible.

In addition to the economic story, there is also the family story. Like those presented by Kalish and Hoover, cooperation across the generations and among extended kin made the continuation of the agricultural community possible. Elmo Davis shared his labor with the extended family, and they with him. May made use of hired labor, but also welcomed nieces and other female relatives into the home to help with the work. May and Elmo lent money to extended kin. When an aging and ailing Elmo could not do his chores, "of course, many helped make sure the farmwork got done" (203). It is the "of course" that defines the love, respect, and cooperation with which Meyer describes this family's relations.

Individually, these three books are well worth reading. The books entertain and inform and would be interesting to nearly anyone concerned with the history of the Midwest, rural and agricultural life, or the Great Depression. Together, however,

they are even more impressive and useful. Each one tells a different part of the rural and agricultural history of the Midwest, and the primary issues upon which each author chooses to focus neatly complement the others. In these three books, we have the “cows and plows” discussion of the intricacies of early twentieth-century agriculture, in addition to the emotional and financial context of the same. And each, in its own way, is an intensely personal tale, highlighting the importance of family within the phrase family farming.