

Implementing the AAA's Corn-Hog Program: An Iowa Farmer's Account

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During the hectic first days of the New Deal, President Franklin D. Roosevelt and the U.S. Congress responded to the crisis in American agriculture with the Agricultural Adjustment Act. This epic measure, which the president rightly described as "the most drastic and far-reaching piece of farm legislation ever proposed in time of peace."¹ sought to aid a sector of the economy that had endured more than a decade of economic hardship. Farmers hoped that their long-desired goal of "equality for agriculture" could be achieved.

The AAA contained several policies and programs which the secretary of agriculture could use in order to boost farm income. Architects of the AAA believed that production of price-depressing surpluses had to be discouraged or prevented especially in light of the heavy planting of basic crops (despite disastrously low prices) in 1932 and 1933. This idea of controlling production led to the most revolutionary principle of the new act: the provision that farmers voluntarily reduce their production of seven basic commodities (cotton, wheat, tobacco, rice, milk, field corn, and hogs) in return for direct benefit payments to come from a tax on the processors of the products.

When applied to the nation's depressed corn-hog industry, the AAA allowed Secretary of Agriculture Henry A. Wallace to reduce both the amount of acres planted in corn and the num-

¹Samuel Rosenman, ed., *Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt* (13 vols., New York, 1938), 2-79.

ber of pigs farrowed. Specifically, corn and hog producers signed individual contracts with the secretary that spelled out the reduced corn acreage and hog production. The secretary then made cash payments to farmers for both corn and hogs held off the market. Farmers received \$5.00 per head for not selling hogs (figured on 75 percent of the average number of hogs marketed during the previous two years). Of this price \$2.00 were paid immediately, and the balance deferred until compliance could be demonstrated. The government also rented the idle corn acres, paying a fee based on the average yield for the preceding three years (later changed to a fee based on appraisal by a local committee). Two-thirds of the rent was paid to the farmer as soon as possible after he signed the contract, the rest in 1934 when evidence of compliance was shown. Finally, the program was run at the local level, with temporary committees conducting the sign-up.²

Although there are many studies and accounts of the Agricultural Adjustment Act, it is difficult to find good, daily reports written by grass-roots participants in AAA programs.³ Fortunately, one Iowa farmer left a detailed account of his involvement in the corn-hog program. It is a document that captures the excitement and frustrations a typical Iowa farmer experienced in dealing with the recovery measure.

The following edited material comes from a diary kept by Elmer Gilbert Powers (1886-1942), who farmed a quarter section of rich land in Amaqua Township, Boone County, Iowa. An articulate and sensitive farmer, Powers wrote a "Day-by-

²For an overview of the Corn-hog Program see Richard H. Roberts, "The Administration of the 1934 Corn-Hog Program in Iowa," *Iowa Journal of History and Politics*. XXXIII (October 1935), 317-75.

³The over-all topic of the AAA is covered in Edwin G. Nourse, Joseph Davis and John D. Black, *Three Years of the Agricultural Adjustment Administration* (Washington, 1937); Carl T. Schmidt, *American Farmers in the World Crisis* (New York, 1941); Murray R. Benedict, *Farm Policies of the United States, 1790-1950* (New York, 1953), 276-317; and Van L. Perkins, *Crisis in Agriculture: The Agricultural Adjustment Administration and the New Deal, 1933* (Berkeley, 1969).

The best "grass-roots" accounts of the AAA are Gilbert C. Fite, "Farmer Opinion and the Agricultural Adjustment Act, 1933," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, XLVIII (March 1962), 656-73 and Henry C. Dethloff, "Missouri Farmers and the New Deal: A Case Study of Farm Policy Formulation on the Local Level," *Agricultural History* XXXIX (July 1965), 141-46.

Day on the Farm" account for the region's premier farm publication, Wallace's Farmer. Although he often typed several hundred words daily, few of his entries ever appeared in print.⁴

Elmer Powers, along with fellow corn-hog producers who faced financial ruin, hoped for a "New Deal" in agriculture. A staunch Republican, Powers nonetheless supported the appointment of Democrat Wallace ("editor of our favorite farm paper") as secretary of agriculture. Like Wallace, Powers favored parity prices and did not accept the demands made by John A. Simpson, Milo Reno, and others for prices set on a cost-of-production basis. Yet, as New Deal farm programs matured, Powers began to express reservations as can be seen in his later comments on the corn-hog program.

In the following edited pages from the Powers diary, eccentric spelling, punctuation, and grammar have been retained, with a few exceptions, in order to capture the flavor of the original document.

Thur. Jan. 11. 34.

Much of the time that I was around the sale pavilion this afternoon I was listening to the conversation carried on by the various farmers assembled there. One hears the State Legislature mentioned at only occasional intervals. The corn-hog program is the principal subject. Wherever you hear those words mentioned you will notice farmers edge closer in order to catch any thing they might learn about the working of the plan. "No we don't get the paper anymore" is a statement I hear quite frequently. Earl May and his station seems to be the most dependable source of information.⁵

Mon. Jan. 15. 34.

I got up at three o'clock this morning and went to work

⁴The diary material used in this article is from H. Roger Grant and L. Edward Purcell, *Years of Struggle: The Farm Diary of Elmer G. Powers, 1931-1936* (Ames, 1976).

⁵Earl May, a Shenandoah, Iowa, seed entrepreneur, owned and operated radio station KMA. The station proved popular with farmers because of its extensive coverage of agriculture.

making maps of each school district in our township, so that we may list each farm and farmers. When we had finished the barn work D. L. [Powers' son, Daniel] and I drove to the county seat [Boone, Iowa] and I attended the Corn-Hog school held for the township committeemen.⁶ It was very interesting, tho difficult work. A Professor Paddock [from Iowa State College] and Jay Whitstone had charge of the school. After a short time out for lunch at noon I noticed a few did not return. By the close of day's work late this afternoon we were beginning to grasp the idea. For some of the farmers it was a slow job tho. Frequently you could hear some of them using a little profanity in a rather low voice. We are supposed to continue tomorrow. I remarked to D.L. when we were returning home this evening that I had paid well for training that was not as good as this and he remarked that before we were thru with it we might find that we had paid well for this. Perhaps he is not in sympathy with the movement to reduce corn and hogs this way.

Tue. Jan. 16. 34.

This morning I returned to the corn-hog school. This time I caught a ride with a neighbor. The attendance was slightly smaller again this morning and again at noon I thot I missed a few more. Today we worked with the question and answer book and the Administrative Rulings and planned for county and township meetings. Our township had seven men in this school, where from three to five was required.

Fri. Jan. 19. 34.

Four Twps. in our county were having a corn-hog school

⁶The highly complicated procedures involved in drawing up thousands of individual corn-hog contracts were dealt with through temporary local committees, composed of local farmers. County agents, part of the county extension service, assisted these committees. The agents had been trained in December 1933 after the AAA contract forms and administrative ruling were published. In January 1934, the county agents held two-day training sessions for the township committees where committeemen filled out and signed contracts themselves during the training sessions. By the time the actual sign-up campaign took place, there were between 125 and 150 trained men in each county able to take the contracts to the farmers, help interpret the documents, and assist in filling out production information which would be the basis of the support payments.

in town [Ogden, Iowa] today and I attended. When I went in the hall above the bank I began to arrange the furniture for the meeting. Another farmer soon came in and we soon had things ready. When the County Agent came I assisted him much of the time. Several new men were taking the work and this made it quite interesting for those of us who had already had some training. I left the Meeting early to get home to grind feed. The weather was fine all day and we did not have any trouble with the grinding machinery.

Sat. Jan. 20. 34.

As it will be necessary for me to have Supporting Evidence on my hog sales this forenoon I made a long drive, to see the Manager of the Sales firm, and to secure the sales tickets on the hogs we have sold thru this sale the past two seasons.

Mon. Jan. 22. 34.

After supper we attended a corn-hog meeting in the village [Beaver, Iowa]. Almost every farmer from two townships attended. Several Farm Union and several Holiday men were the only farmers absent.

We men who had some training in the corn-hog work were much disappointed in the way this meeting was conducted. Attending farmers complained that they did not learn any of the things that were bothering them in making out their work sheets and arranging their papers. I was able to get two more S.E. [supporting evidence] on our past hog sales today.

Thur. Feb. 1. 34.

Today was the first sign-up day of the corn-hog campaign in our township. The meeting place was the village town hall. I went there early, was the first one of the committee there. Others soon came. I had taken things from our farm office thinking they would come in handy.

Our chairman, Art Muench, is a very large man and always speaks quite loud. Others of our committee are Herb Clark, Hank Naeve, Bert Bakley, Fred Harten and Alex



courtesy of the Powers family

The Powers family: E. G., D. L., L. L., and Minnie, circa 1927.

Doran. Our township was divided into three sections and we were to have three sign up days.

Each member of the committee was very anxious to sign up anyone bringing in a contract. I did not attempt to do any signing until I could see how things were going. As soon as some contracts were completed I took charge and in looking them over found many errors. Some of them I mentioned to the committee members who had filled them, but I did not mention all of the errors at one time. I thot that would discourage them.

At noon I left the hall long enough for a quick lunch with

my Mother and went back to a hard afternoon. Working out a system was quite a task and by this evening I had things going pretty well. I just had to develop a contract record system. Some farmers left their contracts with the committee, others took them out for various reasons and I listed them all. Fifteen contracts were completed today. Tomorrow will go better. By midafternoon I was a jack-of-all-trades. Outlining the maps and printing the names on the contracts gave the committee men the most trouble. The hall was a dusty place and the fresh outside air seemed very nice this evening when I rode home with Muench and Naeve.

Fri. Feb. 2. 34.

Today was ground hog day. And to our committee the second sign up day. Things went better today. Twenty-five contracts were signed. I have made a list of all of the farmers names in our township and I placed a red letter "CL" by all of the names that have corn loans and a blue "CH" for the corn hog contracts. We have around 130 farms in our township, 70 have loans.

The committee seemed to feel more free to call on me for assistance today. I was on my feet all day, and on the jump most of the time. Some of the farmers had their work sheets completed, others did not. The supporting evidence on the hogs were the biggest problem for the greater number of farmers. I disregarded clerical errors, misspelled words etc. And I looked for dates, acres, hog counts and signatures. Sometimes returning contracts to committee men five times before they were complete. And I am not saying they are correct now. Occasionally I would hurry out and catch a farmer at his car as he was starting for home, and bring him back to help the committee man. It is all very interesting, if hard work. I was approached today by a farmer I do not know well, who wishes to arrange with me to have his hog figures appear so and so. A large hog base is much desired sometimes. This farmer wanted to make me an offer, and I was to come to his place and fix things up for him. I had been looking for something of this kind and immediately declined.

Also I warned him about approaching any other member of the committee in like manner.

Sat. Feb. 3. 34.

Our third sign up day and we certainly did a land office business and at that are running way behind the number we should have signed up. I phoned the county agent twice this morning, for advice. A county committeeman called this afternoon, and brot us more supplies. He wasn't a bit of help to us and spent the time he was there visiting with his relatives, from another township.

I am using a section from our filing cabinet and some of our loose leaf books etc. The committee are beginning to see the results of team work and system. Farmers from other townships tell us things seem to be going very smoothly with us. Hank is a very careful worker. Fred hurries too much. Herb seems to be the authority on contract provisions. Alex is always in hot water about something. The other members plod along. Sometimes they all get in a heated argument among themselves for a short time, then quiet down and go to work again. It is almost impossible to write a sign up day. Committee members, who have been thru them, know exactly how it has been.

We drove to town this evening and attended a movie. It was a very agreeable change.

Our committee is really a fine bunch of fellows and they have did well considering everything. Next week we must do some follow up work.

Sun. Feb. 4. 34.

This evening I drove to Fred's and we fixed up my work sheet, contract etc. Our brood sow quota will be 12 head. Our corn pig production 55 head. Our corn acreage 65 and our contract acres 16.

Mon. Feb. 5. 34.

The local committee was not working as a committee

today and I did odd jobs around the farm this afternoon. After dinner D.L. trucked hogs to market and I drove to Herb's about corn-hog work, then to see the county agent.

The chairman phoned this evening that he wants us all to work tomorrow checking contracts. Thursday has been set for the last day. As I recall we have not had a rider attached to a contract and I do not look for anyone to ask for the early payment. Also so far only two have taken out more than the twenty percent reduction.

Tue. Feb. 6. 34.

We were back to the town hall, on corn-hog work again today. Much of the time was spent going over the contracts, getting them ready to send the Farm Bureau Office.⁷ Several farmers came in and completed new contracts. The list is steadily changing over to farms covered by contracts. There is beginning to be some talk of compelling all farmers to take the reduction.

Some members of the committee are beginning to complain about the amount of time it is taking. They feel they would like to be working on their farms more of the time. Four of the six days so far this month have been spent in this work.

Feb. 8th to 21st. 34.

Many things have happened here on the place, and many things have happened in the corn-hog work, during the past two weeks. I have spent practically all of the time at corn-hog work and have not been able to keep up any kind of writing, other than the few notes that I have been able to make from time to time.

Our temporary committee, composed of six to seven men, have been fine to work with. Our township has around 130

⁷Rather than create an entirely new bureaucracy, federal administrators used the American Farm Bureau Federation as an administrative arm of the AAA. The reliance on the Farm Bureau did nothing to make the AAA more popular with the already dissident Farmers Holiday Association and Farmers Union.

farms and 20 landlords that we contract. Of the 130 farmers, around 120 have been, or will be signed up. Of the ten remaining farmers, only two have refused work sheets. Not any of them have been disagreeable or unpleasant about it. The clean up campaign has required much work and much driving but it is pretty well done now.

Tomorrow, Thursday the 22nd, I will take up things at home again and they will go on as before. The corn-hog program, as I have been connected with it, has taught me much. Volumes might be written about conditions right here in our township.

Fri. Feb. 23. 34.

This afternoon was our local Corn-Hog organization meeting. It was held at our Center Schoolhouse. The meeting was called for one o'clock. It was one twenty when our temporary chairman called the meeting to order. I acted as Secretary. The chairman explained the purpose of the meeting. One of the committee read the Articles of the Association. Then the roll call of the 120 signers out of our 130 farmers in the township was called. I read the roll call and seventy-six responded. Several came in later.

The election of a permanent chairman, a vice-chairman and a third committeeman were all conducted by ballot. Herbert Clark, one of the temporary committee members, was elected for chairman. He is supposed to be the best informed man in our township, on the plan. Henry Naeve, also a temporary committee man, was the Vice-chairman selected. His work on the temporary committee was just ordinary. Arthur Muench was elected for the third member. Muench is a very large man, farms quite extensively, is a good organizer and a man who goes right ahead and does the job whatever it happens to be. I could not understand why he was not elected chairman. All of these men live quite close together. No effort was made to elect men scattered over the township more. Completing the report of the meeting this evening is about the last of the work I will have to do. Of

course I offered to continue any way I could help but as this committee is working for pay now I do not expect to be called. It has been a great experience. I would not have missed it for anything.

Sat. Mar. 24. 34.

This afternoon I drove to the village for quarter round to finish the kitchen floor. In the village I found the corn-hog committee were working and they insisted they should have supporting evidence of my packing sows that were produced in 1931.

This caused me to spend the remainder of the afternoon and much of the evening gathering this evidence.

I learned today that the committee had given me a corn yield of only 47 bu. We had taken out our best corn land, land that actually produces regularly from sixty-five to seventy bushels per acre. This would not look so bad but a neighbor has taken out his lowest producing land and they have allowed him exactly the same yield. Both fields are in cornstalks at the present time and anyone can see the condition of things. Personally I do not care about the inconsistency of the thing. But it will react against the program if the figures are published. The neighbor is supposed to have political influence.

Sun. Mar. 25. 34.

I have been away from the place much of the day. Mainly looking up corn-hog evidence. There is beginning to be much dissatisfaction about the program. However, this may quiet down somewhat if a little money gets out soon on the hog bonus and the corn benefits. But at the best, the Contracted Acres are going to become a very sore spot as the season advances.

Thur. Apr. 5. 34.

Our young pigs and our baby chicks have been showing, by their condition, that they were not being properly fed. This



*courtesy of the Iowa State Historical Department,
Division of the State Historical Society*

The E. G. Powers farm, looking south to north, 1974.

morning I drove the truck to town and talked the feed dealer into letting me have six bags of feed for the poultry and two for the hogs and he will wait until I get some corn-hog money and I can pay him for the feed then. Our farm feeds do not properly nourish our young stuff. I stopped at the produce house and listened to the produce people (former farm folks) tell just what they thot of the way the Government was mixing up things. I admitted that I had recently looked at the calendar to see just how long it would be until Dec. 1 and the corn hog contracts would be expired. At the drug store, where I bot a small quantity of needed medicine, I found the druggist in the same frame of mind as the produce people.

This afternoon I went to town, to see a friendly and here-to-fore always accommodating banker about a twenty-five dollar loan, until we would get corn-hog money. The banker said the Government did not want any money loaned on corn-hog collateral. Suggested that I see one of the Farm Credit Associations. Admitted the young pigs and

poultry would be dead or fully grown before a loan of this type would get around to us and wound up by saying that it seemed to be the Government's policy to kill some of the stock anyway. Might as well let it be now.

Sat. Apr. 14. 34.

Tonight I heard some talk that farmers were "sticking the corn hog-corn contracts in the stove" that 150 farmers, in a meeting said if they didn't have the first payment by May 1st they would plant the Contracted acres. We are sticking it out regardless. That is what we started out to do. Probably we will squirm sometimes, but we will stick.

Mon. Nov. 12. 34.

Of all the crops I have gathered, this is the poorest one. Our cribs are almost empty and almost all of the feeding season is before us. I look at the Contracted Acres and wish I would have them in corn. They are the most productive acres on the farm. The committee cut them down on yield until this drought year they would have produced as much as the committee allowed. The thirty cents per bushel we receive on the yield they allowed won't possibly buy as much as this ground would have raised this year. Now I, like many others, must sell or almost give away hogs because I cannot feed them or buy feed for them.

Tues. Nov. 13. 34.

I spent some of the morning checking over our farming situation. The only conclusion that I could arrive at is the same one neighbors have arrived at. That some of the hogs must be sold. The corn-hog plan was intended to reduce the number of hogs and bushels of corn, so the price would be higher. And it did that. But the drought cut the corn yield much more. The price of market hogs is higher. But the lighter hogs are selling very low because so many farmers must sell them. A few farmers have substantial bank accounts or several thousand bushels of old corn and stand to make a lot of money. These few are the minority and not the majority.

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