

settler colonialism are reshaping our understanding of the history of the upper Mississippi Valley and western Great Lakes as well as the Missouri River Valley. Placing present-day Iowa into these larger contexts frees historians from the constraints of state borders that neither the Native societies nor the imperial powers would have recognized. While pre-statehood Iowa lacked the extensive French settlements that characterized present-day Wisconsin, Illinois, and Missouri, the early history of Dubuque clearly awaits greater examination, as do settler colonialism and state formation in Iowa. To the west, the centrifugal forces of the fur trade favored the lower and upper Missouri River. Hopefully, this essay will point future historians toward these fertile fields of inquiry.

Iowa Agricultural History: Old Perspectives and New Directions

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IN 1939, IOWA STATE COLLEGE history professor Louis Bernard Schmidt outlined a research program for the history of agriculture in Iowa in an essay for *Agricultural History*, the scholarly journal of the Agricultural History Society. In "The Agricultural History of Iowa as a Field of Research," Schmidt recommended multiple topical and geographic perspectives, including county-level studies, land tenure, agricultural education, transportation, and marketing. He even included a call for work on "miscellaneous topics," many of which would be described as social history today. Schmidt's ambitious proposal was notable for its agenda of understanding the total rural experience.

Seven years later *A Century of Farming in Iowa* established the boundaries of the field with brief and reliable essays.¹ In the following decade, historian Earle D. Ross wrote the foundational historical survey, *Iowa Agriculture* (1951), which focused on what is sometimes labelled

1. Thanks to Olivia Garrison, Reference Coordinator, Special Collections and University Archives, Iowa State University Library for providing information regarding historian Louis B. Schmidt. Iowa State College and Iowa Agricultural Experiment Station, *A Century of Farming in Iowa, 1846-1946* (Ames, 1946). For a notable earlier work in Iowa ag history, see John A. Hopkins Jr., *Economic History of the Production of Beef Cattle* (Iowa City, 1928).

"cows and plows" agricultural history, with an emphasis on markets, policy, and biological and technological innovation.² At the same time, Mildred Throne devoted considerable attention to understanding nineteenth-century farming in Iowa. Her work on the development of southern Iowa agriculture, the place of nineteenth-century "book farming," and the Grange set a high standard for subsequent historians.³

Several subsequent studies described the contours of nineteenth century agriculture. The first and most notable of these was Allan G. Bogue's *From Prairie to Corn Belt* (1969), which explored the development of farming as a business in Illinois and Iowa.⁴ James Whitaker's study, *Feedlot Empire* (1975), aligned with Bogue's study, more fully explaining how cattle feeding emerged as a leading part of Illinois and Iowa farming.⁵ While much of Bogue and Whitaker's work focused on native born Americans, Jette Mackintosh turned her attention to immigrant farmers, demonstrating the persistence of more intensive cultivation among Danes in Iowa during the early twentieth century.⁶

The place of farm tenancy in nineteenth century society has been thoroughly studied. Most notably, Robert Swierenga, Seddie Cogswell, Jr., and Donald L. Winters explored tenancy rates of the nineteenth century to determine if tenancy was a product of misguided land policy or was a means of social mobility. Tenancy was not forced on farmers by rapacious speculators; rather, speculators quickly liquidated their holdings to farmers. These historians also showed that farmers often used tenancy to better understand local conditions before purchasing, to save

2. Earle D. Ross, *Iowa Agriculture: An Historical Survey* (Iowa City, 1951). This text remains a standard reference.

3. Mildred Throne, "Southern Iowa Agriculture, 1833-1890: The Progress from Subsistence to Commercial Corn-Belt Farming," *Agricultural History* 23 (April 1949), 124-30; Throne "'Book Farming' in Iowa, 1840-1870," *Iowa Journal of History* 49 (1951), 117-42; Throne, "The Grange in Iowa, 1868-1875," *Iowa Journal of History* 51 (1953), 289-324; Throne, "The Repeal of the Iowa Granger Law, 1878," *Iowa Journal of History* 51 (1953), 97-130; Throne, "The Anti-Monopoly Party in Iowa, 1873-1874," *Iowa Journal of History* 52 (1954), 289-326.

4. Allan G. Bogue, "Pioneer Farmers and Innovation," *Iowa Journal of History* 56 (1958), 1-36; Bogue, "Twenty Years of an Iowa Farm Business, 1860-1880," *Annals of Iowa* 35 (1961), 561-77.

5. James W. Whitaker, *Feedlot Empire: Beef Cattle Feeding in Illinois and Iowa, 1840-1900* (Ames, 1975).

6. Jette Mackintosh, "Ethnic Patterns in Danish Immigrant Agriculture: A Study of Audubon and Shelby Counties, Iowa," *Agricultural History* 64 (Autumn 1990), 59-77.

for a down payment, or to invest more in livestock and equipment.⁷ Of course, farm inheritance practices had a great deal to do with the viability of the agricultural ladder, but nineteenth century "frontier" farming in Iowa was generally profitable.⁸

The years from 1900 to 1914 are often labelled agriculture's "Golden Age," characterized by a favorable cost to price ratio, but it was also the age of railroad, meat, and reaper trusts. Prosperity was not a forgone conclusion. Keach Johnson explained that during the Progressive Era, some Iowa farmers organized to improve both farm and processor practices as well as urged more government regulation to ensure greater farm profits.⁹

In 1982 the State Historical Society of Iowa convened a conference on Henry A. Wallace and rural Iowa in the 1920s and 1930s, resulting in several important articles in the *Annals of Iowa*. The studies provided context for Wallace's life and career, including Joseph Wall's assessment of the "Iowa Farmer in Crisis, 1920-1936," Leland Sage's survey of the roots of the farm depression in "Rural Iowa in the 1920s and 1930s," and Dorothy Schwieder's essay titled "Rural Iowa in the 1920s." These essays, along with several more in that volume, marked an important milestone in the study of Iowa's rural history.¹⁰

There have been a number of other articles and monographs on the 1920s and 1930s since the conference. Studies by Rodney Karr (1985), William Pratt (1988), and Leslie Taylor (1992) re-assessed the farm

7. Donald L. Winters, "Agricultural Tenancy in the Nineteenth Century Middle West: The Historiographical Debate," *Indiana Magazine of History* 78 (June 1982), 128-53; Robert P. Swierenga, *Pioneers and Profits: Land Speculation on the Iowa Frontier* (Ames, 1968); Seddie Cogswell, Jr., *Tenure, Age, and Nativity as Factors in Iowa Agriculture, 1850-1880* (Ames, 1975); Swierenga, *Acres for Cents: Delinquent Tax Auctions in Frontier Iowa* (Westport, CT, 1976); Donald L. Winters, *Farmers Without Farms: Agricultural Tenancy in Nineteenth-Century Iowa* (Westport, CT, 1978).

8. Mark W. Friedberger, "Handing Down the Homeplace: Farm Inheritance Strategies in Iowa, 1870-1945," *Annals of Iowa* 47 (1984), 518-36; David W. Galenson and Clayne L. Pope, "Economic and Geographic Mobility on the Farming Frontier: Evidence from Appanoose County, Iowa, 1850-1870," *Journal of Economic History* 49 (September 1989), 635-55.

9. Keach Johnson, "Iowa Dairying at the Turn of the Century: The New Agriculture and Progressivism," *Agricultural History* 45 (April 1971), 95-110; Johnson, "The Corn Belt Meat Producers' Association of Iowa: Origins of a Progressive Pressure Group," *Annals of Iowa* 43 (1976), 242-59.

10. Leland L. Sage, "Rural Iowa in the 1920s and 1930s," *Annals of Iowa* 47 (1983), 91-103; Dorothy Schwieder, "Rural Iowa in the 1920s," *Annals of Iowa* 47 (1983), 104-15; Joseph Frazier Wall, "The Iowa Farmer in Crisis, 1920-1936," *Annals of Iowa* 47 (1983), 116-27.

revolt.¹¹ Alan Olmstead and Paul Rhode used the Iowa “Cow War” to understand resistance to technological change.¹² Lisa Ossian’s *The Depression Dilemmas of Rural Iowa, 1929–1933* (2010) eschewed the emphasis on farm protest and instead focused on an array of issues (health, rural industry, crime, etc.) that Iowans confronted during the economic crash.¹³ Frank Yoder dealt with the more prosaic but no less important issues of intergenerational succession and the efforts families made to preserve their farms.¹⁴

Regarding World War II, Ossian’s 2009 book *The Home Fronts of Iowa, 1939–1945* addressed how Iowans lived with war in their kitchens, communities, factories, and farms. Ossian traced the work required for increased production and experimentation with new or newish crops. Chad Timm’s essay demonstrated the significance of German, Japanese, and Italian POWs’ labor in weeding, harvesting, logging, hauling manure, making hay, and countless other agricultural tasks.¹⁵

The war, according to Deborah Fink, was a catalyst for change in rural women’s lives. In *Open Country, Iowa* (1987), Fink showed that before the war, women controlled income streams on the farm, often chicken and eggs. After the war, women’s roles in farm production declined, especially as poultry and egg production rapidly industrialized. Women’s contributions to the family farm were less in the productive work of farming and more often in the form of supplemental, off-farm income.¹⁶ Jenny Barker-Devine has examined how farm women shaped the rural social landscape during this time of rapid change. *On Behalf of the Family Farm* shows that farm women asserted themselves and

11. Rodney D. Karr, “Farmer Rebels in Plymouth County, 1932–1933,” *Annals of Iowa* 47 (1985), 637–45; William C. Pratt, “The Farmers Union and the 1948 Henry Wallace Campaign,” *Annals of Iowa* 49 (1988), 349–70; Leslie A. Taylor, “Femininity as a Strategy: A Gendered Perspective on the Farmers’ Holiday,” *Annals of Iowa* 51 (1992), 252–77.

12. Alan L. Olmstead and Paul W. Rhode, “‘Not on My Farm!’: Resistance to Bovine Tuberculosis Eradication in the United States,” *Journal of Economic History* 67 (September 2007), 768–809.

13. Lisa L. Ossian, *The Depression Dilemmas of Rural Iowa, 1929–1933* (Columbia, MO, 2011).

14. Frank Yoder, “Staying on the Farm: Surviving the Great Depression in an Iowa Township, 1920–1950,” *Annals of Iowa* 51 (1991), 53–78.

15. Chad W. Timm, “Working with the Enemy: Axis Prisoners of War in Iowa during World War II,” *Annals of Iowa* 70 (2011), 225–57; Lisa L. Ossian, *The Home Fronts of Iowa, 1939–1945* (Columbia, MO, 2009).

16. Deborah Fink, *Open Country, Iowa: Rural Women, Tradition, and Change* (Albany, 1986).

articulated a new vision of rural life, emphasizing mutuality as well as their unique role as producers and advocates.¹⁷

In *Industrializing the Corn Belt* (2009), I followed Bogue and addressed the evolution of farming as a business, focusing particularly on how farmers adopted and adapted new chemical and mechanical technology. Tom Colbert's article on Iowa farmers and corn pickers was an inspiration.¹⁸ My goal was to engage agricultural history, the history of technology, and environmental history, emphasizing the particular labor and financial concerns of farmers as well as how they interacted with farm experts and responded to new environmental challenges.¹⁹ Since 2009, however, there has been comparatively little new work on Iowa farming.

While Professor Schmidt's vision has been only imperfectly realized, historians have examined the who, what, when, where, how, and why of commodity and household production across multiple time periods and places. Yet, it has been seventy years since Ross and Throne's pioneering work, and Bogue's landmark study was published over fifty years ago.

Since that time, however, there have been many developments in interpretation and technique that could be brought to bear on Iowa agriculture. New work could include more environmental history perspectives. What can the study of crop rotations, seed selection, and soil fertility teach us about Iowa farmers' understanding of their world? To what extent was farm pollution an issue before the language of ecosystems? A social construction of technology (SCoT) could help us see the winners and losers in the process of technological change. There have been remarkable strides in women's and gender history, but there is room for exploring more aspects of gender dynamics, not just on the farm but also in rural neighborhoods and communities. There is a need for more

17. Jenny Barker-Devine, *On Behalf of the Family Farm: Iowa Farm Women's Activism since 1945* (Iowa City, 2013).

18. Thomas Burnell Colbert, "Iowa Farmers and Mechanical Corn Pickers, 1900–1952," *Agricultural History* 74 (Spring 2000), 530–44.

19. J. L. Anderson, *Industrializing the Corn Belt: Agriculture, Technology, and Environment, 1945–1972* (DeKalb, 2009); Anderson, "The quickest way possible: Iowa Farmers and Tractor Drawn Combines, 1940–1960," *Agricultural History* 76 (Autumn 2002), 669–88; Anderson, "War on Weeds: Iowa Farmers and Growth Regulator Herbicides," *Technology and Culture* 46 (October 2005), 719–44.

work on migrant and seasonal labor in Iowa's context as well as the history of racialized groups in farming and rural life.²⁰

Among the many areas for future work, the lived experience of the 1930s and 1940s deserve more attention. Published primary sources such as the Elmer Powers's diary suggest that rich narratives and fresh interpretations are possible. Scholars of farm tenancy focused on the mid- to late nineteenth century, but what about the role of tenancy in the maturing farm economy of the twentieth century or the farmers who owned and rented land? What would a broader range of sources tell us about tenancy? Archival sources deposited since the publication of older leading works could bring new interpretations. Material culture studies could reveal the stories and significance of everyday items from farmhouses, barnyards, and fields.

We also need to study more contemporary history, bringing the story of developments on the farm forward from the 1970s and 80s.²¹ The dynamics of farming and farm decision making of the late twentieth century are due for in-depth examination. New studies of how land-grant universities simultaneously shaped the countryside and responded to those changes are needed. The economic changes and dislocation of this period were profound, and studies of farm credit, school consolidation, organic farming, biotech, marketing, alternative crops, production for farmers markets, and soil conservation would help us see a more complete picture of Iowa farming.²² Despite the relative paucity of recent work on farming in Iowa, there are encouraging signs. Chris Rasmussen's exemplary *Carnival in the Countryside* not only demonstrated the importance of the Iowa State Fair for farm production, but also its role in cultural production and reproduction.²³ Pamela Riney-Kehrberg's

20. Valerie Grim's survey "African-Americans in Iowa Agriculture" is already twenty years old. See Bill Silag, Susan Koch Bridgford, and Hal Chase, eds., *Outside In: African-American History in Iowa, 1838–2000* (Iowa City, 2001).

21. For more on the historiography of the Farm Crisis, see Pamela Riney-Kehrberg's article in this issue. "Iowa and the Importance of State and Local History," *Annals of Iowa* 80 (2021), 313–19.

22. Don Muhm, a farm journalist, wrote the most thorough account of the soil conservation story in Iowa. His book is a well-written, classic "insider" history that emphasized institution building and cataloged key individuals. Muhm, *Iowa Soil Conservation, 1939–1979* (Ames, 1984).

23. Chris Rasmussen, *Carnival in the Countryside: The History of the Iowa State Fair* (Iowa City, 2015).

forthcoming study on the Farm Crisis is a welcome addition.²⁴ Significantly, Margaret Weber has pointed a way forward in her study of how agribusinesses wove their narratives into the fabric of farming and rural culture.²⁵ We can hope that Weber and other young scholars will renew the field of Iowa agricultural history with careful work and creativity.

Race and Iowa History

ASHLEY HOWARD

HISTORY IS A POWERFUL FORCE. Like blizzards, derechos, and other environmental phenomenon, the narratives we share shape our civic landscape. The refiguring of these collective stories can occur incrementally or all at once. In the popular imagination, Iowa represents the nation's quintessential core, a pastoral meritocracy where hard work inevitably leads to success. It is also a place envisioned as exclusively white, Christian, and American-born. This frame, enduring and incomplete, informs past and present understandings. It is no accident then, that narratives which challenge this myth are contested, ignored, or invalidated. A more expansive, inclusive state history is not cause for panic, but rather celebration. Documenting the stories of all Iowans highlights resistance, collaboration, and continual commitment to "our liberties we prize and our rights we will maintain."

In a 1971 speech for the Institute of the Black World, historian Vincent Harding argued that "intellectual work is connected to politics—whether the politics of reaction, or politics of the status quo, or politics of some kind of forward movement."¹ History is never a neutral subject, explaining the considerable debate and frequent pushback about certain interpretations. While his terminology is dated, Harding advanced a useful framework to understand the politics of history, particularly

24. Pamela Riney-Kehrberg, *When a Dream Dies: Agriculture, Iowa, and the Farm Crisis of the 1980s*, unpublished manuscript, cited with permission of the author.

25. Margaret Weber, "The American Way of Farming: Pioneer Hi-Bred and Power in Postwar America," *Agricultural History* 92 (Summer 2018), 380–403.

1. Vincent Harding, "History: White, Negro, and Black," in "No More Moanin': Voices of Southern Struggle," ed. Sue Thrasher, special issue, *Southern Exposure*, 1 (Winter 1974), 52.