

# Independence and Interdependence on Midwestern Family Farms: A Review Essay

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*Farm Wife: A Self-Portrait, 1886-1896*, edited by Virginia E. McCormick. Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1990. ix, 254 pp. Illustrations, notes, glossary, index. \$22.95 cloth.

*Rural Reminiscences: The Agony of Survival*, by Kenneth Hassebrock. Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1990. xii, 219 pp. Illustrations. \$21.95 cloth.

*Over-fulfilled Expectations: A Life and an Era in Rural America*, by Harold F. Breimyer. Henry A. Wallace Series on Agricultural History and Rural Studies. Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1991. xvi, 300 pp. Illustrations, bibliography, index. \$34.95 cloth.

FARMING is often considered to be the last stronghold of independence and individualism. The three books under consideration both support that notion and deny it. Each author presents a perception and understanding of farm life that reflects individual experiences, but each also tells a tale of interdependence and economic and social integration. They share a history of technological, social, and economic change in midwestern farm life and work in the past century that throws light on the current discussion about the future of the family farm.

Chronologically, the first of these books is Virginia McCormick's sensitive reworking of Margaret Dow Gebby's diary. Covering a ten-year span of the family's life and work on their Ohio livestock and grain farm, the diary is more a daily log than a revelation of Gebby's innermost thoughts. Gebby is a

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reticent diarist who carefully notes the cost of each meal taken away from home, the wonders (and price) of new machinery, and the value of her butter and egg trade at the market. She rarely reveals her feelings, except occasional gratitude for her family's safety and good health. When Gebby is unable to make her daily entry, her husband or one of their sons takes up the duty. These men, often using family nicknames for each other, reveal a more intimate side of the family than does Gebby herself.

McCormick creates a context for Margaret Gebby's life from the lives and work of farm women in other times and places. She notes which aspects of Gebby's life are common to the experience of other farm women and which are peculiar to her own circumstances. McCormick introduces the family and its relatives in a carefully researched introduction. She then proceeds to examine the diary topically, providing commentary for each section. McCormick's treatment of the diary reveals minute details of housekeeping, farming, and family relationships. Particularly interesting—because the historical evidence is rare and because this is a task still assigned primarily to women—are the entries concerning care of the elderly. Much of the care of her mother and mother-in-law fell to Gebby. She records the daily care, worry, and eventually the death of these women with the same detachment that marks her records of farm activity.

McCormick raises the issue of "family farm" in her preface and suggests that this history of one family's farm may provide a historical context for current discussion. The Gebby family was not entirely independent and the farm was not isolated socially or economically. Work was hired and borrowed. Threshing rings did the work that one family could not manage. Cattle and hogs were bought and sold in Chicago with the Gebby men riding the train back and forth with the stock. Machine replacement parts were secured from sources hundreds of miles distant. National market forces were certainly a factor in farm decision making.

*Farm Wife* contains few surprises for those who have studied nineteenth-century farming. McCormick's treatment of the diary is well researched and nicely written. It provides detail about farmwork, housework, farm economics, and social life,

but it is basically flawed. In order to consider the diary topically, McCormick has broken it up, placing together all entries concerning each topic. For instance, the entries concerning haying indicate that from mid-June to mid-July work focused on the hay crop. Seventy-five pages later, we read that Gebby's mother-in-law died in July. The rearrangement of the diary leaves us wondering how the family managed to allocate labor to cover both the routine, but extremely important, work of haying and the crisis of the elderly woman's failing health and death. The daily and seasonal allocations of family labor and hiring extra labor with its implications for changes in work loads and cash flow are lost. We cannot understand how men's and women's work roles meshed, how the sons were absorbed into farm work as they grew older, how time was set aside for social activities during the intense seasonal activity of planting or harvesting. McCormick's editing, while thorough and fascinating, obscures one of the more important aspects of farm life—seasonal, and to some extent historical, change.

The Gebby family enjoyed comfortable circumstances on the farm in spite of the depression of the 1890s, but only one of their three sons made farming his occupation. Kenneth Hassebrock, in his memoir, *Rural Reminiscences*, suggests that backbreaking work and the uncertainties of farming held little appeal for young men who could find another way to make a living. Hassebrock grew up on three different Iowa farms in the 1920s and 1930s. His parents moved to ever smaller farms as the failing farm economy chased them around north central Iowa. Though Hassebrock would have us believe that his parents were committed to the Jeffersonian ideal of individual farm ownership, their faith was sorely tested, and he offers evidence that other farm families, if not necessarily his own, found that the "American dream had not proven to be within grasp" (49).

Hassebrock focuses on the mechanics of farming. He grew up on the farm during a time when gasoline-powered engines were replacing horses. He offers detailed descriptions of the mechanical operation of both kinds of equipment, including the various means of coaxing a cranky piece of machinery into operation. The impoverished family could not afford new

equipment or replacement parts. Ingenuity replaced a sufficient cash supply.

Like McCormick, Hassebrock has taken a topical approach to his memoir. Each farm provides the framework for a section, and each section is divided into chapters. Mechanical considerations prevail even in chapters about schooling; school transportation and the quality of the roads receives the same attention to detail that Hassebrock gives to farm equipment.

After the last move, to Manly, Hassebrock attended school in town. His experiences there offer insight into rural-urban relations. Though he was aware of a certain amount of discord between rural and urban lifestyles, Hassebrock enjoyed the friendship of city students and, especially, the wider variety of activities available in the urban school. Vocational agriculture classes were available, and through them Hassebrock was able to travel to Minneapolis, Des Moines, and Ames. Those experiences convinced him to seek a college education. It is not surprising to find that Hassebrock chose engineering for his profession.

*Rural Reminiscences* is primarily valuable for its details about the mechanics of obsolete farm equipment. We find out very little about the "agony of survival" because Hassebrock neglects to discuss the strategies the family employed to survive the tough times of the thirties. If young Kenneth wanted a gun or money for a class trip, somehow the money became available. The reader never finds out how. Hassebrock intentionally neglects women's roles on the farm. We don't have a historical view of a family farm then, but of the work of field and barn. The importance of women's roles, so evident in *Farm Wife*, is muted, and the family is distorted.

Hassebrock wrote the entire book in the passive voice. The effect, besides causing discomfort for those sensitive to writing style, is to depopulate the farm. The overall impression is of a ghost farm, complete with livestock and equipment, but only a faint and ghostly family occupies it.

Harold F. Breimyer, whose youth on an Ohio farm closely resembles Hassebrock's, provides a broader view of family farming in the Midwest in his autobiography, *Over-fulfilled Expectations*. Breimyer's experiences with rural life, 4-H, and vocational agriculture classes led him to study agricultural eco-

nomics in college. In 1936 he went to work for the Agricultural Adjustment Administration and remained in government service until he accepted a teaching and extension position with the University of Missouri in 1965.

Less than one-third of the book deals with Breimyer's life on the farm. While Hassebrock saw the farm distress of the thirties as closing a door to an agricultural career, Breimyer saw the 1920s and 1930s as a time when opportunities for nonfarm employment opened up for farm youth. The emphasis his community and family placed on education and cultural activities gave him access to college scholarships. New Deal agriculture programs meant that he could find work during and after college.

The heart of Breimyer's autobiography centers on his years as an agricultural economist with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. For many of those years he gathered statistics and, using these numbers, made predictions about agricultural markets. He stops short, however, of writing a gossipy, insider's book about how agricultural policy is made. He wants the reader to know how his life's experiences—from plowing at home on the family farm to his service in the Navy during World War II to his work in Washington—created the man, Harold Breimyer.

Breimyer credits a value-laden education, both at home and in school, for providing the basis for the moral decisions he would make in his life. Though he seldom allows the reader to observe him wrestling with moral questions, he demonstrates how his values influenced his work. The statistics he gathered were not cold and valueless. The numbers told the story of men's and women's lives on small farms everywhere. It was their fate that always remained in Breimyer's mind no matter what government agency he worked with. His few contacts with agribusiness and large-scale farming usually made him uncomfortable, though his skill in transmitting his considerable knowledge won the respect of his audiences.

Breimyer never loses sight of the social consequences of technological change or government farm policy. Ultimately, the value of any program was how well it helped (or how much it hurt) men and women trying to make a living from farming. His analysis of farm policy generated in the years of

his active service and since his retirement indicates that the family farm is becoming obsolete. But he recognizes that policy is not solely responsible for farm distress in the 1980s. Breimyer also blames "individual farmers, glorying in their independence" (247), who have failed to work together to preserve family farming.

This is an autobiography of the public life of Harold Breimyer. Though he lets the reader get a little closer to him than do either Hassebrock or Gebby, he still keeps his distance. Oddly, he writes in the third person. He may have thought it a modest approach to autobiography, but it raises a curtain between him and the reader that we usually find only in biography. The technique contributed to the rather disjointed arrangement of the book, and probably kept him from divulging more about Washington's manipulation of farm economics than he wanted to. He leaves the reader wanting to know more about this very likable man.

One way or another, all three books keep the reader at arm's length. One wonders if the authors are trying to protect the reader or to protect their memories from the intrusion of prying, perhaps unsympathetic, strangers. The death of the family farm both as an institution and as a private life story may be too personal to reveal in so public a forum, and this is a theme that haunts these books. Hassebrock's family left the farm when his father died in 1954. Gebby's descendants remain on the farm, but McCormick recognizes that the farm work and family relationships that Margaret Gebby knew have disappeared. Breimyer, with his broader, more scholarly perspective, warns that the "traditional institutions of agriculture" (247) will cease to exist.

Hassebrock's ghostly farm family may be an appropriate symbol for the distress of the 1920s and 1930s as well as today. Breimyer calls it *déjà vu*, and outlines parallels between the past and present. None of these authors is suggesting that American agriculture is caught in a cycle of distress and bounty, so we need only wait for the next turn. They are all saying good-bye to the life and thank you for the good things it provided, particularly the moral grounding, but they are cautioning the reader against romanticizing the family farm of the past. Breimyer suggests in his epilogue that though

the institution has changed; the social lessons of its history might help us construct the agricultural institutions of the future.

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