

THE ANNALS OF IOWA

Custom Combining on the Great Plains, by Thomas Isern. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1981. pp. xvi, 248. Photographs, figures, notes, bibliography, index. \$14.95.

Since World War II, custom combining has become the usual method of wheat harvesting in the United States, and custom combiners harvest many of the other grain crops of the wheat belt as well. This book tells us why and how.

An introductory chapter explains the harvesting techniques used in the wheat harvest on the Plains before custom combining. The thresher or separator, the header, and the combine are some of the kinds of equipment described. Practices of harvesting such as the threshing ring, custom threshing, and farmer-owned combining before World War II are also discussed. The war, bringing a greatly increased demand for wheat production, a critical decrease in the available supply of harvest labor, and critical shortages in new machinery and in replacement parts, set the stage for dramatic changes in harvesting practices. This change made custom combining the dominant harvesting practice on the Great Plains.

Isern recounts a dramatic harvesting event in 1944 that set the pattern that has continued to the present. In that year the Massey Harris company built some five hundred new combines, publicized their availability, and attempted to distribute them to persons already experienced in custom combining. The company wanted the purchasers of the new combines to participate in the wheat harvest from Texas to Canada following the ripening grain. Massey Harris made a major effort to provide replacement parts and mechanics to keep the combines in this "Harvest Brigade" operational. The idea worked well. There were some breakdowns in the system, but the "Harvest Brigade" provided harvesting facilities for farmers who were hard pressed to harvest their crops. The system also worked well for the combiners. It worked so well that it created a major change in the way wheat was harvested in the Plains.

Before the war combines had been in use and they became increasingly numerous from the 1920s on. Also there was a steady increase of the number of custom combiners working in a neighborhood or locality. But their combines were independent free-standing machines that were pulled by tractors and powered from the tractors' power take off. They were small in size and in potential for large production, whether the production was measured in acres or in bushels harvested. Also they were difficult to move and did not lend themselves well to custom combining. Increasingly after World War II

Book Reviews

combines were built for the custom combiner. Their capacity and their mobility were greatly increased, and their increased cost made their use for custom work more and more essential to their owners.

Professor Isern tells his readers much about the custom combining that developed. He deals with such topics as the number of combiners originating in different states and the number of combiners that moved from one state to another in the harvest. He also deals with the lives of the combiners, the equipment used, the hours worked, the living facilities for combine crews, the patterns of movement northward, and how these and other factors have changed. He points out that custom combining frequently becomes a way of life and a traditional business and that many families are now in the second and third generations of the business.

The book is illustrated with many well chosen photographs. Information is also presented with graphs on a variety of topics such as numbers of combines, geographical origin of combine operators, area harvested, number of bushels harvested, value of crops, and price charged for combining. Some topics on which a reader might expect to find information are omitted, such as changes that custom combining has caused in size of farms, amount of wheat planted, impact on farm families, changes in labor supply utilized by wheat farmers. This is a book about the custom combiners and their lives, not one about the people for whom they work.

It is a first-class study, interesting, well organized, and informative. It should be of great interest to inhabitants of the Plains where custom combining outfits have become a dominant part of the harvest season. It should also attract an audience among historians and other observers of the American scene.

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Red Harvest: The Communist Party and American Farmers, by Lowell K. Dyson. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982. pp. xii, 259. Bibliographic essay. \$18.95.

The countryside, and the people who lived there, held little interest for Karl Marx. He complained of the "idiocy of rural life" and regarded European peasants as likely recruits for the counter-revolution. But the workers' revolution to which Marx devoted his life never showed up. And when Marxists finally came to power in Russia and Asia in the twentieth century, they did so as the leaders of peasant revolu-

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