

*Roswell Garst: A Biography*, by Harold Lee. Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1984. xv, 310 pp. Photographs, bibliography, index. \$12.95 cloth.

American agriculture at the time of Roswell Garst's birth in 1898 more closely resembled farming in the Middle Ages than farming in the 1980s. Although many of the nation's farms were becoming mechanized, most of the significant innovations that led to rapidly increasing agricultural productivity a few decades later—hybrid seeds, chemicals, fertilizers, and antibiotics, to name a few—had not yet appeared on the scene. Except for developing new ways of feeding cattle, Garst did not contribute significantly to the nation's store of scientific knowledge. He was neither scientist nor inventor; but was a genius when it came to applying new products and untested theories to some practical goal. To his credit, Garst was always on the cutting edge of change—he knew instinctively what needed to be done to produce more food with less effort, and was always ready, in the spirit of American commerce, to make a few dollars in the process.

In his recently published book, *Roswell Garst: A Biography*, Harold Lee, Garst's son-in-law, adds credibility to the belief expressed by another member of the family, John Crystal, that "the world eats better, is warmer and is safer because of Roswell Garst." Lee has written an enjoyable, readable book that reaches beyond its obvious goal of preserving the memory of this interesting and colorful Iowan. Because of Garst's wide-ranging interests, the reader of this book will learn much about recent scientific and technological developments, political events and personalities, and agriculture's role in shaping post-World War II Soviet-American relations. Perhaps most important, this book is good social history. The author tells us much about how farming and the lives of farmers changed so fundamentally in an incredibly short amount of time.

After outlining the history of the Garst family, as well as the early lives of Roswell and Elizabeth Garst, the author devotes the vast majority of the book to presenting an account of the New Deal years and after. Lee pays disproportionate attention to the years between 1955 and 1965 when Garst played a role in the thawing of Cold War tensions and bringing American farming methods to the Third World. Lee does not exaggerate the importance of his father-in-law's activities, but treats his readers to plenty of what most surely want: insights into the relationship between Garst and Khrushchev and an analysis of Garst's mixed feelings about trading with a foreign power whose human rights record is hardly laudable.

## *Book Reviews*

An important feature of this book is the description of how Garst and a handful of advocates of the new agriculture worked to bring new farming methods to the Midwest. The accounts of a young Roswell Garst working day and night to sell seed corn to farmers skeptical of new ways and often, because of the Depression, too poor to give them a try, is both moving and informative. Lee convinces the reader that Garst's greatest asset was his ability to persuade farmers that they would benefit from the products for which he seemed to have an almost religious fervor. A consummate salesman, Garst helped transform American farmers—usually socially and politically conservative—into the most zealous modernizers around.

By the early thirties Garst had become a farm leader of some importance, respected enough to have a role in formulating Roosevelt's new agricultural policy. In the years after the war, Garst became even more influential as his interests ranged more widely. Freed from responsibilities of the day-to-day management of his own farming operation, he became outspoken on a great many issues relating to agriculture. It was during these years that Garst wrote literally thousands of letters which, since his death, have become part of the Garst Papers at Iowa State University. The author draws extensively on these letters, along with numerous oral interviews, to write this book.

For one who is a member of the Garst family, however, the author pays surprisingly little attention to family relationships. Elizabeth was not always happy about her husband's extended absences from the family, but Lee never describes her role in detail. There is little mention of the children, except to point out that they eventually assumed a greater role in managing the family's myriad business interests. Perhaps this is the price that must be paid when a surviving relative of the main character writes a biography. It is quite possible that family considerations played a role in preventing the author from taking a more critical look at the life and times of Roswell Garst.

This, then, is the book's major weakness: Its treatment of Garst is too superficial and the author is too inclined to present Garst as a one-dimensional character. Lee gives us little insight into Garst's more reflective moments, nor does he tell us whether Garst ever regretted the less positive aspects of the agricultural revolution he helped bring about. Obviously, Garst was successful in his efforts to increase agricultural productivity; but, just as surely, he helped set forces in motion that drove millions of farm families from the land. Fewer farmers now produce more food, but, unable to regulate the production of the various commodities, find themselves increasingly at the mercy of the uncaring law of supply and demand. In effect, farmers handle more food for the same money—or less.

Lee starts to analyze Garst's views several times—we learn that Garst offered his support for larger farm units in 1941 because "greater efficiency must give the world greater plenty," for example—but in the end Lee leaves the reader wondering whether Garst recognized or cared about the social upheaval concurrent with the adoption of the methods he advocated. Moreover, it would be useful to know more about Garst's reaction to the critics of the new agriculture. The National Farmers Organization, founded at the peak of Garst's influence in 1955, often pointed out that almost everyone except farmers themselves benefited from the emergence of commercial agriculture. Others, with whom Garst seems to have strongly disagreed, criticized the use of chemicals, intensive farming methods, and petroleum-based products from an ecological perspective. Was Garst aware that there were voices directly challenging his views? Did he ever answer the critics in his correspondence and public pronouncements?

Despite this book's main flaw, it is one that is well worth reading. If the author's goal was to recapture all the energy and enthusiasm of Roswell Garst, then he was more than successful. Perhaps at a later date, Lee, or another similarly qualified scholar will take up where this book leaves off. Then the story of Roswell Garst will be complete.

UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA

RICHARD BROADIE

*Self-Help in the 1890s Depression*, by H. Roger Grant. Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1983. xii, 163 pp. Photographs, maps, notes, index. \$11.95 cloth.

Many of the responses Americans have made to recent economic difficulties are not new, nor did they originate during the Great Depression of the 1930s. Self-help programs, such as community gardens, cooperative businesses, and barter systems, can be traced to the period from 1893 to 1897, when the United States weathered its first major industrial depression. These and other programs represented consumer responses to problems of unemployment, food shortages, and lack of capital, and provided prototypes used during subsequent periods of hardship.

The object of this book, in part, is to give these self-help schemes more of the attention they deserve. In addition, Grant, a professor of history at the University of Akron and an editorial consultant for the *Annals of Iowa*, attempts to show how organized consumer actions helped provide a linkage between populism and progressivism.

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