

Book Reviews

The author also writes with great sympathy; she cares deeply about her family and the hardships they faced. They battled both the natural elements and the injustices of the free enterprise system. They sacrificed; suffering was evident at every turn. Near the end of her book, still recalling the loss of her father's farm when she was very young, Beulah tells us: "We never really put down roots anywhere after that. We never really felt like we had a home anywhere we ever lived." Beulah Pelton's truthfulness is a gift to all who read it. This is, indeed, a contemporary tale of the frustrations we all know in our search for a home in this world. For farmers today, especially, it has an all-too-familiar ring.

NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

RICHARD QUINNEY

This is Home Now, by Floyd A. Robinson. Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1983. xiii, 229 pp. \$14.95 cloth.

Today fewer than 3 percent of the population live on farms. Consequently, most people know little about farming. Some may be familiar with the general outline of daily farm activities, such as milking, plowing, or threshing, but few know precisely how farmers went about these tasks in the past and few understand the drudgery as well as the pleasure of farm life. Moreover, agriculture has changed so rapidly, particularly during the twentieth century, that even contemporary farmers may be ignorant of their grandparents' agricultural experiences. While most farmers, for example, can operate the largest four-wheel-drive tractors, few have experience in harnessing teams of horses for plowing. Similarly, agricultural historians busily explain shifts in agricultural policy, the effects of technological change, or past economic problems while seldom describing the most basic feature of agriculture—the actual farming process.

Floyd A. Robinson, a retired public school teacher who grew up on an Iowa farm, has written an excellent account of a farmer's daily concerns during the second and third decades in twentieth-century Iowa. *This is Home Now* may tell us more about farm life in the Midwest than most of us have ever known. Robinson traces the fictional Harper family from coal mines of Indiana to northwestern Iowa during the winter of 1913. Although Robinson has not intended this book to be a memoir, one suspects that it is largely autobiographical. It is a personal story of a tenant farmer's struggle to raise a family and make his land productive, a story of unremitting toil, of missed school days, of danger, and of remarkable change.

Robinson organizes his account of farm life around the seasons.

From winter to autumn, he takes us on a journey through the fields and barns. We learn how to harness a team for plowing, how to sow oats, and how to shell corn as well as how to make butter, butcher hogs, render lard, train draft horses, raise chicks, and shoe horses. Robinson takes a topical approach within the seasonal farm activities, through which he introduces the rural school, revivals, mail delivery, moving day, cream separators, automobiles, and tractors. By metaphorically riding a wagon loaded with corn bound for the elevator on a cold winter morning, we gain a better understanding of the hardship of farm life prior to widespread adoption of the automobile, truck, and tractor.

This is Home Now is a touching story of farm life from the eve of the First World War to the Great Depression. It is a delight to read. The author's concern is daily farm work. He does not discuss political or economic matters, such as the boom years of World War I, the postwar Depression, or the McNary-Haugen plan. As such, his family seems more isolated than it probably was. Certainly, although farmers tend to be concerned with the everyday problems of their land, livestock, and families, in the 1920s and 1930s they experienced a gripping recession followed by hard times which made them question the federal government's passive relationship with agriculture. The Harper family seems untouched by national and international events which must have dramatically influenced their lives. Still, Robinson provides an excellent overview of farm life at a time when American agriculture was on the verge of mechanization with the internal combustion engine. It was a far different time than now, and Robinson's remembrance gives us a better understanding of earlier midwestern farmers' lives. Anyone interested in midwestern agriculture during the early twentieth century would find value in this book. While it will have nostalgic appeal for some, it will also serve as a useful reference about daily farming activities. Robinson has told a fascinating and poignant story that awaited telling.

OHIO HISTORICAL SOCIETY

R. DOUGLAS HURT

Where the Sky Began: Land of the Tallgrass Prairie, by John Madson. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1982. xvi, 321 pp. Illustrations, appendix, selected references, index. \$13.50 cloth.

Over the past 150 years, the Emersonian nature essay has served as a prototype for a specialized genre with regional themes. The New England variety bloomed earliest and looms largest, with its nineteenth-century founders, Emerson and Thoreau, and with secondary

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