



Iowa Farming during 1910-1930 as Seen Through Paul Corey's "Mantz Trilogy"

DAVID E. SCHOB

A successful writer draws upon childhood experiences and adult powers of observation. This duality explains Paul Corey as the novelist who grew up in rural Iowa in the early twentieth century, and what influenced him later to write the Mantz Trilogy, the story of an Iowa farm family. The first volume entitled *Three Miles Square* appeared in 1939, followed by *The Road Returns* in 1940, and *County Seat* in 1941. *Three Miles Square* [1910-1916], the most purely agricultural volume in the trilogy, introduced the Mantz family members and other principal characters, while providing the mise-en-scène for what happened to the rural economy prior to World War I. *The Road Returns* [1917-1923] followed with the Mantz family's war-time prosperity, sale of the farm, and the move into the nearby town. The concluding volume, *County Seat* [1924-1930] painted a grim portrait of agriculture and of rural based towns that offered no financial refuge when surrounding countryside farmers failed financially in the 1920s.¹

¹Citations from the Trilogy volumes in this article will be identified in text, using these abbreviations with appropriate page number(s): *Three Miles Square* = TMS; *The Road Returns* = RR; and *County Seat* = CS. In addition to standard biographical listings, useful background and literary analysis are available in Robert A. McCown, "Paul Corey's Mantz Trilogy," *Books at Iowa*, 17 (November 1972), 15-26; Clarence A. Andrews, *A Literary History of Iowa* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1972), pp. 132-40; Philip Gerber, "I Could Write a Book': Paul and Elizabeth Corey," *Books at Iowa*, 52 (April 1990), 12-52; and Roy W. Meyer, *The Middle Western Farm Novel in the Twentieth Century* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), pp. 72-73, 94-98, 164, 169, 176, 191, 193, 194, 195, 197, 199, 206-7.

Born in 1903 in Shelby County, Iowa, as the youngest of seven siblings, Corey was still an infant when his father died, leaving the widow with the task of operating the family farm. This element of his childhood provided a main scenario that ran through the course of the Mantz family struggles. The three volumes revolved around the central character of widow Bessie Mantz, who ran the family farm and raised her three sons, Andrew, Wolmar and Otto. Not surprisingly Corey dedicated the first volume of the Trilogy to his mother.

The Trilogy's images were also conceived from a long string of correspondence that young Corey and his family had with older sister "Bachelor Bess," who attempted to homestead and farm independently in nearby South Dakota. The enterprise never succeeded for his sister whose letters chronicled setbacks and failures, culminating with the drought and Great Depression.² Bess's meager earnings came not from farming but a series of mediocre assignments as a rural school teacher. Not surprisingly problems confronting young female school teachers appeared similarly in Corey's depiction of rural society.³ When Paul visited his sister in 1934, fresh image seeds were sown in his fertile imagination along with childhood memories. Corey's observations about his family's struggles at farming were also derived from other perspectives. By the time young Paul went off to college in 1921, he absorbed ideas of political and economic liberalism that included sympathy for socialist ideas appearing in the trilogy during World War I and later as potential remedies for agriculture in the 1920s.⁴

²See Philip L. Gerber "'I Could Write a Book': Paul and Elizabeth Corey," 12-52; and ed., *Bachelor Bess: The Homesteading Letters of Elizabeth Corey, 1909-1919*. Foreword by Paul Corey. (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1990). Recent studies with useful background material on women's role in agriculture are Deborah Fink, *Open Country Iowa: Rural Women, Tradition and Change* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986); Wava G. Haney and Jane B. Knowles, eds., *Women and Farming: Changing Roles, Changing Structures in The Rural Studies Series of the Rural Sociological Society* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1988).

³Prior to 1900, rural school teaching was seen as improving one's life, whereas after 1900 teaching symbolized failure to succeed at anything else, according to David B. Danbom, *The Resisted Revolution: Urban America and the Industrialization of Agriculture, 1900-1930* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1979), p. 14.

⁴Paul Corey, "Lurching toward Liberalism: Political and Literary Reminis-



Corey farm near Marne, Iowa, as it appeared about the time of Paul Corey's birth in 1903

The Corey family farmed 160 acres in Shelby County in western Iowa before moving to Atlantic, the county seat of adjoining Cass County in 1918, about the time Paul entered high school and acquired images of town life that appeared in the second and third volumes of the trilogy. The Mantz farm was located in the fictional county of Moss. The map plate inside the cover of *Three Miles Square* showed the relationship of the Mantz farm to its neighbors and the road leading to Elm, the town to which the Mantzes eventually moved following World War I. The Mantz farm was 160 acres, identical to the Corey farm in size.⁵ In 1910, Iowa had 217,044 farms whose size averaged 156 acres, virtually identical to Corey's Mantz family farm depicted in the trilogy, and at a time when farm land constituted 94.7 percent of the Iowa's total area. Between 1910 and 1930, these figures did not change significantly other than to witness a slight decline in the number of farms. By 1930 at

cences," *Books at Iowa*, 49 (November 1988), 35-71.

⁵See McCown, "Paul Corey's Mantz Trilogy," 15-16; and Gerber, "I Could Write a Book': Paul and Elizabeth Corey," 43-45.

the end of the Mantz Trilogy, the average farm size was 158 acres while the overall percentage of total area of Iowa in farm land remained unchanged.⁶

As a farming unit, the Mantz place was set into diversified production unlike many Iowa farms that were heavily into corn and livestock. Chris Mantz, the father who died in 1910 at the start of Corey's trilogy, advocated planting wheat, oats, barley and hay, raising dairy cows in addition to staple corn and hogs. He was also committed to the idea of good farming by improvements such as straightening creek and river channels to recover land for cultivation or pasturing. Corey devoted considerable attention to the importance of wheat, especially when oldest son Andrew began operating the farm and planting more resilient winter wheat. Wheat producers depended on the steam powered threshing machines, operated by professional threshers, who made the "ring" around the neighboring farms to process their cut wheat.⁷ (TMS 97-132)

The period from 1897 to 1910 became known as the "Good Years" before economic inflationary effects of World War I distorted its long cycle.⁸ An indication of the improving picture by 1910, in which Iowa farmers participated and seen in Corey's Trilogy, can be traced with United States Department of Agriculture data. The USDA reported the national index value of farm products, with 1899 equaling 100 as the base year, and rising to 189.2 by 1910. This accounted for almost a 90 percent increase within a ten year span. Iowa shared in this growth not only in value of farm produce that translated into

⁶These figures are drawn from W. G. Murray, "Struggle for Land Ownership," in *A Century of Farming in Iowa: 1846-1946* (Ames: Iowa State College Press, 1946), p. 11, Table 2.

⁷The single best treatment of professional threshing is J. Sanford Rikoon, *Threshing in the Midwest, 1820-1940* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988). In terms of technological evolution, Rikoon discusses the impact of the small multi-purpose gasoline tractor and pull-type combine that replaced the large, cumbersome steam threshers going from farm to farm at the assigned "ring" of farms on the route. See esp. pp. 142-3.

⁸The "Good Years" were preceded by economic hardship and agrarian political radicalism in the late nineteenth century. A useful background study of the midwestern region and of Iowa is Jeffrey Ostler, *Prairie Populism: The Fate of Agrarian Radicalism in Kansas, Nebraska, and Iowa, 1880-1892* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1993).

greater income, but also with rising land values. Nationwide during 1900-1910, the average value of farm land increased 118 percent while Iowa's value of farm land rose 123 percent.⁹

An uneasiness lingered nonetheless in rural America, and Corey's *Three Miles Square* during 1910-17 revealed this ambivalent mood that things were good but could be better. The Country Life Commission, appointed by President Theodore Roosevelt in 1908, gathered data that confirmed the drudgery of farming, need for mechanization to achieve more production with less labor, and enhancement of life for rural America.¹⁰ The commission's report urged farmers to organize among themselves through cooperative marketing associations in order to drive up commodity prices and thereby derive greater income.¹¹ The importance of cooperative marketing was personified through Ed Crosby, one of the Mantz neighbors, who urged farmers of Moss County to organize because if they did not look out for themselves, no one else would do so. (RR 47-48) The commission report also observed that farm women deserved amenities such as indoor plumbing, electric lighting, and better cooking ranges. Fear that rural population might decline was expressed by *Wallaces' Farmer* in 1914: "Until we make life on the farm satisfying to the farmer's wife, we will labor in vain to check the drift of rural population to the towns and cities."¹² As an example in 1913, Bessie Mantz felt financially comfortable to start remodeling the farm house, an

⁹Theodore Saloutos and John D. Hicks, *Agricultural Discontent in the Middle West, 1900-1939* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1951), pp. 21-23.

¹⁰A standard study of the Commission set against the broader background of the Country Life Movement is William L. Bowers, *The Country Life Movement in America: 1900-1920* (Port Washington, New York: Kennikat Press, 1974), esp. pp. 24-27, 62-66.

¹¹Saloutos and Hicks, *Agricultural Discontent*, see Chapter III "Early Phases of the Cooperative Movement" with discussion of the Country Life Commission. A broader survey can be found in Henry C. and Anne D. Taylor, *The Story of Agricultural Economics in the United States, 1840-1932* (Ames: Iowa State College Press, 1952), reprinted by Greenwood Press, 1974. See "Cooperative Marketing Studies," pp. 641-709.

¹²[July 31, 1914] cited from Katherine Jellison, *Entitled to Power: Farm Women and Technology, 1913-1963* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), p. 5. Jellison's study draws heavily from the rural press and USDA records in the Farm Women's Bureau. The premise of mechanization as necessarily beneficial is questioned by Danbom, *Resisted Revolution*, see.vii-viii, and pp. 25, 40-46.

activity which was one of the more obvious manifestations of farmers' sense of well-being during the "Good Years." (TMS 178)

Lending had also become easier, and Corey emphasized this trend with the local banker pushing loans to meet the competition from a new farmers' savings bank. As a technological innovation, autos reinforced prosperity's image; but as one Mantz neighbor remarked "Lots of money floatin' around the country these days," and to which another retorted "Now if folks 'll just spend it right." (TMS 248-9) Corey approved of regulatory action by the federal government to assist farmers, which reflected his sense of liberalism and later admiration of the New Deal. The Federal Reserve Act of 1914, as seen through Ed Crosby, got high marks as an example of banking stabilization. (TMS 174) Similarly the Rural Credit Act of 1916 provided low interest loans to ease farmer debts. Yet Crosby remained suspicious: "When there's plenty of money, the speculators and bankers get it first, and the farmers always lose out in the long run. What we need is a law to fix the value of land and remove it from speculators." (TMS 297)

World War I in Europe during 1914-16 offered American farmers the best of two worlds: high prices for their products and not actually having to fight. When American involvement in the conflict came by 1917, an already fast moving farm economy accelerated into wild speculation. Troubling to rural minds was that "Things that happen to the farmer have no immediate effect; their effect is cumulative. It isn't felt until months after the trouble happens." (TMS 413) Corey closed the first volume of his trilogy with an eery foreboding. The local banker called for American involvement in the conflict to sustain lucrative European purchases of farm commodities. (TMS 448) Corey was clearly anti-war and traced the war's beguiling effect on farmers by lulling them into overproduction and a false sense of prosperity.

Corey opened the Trilogy's second volume, *The Road Returns*, in April 1917 when the United States entered the war on the side of the Allies to whom American farmers had been selling

food commodities since the conflict's outbreak three years before in 1914. From the farmers' perspective, American participation was patriotic and profitable. Selling farm commodities to the allies promised more profits and rising land values. With buy-outs from neighbors and the lure of retirement, an older generation of farmers who had stuck it out during lean decades saw the opportunity to take profits and move to town. Their neighbors were eager to buy them out; cynical greed affected even otherwise sensible Ed Crosby who told himself that ". . . if a fellow had more land; if I had that eighty of the Carens, or that Frazier quarter section along with mine—and prices the way they are—I'd make a bunch of money." (RR 9-10) Even farmers not close to retirement mulled the golden dream of selling and moving to town, such as Mantz neighbor Pete Thorne who told himself confidently: "Give me two more years like this one's shapin' and I'll be movin' to Elm." (RR 10)

The war's impact on farming, especially in Midwestern states like Iowa, created economic distortions for which farmers paid a heavy price afterward in the 1920s. Here was a critical juncture not perceived by many ebullient farmers at the time and whose enthusiasm clouded what should have been tempered restraint. The war created changes—profitable for short term—but disastrous for long-term in the postwar decade. Production was boosted because of patriotic urging, high prices, easy availability of mortgages to take on more land, and additional loans to buy extra equipment and consumer goods such as autos and phonograph players. During the four year period of 1910 to 1914, annual value of American agricultural output registered modestly six billion dollars; but this figure soared to fourteen billion by 1918 and incredibly went higher to sixteen billion by 1919.¹³ The index of wholesale prices for commodities witnessed a stunning 127 percent increase between 1914 and 1919; and such gains were most pronounced in the Midwestern states, including Iowa.¹⁴

¹³Saloutos and Hicks, *Agricultural Discontent*, p. 90.

¹⁴This percentage was extracted from figures in Murray R. Benedict, *Farm*

The troublesome factor was the farmer's steady accumulation of debt during this period under the assumption that high prices for commodities would continue to prevail and make for easy repayment of principal and accrued interest. Farmer debt was acquired too easily from bankers who pushed loans that extended their customers beyond a safe margin. Bessie Mantz strongly resisted such over-extension of debt and displayed a conservative attitude bordering on distrust of the prosperity around her. In September of 1917 after a good harvest, she made her payment on the mortgage and paid off the note on the Ford auto she had earlier in the year bought grudgingly. The banker reluctantly accepted her payment of the auto note loan but offered new credit: "We'll be glad to let you have this for any improvements you need." Her curt response was "We're not improving this fall." (RR 35-36, 59)

Most characters in Corey's trilogy lacked Bessie's resolve in avoiding excessive debt, and the issue of rural debt ran as a major theme through all three volumes of the Mantz Trilogy. Statistics for rural debt accumulation as a result of World War I were staggering and yet the players of the game did not fully appreciate or understand the odds in this false gambler's prosperity. Agricultural land prices and valuation on buildings and improvements had risen nationally from \$35 billion to \$66 billion between 1910 and 1920. Dangerously deceptive was the amount of inflation built into these values and saddled on the backs of farmers who presumed continual high commodity prices. Agricultural mortgages soared from \$4.7 billion in 1914 to \$10.2 billion in 1920.¹⁵

By 1918, *Wallaces' Farmer* focused with mounting urgency on this trend for Iowa farmers in terms of what became known as "cost-plus." It was pointed out to farmers that costs in terms of operation and production had to be figured into the equation. For example, an acre of corn before the war cost \$10 to produce. As a result of the war, the production or cost-plus factor had

Policies of the United States: 1790-1950: A Study of Their Origins and Development (New York: Twentieth Century Fund, 1953), p. 168.

¹⁵Benedict, *Farm Policies of the United States*, p. 168.

risen for the same acre of corn to \$23 by 1918. Corey understood this factor through the example of farmer Henry Clausen who took on debt to add electricity and a new silo to his farm but noticed that “. . . when the bills began to come through—the big prices he was getting were eaten up by the bigger prices on the stuff he bought.” (RR 62) *Wallaces' Farmer* cautioned that after figuring in costs, farmers made actually less net profit, working the land harder than usual for war-time profits or letting out acreage to tenants—the poorest kind of farming in terms of its effect on the land.¹⁶ Farm tenancy increased throughout the Midwest. In 1910, about 40 percent of Iowa's farms were operated by tenants. For the years covered by Corey's Mantz Trilogy, the number of tenant operated farms in Iowa rose to 41.7 percent in 1920, jumped to 44.7 percent in 1925, and advanced again over the next five years to 47.3 percent by 1930.¹⁷

The rise in value of farm land resulted from both the “Good Years” (1897-1910) and the economic stimulation of World War I (1914-1918). This aspect of farm value was an underlying theme in Corey's trilogy about the Mantz family, and his use of data is remarkably accurate. In 1910 when Chris Mantz died and left the farm for Bessie and her children to operate, an offer was made barely after the husband was laid to rest. Corey used the figure of \$45 per acre in that year when Sorrel Jensen, a grasping and greedy neighbor, sought to take advantage of a helpless bereaved widow. The Mantz family rejected the offer although Bessie conceded that it seemed attractive since land prices were low at that time. (TMS 22-24, 41, 44-5)

The notion of selling the farm arose again in 1917 when son Wolmar, mechanically inclined and with little penchant for farming, urged his mother to sell the place, claiming that it could fetch as much as \$100 per acre. Reasonably accurate, this figure represented a 122% gain over Jensen's proposed offer of \$45 per acre in 1910. Corey used this point to illustrate the

¹⁶Saloutos and Hicks, *Agricultural Discontent*, pp.98-99.

¹⁷Saloutos and Hicks, *Agricultural Discontent*, p. 14; Murray, “Struggle for Land Ownership” in *A Century of Farming in Iowa*, p. 12, Table 3.

run-up in farm real estate and Wolmar's astute opinion that a point would eventually occur when it would be wise to take profits. (RR 54)

Corey flagged another warning about land's sharp run-up in early 1918. Not unlike speculation in stocks when the market approaches its top, wise sellers unload while fools enter to buy at overpriced levels. Corey is worth quoting because he understood the omens of this frenzy: "The days of the new year marched into February and the telephone poles at each road intersection were plastered with yellow manila posters announcing public auctions of stock, machinery and household effects of farmers selling out. One of these posters was for Ben Spangler, a neighbor to the southwest of the Mantzes." Corey described Spangler's auction: "The farmers were buying-mad. They surged from one pen of stock to another, one lot of machinery to another, bid and counter-bid and piled up prices. Steuben, the auctioneer, played one against the other, heckling a laggard, praising a free bidder, building a price that staggered the buyer when he turned away and thought about it." One of the farmers attending the auction could not see the ironic edge of the precipice and blithely lighted a cigar while saying: "This War's the greatest thing that ever happened to us farmers."¹⁸ The farmers at the auction cynically added that such land could now be worked by tenants—the worst kind of farming in terms of preserving land quality and value. (RR 80-2)

The Armistice in November 1918 brought an end to the war but did not immediately terminate the spiraling rise of speculation. The government, under the Food Control Act of 1917, continued to support wheat at \$2.00 to \$2.20 per bushel, corn remained high, and land did not indicate any retreat to earlier pre-war levels during 1919. Corey recorded casual farmer conversations filled with bravado yet shaded in concern when

¹⁸The frenzy in buying used equipment at auctions in prosperity cycles tended to result in prices higher than real value or if purchased new. For insight into this aspect, see Alvin S. Tostlebe, *Capital in Agriculture: Its Formation and Financing Since 1870: A Study by the National Bureau of Economic Research* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), Appendix B, pp. 186-7.

asserting that land would never go down in price. But one farmer averred that "If it does, there'll be a lot of farmers caught with their pants down." (RR 211)

In August 1919, Bessie decided to sell the farm to Sorrel Jensen for \$350 per acre, with possession taken in March 1920, and assuming a first mortgage note from him. With Jensen's down payment of \$10,000, she could clear her own mortgage on the farm; however she had become unwittingly a creditor and dependent on Jensen's ability to make the first mortgage payments in the 1920s. (RR 214) Yet it seemed like a financial coup because Jensen had offered only \$45 per acre in 1910, and now she received \$350 per acre—a gain of 678 percent over a ten year period. These figures conformed with prevailing acreage prices at the height of boom in both Illinois and Iowa, where gains had been greatest in the Midwest. By 1919, Iowa farm land sold for as much as \$400 per acre, which meant the Mantzes sold within thirteen percent of the highest prevailing price.¹⁹

The Mantzes had done better than the overall averages for Iowa. The figures for the average value per acre of farm land and improvements showed \$96 in 1910; \$227.09 in 1920; and \$124.18 by 1930. But during the 1920s, the average worth of Iowa farms fell almost over 45 percent.²⁰ This decline in the 1920s was especially severe because of the accumulation of debt under the weight of what *Wallaces' Farmer* in 1918 had warned with its cost-plus calculations. Here were the seeds of disaster that would befall Iowa, including the Mantzes who prepared now to move into town.

In early 1920, the Mantzes auctioned off their farm equipment and belongings at the farmstead in preparation for the move into Elm where Bessie bought a house. Her feelings were

¹⁹Saloutos and Hicks, *Agricultural Discontent*, p. 102

²⁰Murray, "Struggle for Land Ownership" in *A Century of Farming in Iowa*, p. 14, figures and percentages extracted from data in Table 4. A useful discussion also for this period is Karl Scholz, "Trends in Farm Land Values in the United States from 1912 to 1928," in Clyde L. King, ed., *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, vol. CXLII (March 1929), reprinted as *Farm Relief in American Farmers and the Rise of Agribusiness* (New York: Arno Press, 1975), pp. 27-43.

mixed with reflections about her dead husband's desire that the farm should have remained in the family. At this point in the trilogy, Corey focused more on town life; yet the surrounding countryside ironically held a fateful key in terms of Elm's economic well-being. Like the Mantz family, the town could not ignore its rural roots and mainstays. On the surface, the economy appeared to maintain its war-time prosperity. The local real estate agent bragged about good times lasting forever, while Ed Crosby remained confident of his own farming prowess and effectiveness as head of the grain cooperative by working closely with banker Oscar Rhomer. Otto was in school and Wolmar was looking for a mechanic's job; both were excited in anticipation about town life in contrast to the dullness of the farm now seemingly behind them. Wolmar noted however an underlying contradiction while searching for a job. Money seemed plentiful and people felt wealthy, but he observed that many people were looking for work. (RR 236,239, 241, 247, 258)

Despite the conflict's end in November 1918, war-shattered Europe continued importing foodstuffs but only postponing the inevitable downturn. Farmers were convinced prices would not slump. When wheat lost its government support in May 1920, the straw broke the camel's back. Within five months after government removal of guarantees for wheat, agricultural prices across the board fell one third by November 1920.²¹ The USDA's Bureau of Agricultural Economics calculated the average farm operator's net income dropped 47% between 1920 and 1921, sending shudders through a dangerously overextended farm economy.²² Corey's Mantz Trilogy was pin-point accurate when the local economy—both for farmers of Moss County and town folks in Elm—began to crater and sucked them deeper toward total financial collapse.

The first tell-tale signs surfaced when Sorrel Jensen stopped by Bessie Mantz's place in town to make his payment on the

²¹Saloutos and Hicks, *Agricultural Discontent*, pp. 92-103.

²²Figures extracted from Benedict, *Farm Policies of the United States*, see table p. 231, fn 78.

mortgage note. Nervously he mentioned falling prices and tough times, but Bessie regarded such agricultural problems as no longer her concern. Yet it was apparent that the rural town of Elm felt what ailed the surrounding countryside. The auto shop where Wolmar worked as a mechanic fired one of its workers, while Andrew and his wife showed up at the doorstep from Des Moines where he had just lost his job. (RR 268-75) By the following year in 1922, the once confident real estate agent, turning to alcohol, reflected remorsefully: "A year ago . . . I had equity in land worth a million. Today that land ain't worth the manure on a mule's foot." (RR 288)

While the Mantz family members concerned themselves with finding and keeping employment in town, the worsening countryside situation forced financially strapped farmers into bootlegging alcohol to make ends meet. Clearly now worried, Ed Crosby reverted toward his earlier sense of radicalism and the need for farmers to organize. Intriguingly Corey put notions and words into Crosby who talked up the idea of farmers withholding commodities to force up prices—clearly an anticipation of Milo Reno's Iowa Farm Holiday Association in the early 1930s.²³ Ironically Crosby was accused of being a socialist for such solutions. (RR 396-98)

The Road Returns closed symbolically in 1923 with a series of psychological and economic jolts. Wolmar lost his mechanic's job and was turned down by the bank for a loan to open his own garage. Bessie was told by the bank that her house in town, like everything else in Elm, had lost three-quarters of its original value. Sorrel Jensen told Bessie that he could no longer make the note payments. She would have to take back her farm. Shortly afterwards Jensen committed suicide by hanging himself in the barn. (RR402, 405, 428, 437). Bessie was devastated because she had planned to use the money from the sale of the farm to send Otto to college. In retrospect, the Mantzes would have been better off not to have sold the farm, and

²³For discussion of Reno who had earlier been state president of the Farmers' Union during 1921-30, see Ross, *Iowa Agriculture*, pp. 165-7.

instead worked off the remainder of the mortgage. Without excessive debt, they could have hunkered down during the 1920s, lived well on the farm, although not making much money but at least surviving. It is obvious that Corey used the trilogy here to emphasize why farmers should have stayed close to what they knew best: farming without excessive debt. But World War I had undermined that trait.²⁴

The final volume in Corey's trilogy, *County Seat*, fulfilled its title descriptively as the Mantzes struggled in town to achieve elusive success. Elm was a place trying to make something of itself. The effort fell short with appearances that were hollow and without substance. Elm's backdrop was a distressed agricultural countryside that was fated not to enjoy any repeat of the glory days of 1914-20. Corey structured *County Seat* around lives of its inhabitants, but the rural countryside was never far away, often raising its depressed head as a reminder that times were tough within a short distance from the town's edge as well as throughout the farm belt.

Economic adversity became a central theme in this volume, pitting people against one another, especially when changes occurred that left them seemingly no longer in control of their fate. The Ku Klux Klan resumed public prominence during the 1920s and was purposefully used by Corey to emphasize economic change as an agent of displacement and frustration. The local Rollins Creamery in Elm faced stiff competition from larger and more efficient processors. Its owner's resentment surfaced by blaming outsiders and Jews, fueling attraction for the Klan's simplistic solutions. Ultimately the Creamery was acquired by a larger company, and the older employees were fired.²⁵

²⁴A classic analysis of the war's impact, speculation, and the collapse in the early 1920s, see Henry C. Wallace, *Our Debt and Duty to the Farmer* (New York: Century, 1925) Reprinted in *American Farmers and the Rise of Agribusiness* (New York: Arno Press, 1975), esp. Chapters 3-5.

²⁵The Klan is interpreted as part of an "agrarian counterattack" and reflective of rural resistance toward change during the radical environment of the Nonpartisan League and the Farmers' Union, according to Edward L. and Frederick H. Schapsmeier, *Henry A. Wallace of Iowa: The Agrarian Years, 1910-1940* (Ames: Iowa State

Although Elm's economy recovered somewhat by the mid-1920s, smaller outlying crossroads towns that once serviced local farmers were withering away. Infrastructural decline of these villages resulted from expanding use of autos and the good roads movement common in Iowa and other states during the 1920s. (CS 39, 66-71, 96) Acquiring heavy debt, Wolmar expanded his garage and filling station business, which serviced the increasing volume of farmers' cars and trucks coming to town. Corey used Wolmar's business as an example of greater traffic by farmers driving into Elm rather than going to nearby small country villages that were already dying. Gilbert Fite confirms the nation-wide popularity of farm trucks during the 1920s when their numbers rose from 139,169 to 900,385. Even more dramatic by 1930 was that 90 percent of Iowa farmers drove to town in motorized vehicles.²⁶ Ironically hard-surfacing of roads as an improvement led to a doubling of the farm land tax in Iowa during the 1920s.²⁷

Despite tough times, Otto managed to attend college and graduated in 1927 when he obtained a job in Chicago. But before leaving town, he visited the Mantz farm, noticing its poor condition. He listened to its dejected renter who complained: ". . . ain't much use workin' anyhow, 'cause by the time a fella pays his rent and the interest on the loans he's had to get and this and that and something or other, there ain't nothin' left." (CS 231-2) Corey summed up accurately the treadmill situation of farmers by the mid-1920s. Whether renters or owner-operators, they were locked in place with heavy mortgages, high taxes on depressed properties, and low commodity prices. Earle Ross defined the situation specifically

University Press, 1968), pp. 51-2.

²⁶Gilbert C. Fite, *George N. Peek and the Fight for Farm Parity* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1954), Reprinted in 1990 with foreword by Paul Simon, p. 120.

²⁷This issue of roads with the tax burden on farmers drew the concern of Henry C. Wallace. See his *Debt and Duty to the Farmer*, pp. 173-85. A survey in 1923 by *Wallaces' Farmer* showed that Iowa farmers were demanding ". . . that earning power of farm land rather than reputed selling price be made the basis of valuation of farm property for purposes of taxation." Yet the same survey showed only modest support for a state income tax. See "Farm Taxation and Local Government" in Taylor, *Story of Agricultural Economics in the United States, 1840-1932*, p. 999.

with regard to renters: "The price collapse made the rental charge in many cases greater than the cash return, and many renters with visions of ultimate proprietorship lost their entire investment and were reduced to the status of hired laborers."²⁸ The recovery of agricultural prices during the mid-to-late 1920s was anemic and never approached earlier war-time highs. At the end of the decade and just before the Crash of 1929, the index of agricultural prices in Iowa was 33% lower than in 1919.²⁹

Iowa farmers were concerned about the need for agricultural relief in the 1920s; yet their innate sense of political conservatism minimized support for the Nonpartisan League, Farmer-Labor movement and politicians such as Senator Smith W. Brookhart.³⁰ The Capper-Volstead Act of 1922 exempted agricultural cooperatives from anti-trust proceedings, thus sanctioning marketing associations, which were solutions worth trying, despite lack of support from the USDA. Cooperative marketing associations were not always well managed and competed against one another. Farmers did not see sufficient reward for the cost of membership or buying shares of stock in these enterprises. By the mid-1920s, lack of results controlling production and getting better prices discouraged potential farmer membership with the overall percentage of participants declining by 1929.³¹

Aside from emphasis on cooperative market as a potential solution, Corey ignored for the most part such considerations as George Peek's idea of parity and the ill-fated McNary-Haugen Bills of 1924-1928. Peek's proposal attracted considerable attention in Iowa by the mid-1920s, by which the federal government would have supported higher commodity prices

²⁸Ross, *Iowa Agriculture*, p. 154.

²⁹Percentage figure extracted from data in Ross, *Iowa Agriculture*, p. 160.

³⁰Ross, *Iowa Agriculture*, p. 159. For views of Smith W. Brookhart as a "cowhide radical" and advocate of cooperatives controlling production, credit and marketing, see James H. Shideler, *Farm Crisis: 1919-1923* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957), 222-23, 235; Leland L. Sage, *A History of Iowa* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1974), pp. 255-57, 264-68.

³¹Danbom, *Resisted Revolution*, pp. 130-31; Shideler, *Farm Crisis*, p. 249 passim.

and restored farmers' purchasing power by dumping American surpluses in overseas markets. In 1925, the Iowa Bankers' Association became a strong advocate of parity.³² But high American tariffs on European goods invited retaliation against American farm commodities and contributed to low prices. Europe's return to agricultural self-sufficiency in the 1920s dealt a major blow to American farmers. Donald Blaisdell noted the value of American agricultural exports constituting 13.4 percent of gross farm income in 1910, but down to a mere 7 percent or approximately one half by 1931.³³

Writing the Trilogy in the context of the 1930s, Corey was probably unaware of changes in dietary consumption away from heavy staple farm products. Between 1920 and 1925, the ratio of wheat exports as a component of net farm output fell from over 50 percent to about 19 percent.³⁴ Corey did perceive the declining role of traditional draft horses for farm tasks and the growing adoption of tractors as witnessed by Wolmar's fascination with anything mechanical. When many farmers got rid of unessential horses during the 1920s, pastures normally reserved for them were put into production, further contributing to excess production and weaker commodity prices. Nationwide the number of tractors adopted by farmers increased from 246,083 to 920,021 during 1920-30, although it is questionable if they were always used efficiently. Iowa's 60,000 number of tractors ranked second in the nation by 1929.³⁵ Corey saw a significant part of the agricultural dilemma as self-inflicted by over-production, over-expansion of farm land, greater outlays for equipment and consumer items, and finally—perhaps most

³²A standard source on this aspect remains Fite, *George N. Peek and the Fight for Farm Parity*. On the activities of the Iowa Bankers Association, see pp. 144-5. See also Sage, *History of Iowa*, pp. 261-3, and 268.

³³Donald C. Blaisdell, *Government and Agriculture: The Growth of Federal Farm Aid* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1940), p. 16. Blaisdell was an assistant to M. L. Wilson, Under Secretary of Agriculture in the USDA during the 1930s.

³⁴See Harold Barger and Hans H. Landsberg, *American Agriculture, 1899-1939: A Study of Output, Employment and Productivity* (New York: National Bureau of Economic Research, 1942), pp. 51-55, esp. Table 10, Wheat: Ratio of Exports to Net Output, 1897-1938, p. 53.

³⁵Danbom, *Resisted Revolution*, pp. 133-4; Ross, *Iowa Agriculture*, p. 154.

importantly in his thinking—the massive accumulation of debt from earlier prosperity that should have been worked off promptly in order to ride out the “down and lean” cycle years.

Corey questioned the effectiveness of the Farm Bureau as a spokesman for agrarian interests and instead saw the solution through cooperative marketing and programs of the Iowa Farmers’ Union.³⁶ In a revealing exchange between Otto and the Farm Bureau county agent, questions were raised about the future of Iowa agriculture. Otto, having recently lost his job in Chicago after the Wall Street Crash of 1929, prepared to take over the family farm and return to his real roots. He inquired about cooperative marketing and the Iowa Farmers’ Union. The county agent clearly did not want to talk about those alternate approaches, saying that the Farm Bureau had tried what was possible and concluded: “The only solution is mechanization and that means combining small units to cut labor costs. It means making farming into a big industry like automobile manufacturing.” When Otto responded that it would be death of small family farmers and their renters, the county agent ended the conversation by saying “Oh, they’ll find work somewhere else.”³⁷ (CS 366)

Corey’s view of farming closed the trilogy on a slightly more optimistic note with Otto’s observations in 1938. The New Deal saved some farmers in the 1930s, but the future remained uncertain. Speaking through Otto and his wife, Corey alluded to the single most important reason for writing the Trilogy: “I guess we were pretty frank in telling you about the lives of our families, ourselves and the community, but we both think that someone should tell a story of the Middle West so thoroughly

³⁶The rise of the Farm Bureau in Iowa and its philosophical differences with the more activist groups such as Farmers’ Union, are described in Benedict, *Farm Policies of the United States*, pp. 190-1; Ross, *Iowa Agriculture*, Chapter 10; Saloutos and Hicks, *Agricultural Discontent*, Chapters 8 and 9. Reflecting economic class differences, the Farmers’ Union saw the county agent and the Farm Bureau as tools of wealthy “gentlemen farmers”. See esp. p. 231.

³⁷Corey returned to this theme of fictional critique of mechanization and “combinations” with *Acres of Antaeus* (New York: Henry Holt, 1946), in which he extolled the virtues of traditional American family farms in their struggle against corporate agriculture.

that readers in the rest of the country could feel that they knew how we lived and felt even if they couldn't come and see for themselves." (CS 418) A half century later here in the 1990s, Corey's Trilogy ranks as a classic whose depiction of midwestern farming during 1910-1930 has retained its force of clarity, honesty, admission, and sadness of what was and what could have been better times and circumstances for farmers like the Mantz family.