

AN UNWORKED FIELD IN MISSISSIPPI VALLEY HISTORY¹

The Mississippi Valley occupies a place of transcendent importance in the history of the American nation, but until a few years ago its significance was not recognized by historians. Only occasionally did students catch a glimpse into that great imperial domain and the treatment they accorded it in their writings served only to emphasize their provincialism. Then came Parkman, Winsor, McMaster, and Roosevelt who discovered the Mississippi Valley as a field of research and in their writings accorded this region a place of fundamental importance in the history of the nation. The old tradition of studying and writing American history from the eastern, or more strictly New England, point of view was discarded by these writers. The West was henceforth to receive more of its proportionate share in the study of our national development.

It was Frederick J. Turner, however, who sounded the true keynote to the study of our national history. In his paper on *The Significance of the Frontier in American History*, read before the American Historical Association in 1893, Mr. Turner showed that the westward movement is the key to the study of American development; that the great problems of the nation have grown out of the coloni-

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zation of the West; that the West has had a profound influence on our whole national life; and that to study the West is to study the really American part of our history. Under the direction of this original and critical scholar, a new school in economic interpretation has been founded which is destined to revolutionize the study and writing of American history.

This new school of American historians has opened up many important problems in the history of the Mississippi Valley. Some of these problems have already received considerable attention; others have been given only superficial consideration or else been completely ignored and neglected. Among the latter the economic history of agriculture in the Mississippi Valley may be mentioned as a problem which presents an inviting field for study and research.

This subject includes much more than a mere account of progress in the technique of agriculture. It includes a consideration of all the facts, forces, and conditions which have entered into the development of agriculture from the beginning of the first settlements to the present time. Thus considered, it includes a study of physiographic conditions — topography, soil, climate, rainfall, and drainage systems; Indian economy; the migration of settlers; the occupation of woodland and prairie country; the disposal of the public lands; systems of land tenure and tenancy; and the types of farming developed in each new area reached in the course of westward migration. It includes further a study of the westward movement of crop and live stock areas; the introduction and popularization of labor saving machinery; the development of specialized farming; the transportation of farm products; the growth of markets; and the establishment of agencies for the promotion of scientific knowledge relating to agriculture. And finally, it

includes a study of the relation of agriculture to other industries — flour milling, meat packing, and transportation; the problems engaging the attention of the rural population in the different periods — transportation, markets, currency, banking, and taxation; the relation of the farmer to politics and to legislation; the relation of the State to agriculture; and the influence of agriculture on our whole national life. Thus interpreted, the economic history of agriculture is closely interwoven with other phases of Mississippi Valley history. It is a constituent part of the history of the entire people. To define this subject in this way is, therefore, to direct attention not to a separate or distinct phase of American history but to emphasize a new point of view in the study of our national development.

These considerations show the broad scope of the economic history of agriculture in the Mississippi Valley as a field of research. What then are some of the more specific problems inviting the attention of the historian? The limits of this paper will permit but a brief statement of these problems.

The History of the Public Lands. — The first question in the agricultural history of any country or region is the relation of the farmer to the land. Fifty years ago there was little or no occasion for a careful consideration of this question. There was a superabundance of virgin land which could be had for nothing and Congress was not much concerned over the methods of its disposal. The rapid transference of this vast heritage from public to private ownership constitutes an important chapter in American history. It has been involved with other public questions and it has been an important issue in American politics. The land question has now entered upon a new and com-

plex phase. The speculative spirit which has been fostered by a liberal land policy seems to have become an ingrained American characteristic. It has contributed largely to an inflation of land values and to the present high rate of tenancy. In undertaking a study of the land question under both public and private ownership it should be remembered that the rapid disposal of the public lands is closely linked with the rapid growth of population, the change from extensive to intensive farming and the increased cost of living.

The History of Leading Agricultural Industries.— Among these studies the grain growing, live stock, and cotton industries may be mentioned as of special interest and significance. Such studies should include a consideration of soil and climate, land tenure and tenancy, labor, the use of improved farm machinery, transportation, markets, and prices. The westward movement of production should be studied in relation to the westward movement of population and the accessibility of markets. The influence of agricultural prices on national politics and finance should receive careful study. The relation of these industries to other related industries such as flour milling, meat packing, and textile manufacturing establishments should also be considered.

Similar studies should be made of the dairy, tobacco, poultry, and fruit growing industries. The history of the range is a subject of unusual interest and importance in the history of the Mississippi Valley. It still remains, however, a "no man's land" of the historian who seems to have been content to leave this subject to the novelist, the essayist, and the poet. This is shown by the fact that when the editors of *The Chronicles of America* planned for a volume on this subject, they were compelled to ask a novel-

ist to prepare it. The time has come for a critical study of the range and its relation to our whole national development. Among the newer agricultural industries, the sugar beet industry may also be mentioned. These studies suggest other agricultural industries which await the labors of the historian.

The History of Agriculture in the Various States.—Such studies should include a consideration of economic geography, Indian agriculture, land policies, early settlements, relations with the Indians, pioneer farming, early trade routes, use of improved machinery, development of specialized farming, transportation, and markets. Studies of this kind should include, further, a consideration of the systems of land tenure and tenancy, size of farms, land values and rentals, and the laws governing the inheritance of farm property. Attention should also be given to the sources of immigration, the types of farmers, the methods of farming, and the social phases of farm life, including education, religion, amusements, and entertainments. Currency and banking facilities, rural credit, rates of interest, farmers' organizations, and the relation of the farming population to national politics and legislation are likewise among the important subjects to be considered. Finally, the economic history of agriculture in any given State should include an historical and comparative study of the problems confronting the agricultural class. Similar studies may, indeed, be profitably made of larger geographic areas or regions like the Middle West.

The History of the Transportation and Marketing of Agricultural Products.—Among studies of this kind the history of the grain trade may be mentioned as worthy of primary consideration. Grain has always been the leading item entering into the internal commerce of the country.

As an article of export it attained first place after the Civil War, thus superseding cotton which formerly constituted the leading export product. This subject should include a study of the geographic distribution of grain production in the United States; the change in the areas of surplus production; the various routes — river, lake, canal, and rail — by which grain has been carried to market; the evolution of the leading primary grain markets; the transportation lines connecting the primary grain markets with the consuming States of the East and South; the development of the Atlantic and Gulf ports as local distributing and export centers for western grain and flour; and ocean steamship lines connecting these ports with the markets of Europe, South America, and the Far East. Attention should also be given to market conditions, price quotations and fluctuations, freight rates, terminal facilities, and charges for the handling of grain. Commercial agencies such as boards of trade and produce exchanges, their functions and the part they have played in the development of the grain trade, should be considered.

The history of the grain trade is the history of a competitive struggle between commercial centers for the surplus grain and flour of the Middle West destined for the consuming States of the East and the South and for the countries of western Europe. It is also the history of a competitive struggle between the water and rail routes and in turn between the rail routes themselves for this traffic. The inadequacy of our present transportation system for the handling of this traffic, combined with excessively high freight rates, has brought the entire Middle West into active support of the Great Lakes-St. Lawrence waterway project which is opposed by the commercial interests of Buffalo and New York City. These interests foresee in the construction of that route and the consequent develop-

ment of Chicago and Duluth as seaports, the destruction of a monopoly of the western grain traffic which they have held since the construction of the Erie Canal. This serves to illustrate the fact that the history of the grain trade of the United States, viewed in one way, is the history of the development of water, lake, canal, rail, and ocean transportation. To study the grain trade, therefore, is to study one of the fundamental problems in the history of the nation during the last one hundred years.

Similar studies should be made of the history of the provision trade — live stock and animal products; the history of the cotton trade; the history of the tobacco trade; and the history of the fruit trade. These subjects all occupy a place of fundamental importance in the history of the Mississippi Valley. They should, therefore, be studied by the historian. Moreover, such studies would furnish the necessary historical background for the consideration of present problems in the transportation and marketing of farm products which are engaging the attention of the economist and the lawmaker.

The History of Farmers' Organizations. — Studies of this kind may be divided into two groups: first, the organizations that seek to promote some special end or industry, among which may be mentioned the farmers' elevator companies, the meat producers' associations, the wool growers' association, and the coöperative creamery associations; and, second, those organizations that seek to unite the farmers as a class, as for example the Grange, the Farmers' Alliance, and the American Farm Bureau Federation. In this group are included also political organizations such as the Greenback and Populist parties, which were principally western and to a large extent agricultural in origin. Such a study should include an investigation in-

to the causes of agrarian discontent; the origin, formation, and growth of the organization; its functions and activities — political, economic, social, and educational; and its achievements and failures. The influence of the organization on State and national politics should be given due weight. Studies of this kind should receive considerable attention in view of the recent active interest which has been developed in the various forms of farmers' organizations — local, State, and national. They will contribute very materially to a proper understanding of the farmers' coöperative movement in this country and they will help to point the way to more successful and fruitful coöperation in the future.

The History of Agricultural Education. — This subject offers a variety of problems for study and investigation. Mention should be made especially of agricultural societies and fairs, the agricultural press, farmers' organizations, the United States Department of Agriculture, the various State departments of agriculture, and the agricultural colleges and experiment stations, including rural extension work, the introduction of agriculture into the high schools, and the recent development of the county agent work. These agencies have all been potent factors in the promotion of scientific knowledge relating to agriculture. They have contributed in no small measure to the rapid transformation of American agriculture from a primitive, pioneer, largely self-sufficing type of agriculture into a modern business organized on a scientific, capitalistic, commercial basis. We are still without a satisfactory treatment of any of these agencies, the importance of which is now coming to be recognized as the nation is entering upon the period of intensive development. These subjects, therefore, await the attention of the historian.

The Biographies of Leading Men Who Have Contributed to the Advancement of Agriculture. — Our agricultural history is not devoid of the personal element. Reference need only be made to George Washington whose extensive farming interests and activities and numerous writings on the subject of agriculture are sufficient to give him a prominent place in American history as one of the foremost agriculturists of his time. Consider also the place of Eli Whitney and his invention of the cotton gin in the history of the cotton industry and of Cyrus Hall McCormick and his invention of the reaper in the history of the wheat growing industry; of J. B. Turner and Justin H. Morrill in the movement for the establishment of colleges of agriculture and mechanic arts; of Oliver Hudson Kelly in the organization of the Grange; of James B. Weaver in the organization and history of the Greenback and Populist parties; of Seaman Knapp in the popularization of scientific farming in the southern States; of James Wilson in the extension and development of the activities of the United States Department of Agriculture; and of "Uncle Henry" Wallace in the promotion of scientific knowledge relating to agriculture. These names suggest at once a history of scientists, inventors, journalists, public men, and practical farmers who have rendered conspicuous service in the advancement of agriculture and who therefore deserve as prominent places in American history as our soldiers and our statesmen. The economic history of agriculture is therefore rich in the personal element.

The economic history of agriculture in the Mississippi Valley, as thus outlined, presents an inviting field for study and investigation. Although historians have not given this phase of our national life the attention and the emphasis which it deserves, it is encouraging to note an awakening interest in this direction. In evidence of this fact mention

should first be made of the leading State historical societies of the Mississippi Valley. These societies are doing an important work in the collection and classification of the historical sources, many of which have a direct bearing on agricultural history. Several societies have made provision for researches in this field and a number of papers have been published; while two State agricultural histories are now in course of preparation. The departments of history and economics in some of the colleges and universities of the country have begun to direct graduate students to this field, as shown by the annually published lists of masters' and doctors' dissertations; and some good monographs have been published. Some of the departments of history are now offering courses in agricultural history. The Department of Economics and Sociology of the Carnegie Institution at Washington has promised a comprehensive history of American agriculture which is to be published in the near future.

Mention should also be made of the recently formed Agricultural History Society which has become affiliated with the American Historical Association. This society has become an active agency for the promotion of scientific work in the economic history of agriculture, as shown by the topics listed on the programs of the society and the volume of papers which has just been published by the American Historical Association. Finally, reference should be made to the Mississippi Valley Historical Association which is an important agency for the encouragement of productive work in agricultural history.

These activities, however, represent only the pioneer undertakings which will need to be supplemented by numerous studies if the economic history of agriculture in the Mississippi Valley is to be properly recorded.

With the foregoing considerations in mind the reasons

for giving special attention to this hitherto neglected phase of American history may be briefly stated.

Agriculture as the Leading Occupation. — Viewed in one way, the history of the United States from the beginning has been in very large measure the story of rural communities advancing westward by the conquest of the soil and developing from a state of primitive self-sufficiency into a capitalistic and highly complex agricultural organization. Moreover, the great majority of the American people have always dwelt in rural communities. The United States census of 1910 showed that 54.2 per cent of the entire population was still classed as rural, the term rural population being interpreted to include towns having fewer than 2500 inhabitants, since such towns are directly dependent on the surrounding farming population. An analysis of the distribution of population over ten years of age and engaged in gainful occupations shows that 33.2 per cent of such persons were engaged in the occupation of agriculture, forestry, and animal husbandry — a larger percentage than was engaged in any other occupation. The United States census of 1920 is the first to show that the greater portion of the population no longer lives in rural communities. According to this report 48.6 per cent of the population is classified as rural. It is also the first census to show that agriculture can no longer lay claim to the largest percentage of persons over ten years of age engaged in gainful occupations. That is to say, while 26.3 per cent of those so employed were engaged in agriculture, forestry, and animal husbandry, 30.8 per cent were engaged in manufacturing and mechanical industries. These facts show that agriculture has until the last few years played a larger part in the life of the American people than any other occupation, industry, or profession, and that this alone is sufficient to

give it a place of predominant importance in the study of our national development.

Relation of the Economic History of Agriculture to the Political and Constitutional History of the United States.—National politics and legislation have to a large extent been concerned with the problems that have been evolved by a rapidly expanding agricultural empire. Among these problems may be mentioned territorial acquisitions, Indian wars and treaties, the public lands, internal improvements—roads, canals, and railroads—the extension of cotton and slavery, banking, currency, and foreign affairs. A study of agricultural history shows, for example, that it was the demand of the southwestern farmers for the free and unrestricted use of the Mississippi River as an outlet for the surplus products and the use of New Orleans as an export trade center that led directly to the acquisition of Louisiana; that it was the interference with our agricultural export trade during the Napoleonic wars that constituted one of the principal causes of the Second War of Independence; that it was the grain and wool producing States, in support of the home market argument, that enabled the protectionist forces under the leadership of Henry Clay to enact the high tariff of 1824; and that it was the contest between two opposing systems of agriculture—the one aristocratic, with large plantations, slave labor, and cotton, the other democratic with small holdings, free labor, and diversified farming—for the control of the West and for supremacy in the national government that dominated national politics and legislation for nearly a generation and finally led to the Civil War. While it is generally conceded that cotton was the economic weapon with which the South hoped to secure British recognition of the Confederacy, it is no less significant that England's imperative need of north-

ern wheat, due to the failure of the home and continental supplies, operated effectively to keep the British government officially neutral during the continuance of the struggle. Nor should we omit reference to the homestead law, enacted in 1862, the law providing for the establishment of colleges of agriculture and mechanic arts, the law creating the United States Department of Agriculture, and the law providing for a huge grant of land to aid in the construction of the Union Pacific Railroad. These laws represented a great triumph of the agricultural West in its demand for those agencies which were designed to promote the interests of the farming class.

The revolution in agriculture during the latter half of the nineteenth century gave rise to many problems which became the subject of national politics and legislation. New parties were formed which gave expression to agrarian demands. The Greenback and Populist parties became the rallying ground for the more discontented and radical farmers who believed that needed legislation could be secured only by inaugurating a revolt against the major parties and organizing new parties dedicated to the cause of the farmer and the laboring man; while the majority of the farmers realized that their demands could be more effectively presented and secured through the major parties. The latter group, represented in the seventies by the Grangers and in our time by the Non-Partisan League and the American Farm Bureau Federation, remained in the old parties, nominated and elected candidates pledged to secure agrarian reforms, and incorporated their demands in the major party platforms, with the result that they contributed in no slight degree to the enactment of legislation designed to promote the interests of the farmer. Among these measures may be mentioned the enactment in 1887 of the Hatch Act providing for the establishment of

agricultural experiment stations, and in 1888 of the law advancing the United States Department of Agriculture to the rank of a cabinet office; the passage of the Interstate Commerce Act in 1887, the Sherman Anti-Trust Act in 1890, and the Federal Reserve Act in 1913; and the more recent agricultural legislation which has been enacted largely through the influence of the American Farm Bureau Federation, not to mention the formation of the agricultural bloc in Congress and the calling of the agricultural conference in Washington. These illustrations are sufficient to emphasize the fact that a proper interpretation of politics and legislation is dependent in no small measure on the study of agricultural history.

The Economic History of Agriculture as a Necessary Background for the Development of a Sound and Far-sighted Rural Economy.—Economic history bears about the same relation to economic science that political history bears to political science. The value of political history to the political scientist is so obvious as to require no defense. History is the school of experience in which political theories are tried out and tested; and so it becomes the first duty of the student of government to inform himself concerning the nature and workings of political experiments in the past in order that he may draw upon these experiments in the formulation of theories, the soundness of which must in turn be tested in the school of experience. "I have but one lamp by which my feet are guided", said Patrick Henry, "and that is the lamp of experience". To which he added: "I know no way of judging the future but by the past". The value of the historical approach to the study of present day problems has recently been further emphasized by James Harvey Robinson thus: "Certain generally accepted historical facts, if permitted to play

a constant part in our thought, would automatically eliminate a very considerable portion of the gross stupidity and blindness which characterize our present thought and conduct in public affairs and would contribute greatly to the remaking and expansion of the mind."

This argument applies to the economist with quite as much force as it does to the political scientist. That is to say, the economist needs to be familiar with the economic life of man in the past in order to understand and appreciate the organic nature of society. He needs to be historically minded if he would deal efficiently with the problems of the present. It goes without saying that too many economists are not properly trained in the historical method which constitutes the only safe and sane approach to the solution of present day problems. Too many economists have been content to work in the realm of abstract theories without giving adequate attention to the teachings of history. As a consequence economic theories have been advanced which ignored the lessons of experience; whereas, if these lessons had been understood and appraised at their proper value, proposed plans and theories for the solution of economic and social problems would have been inaugurated along more sane and constructive lines. The study of history is the only route by which this can be accomplished, though it is the sort of preparation which is often sacrificed by students who are interested in the solution of present day problems.

The great problems of rural communities are human rather than merely materialistic. That is to say, they are economic, social, and political, and they can not be understood without due attention being given to their historical evolution. Questions of land tenure and tenancy, markets — including the complex problems of distribution and exchange — capitalistic agriculture, the rise of land values,

rural credits, farmers' organizations with their economic, political, educational, and social functions, the rural school, the rural church, and good roads are only a few of the vital problems which should be considered from an historical and comparative, as well as from a purely technical, point of view. These problems will henceforth demand a superior type of statesmanship, for we are to-day passing rapidly through a great transition period of our history. We have emerged from the period of colonization, of exploitation, of extensive development; and we have now entered upon a period of intensive development. There is a greater need than ever for calling upon the wisdom and experience of the past in the working out of a sound and farsighted system of rural economy. We are in need of a scientific treatment of the economic history of agriculture in this country to help supply this need.

The Economic History of Agriculture as Part of a Well Balanced History of the Nation.—Our history may, for convenience, be studied under the following heads according to phases of social life treated: (a) political, (b) constitutional, (c) military, (d) economic, (e) religious, (f) domestic, (g) history of morals, (h) history of intellectual life, and (i) history of the fine arts. Economic history is further divisible into: (a) the history of population and immigration, (b) the history of agriculture, (c) the history of manufacturing, (d) the history of mining, (e) the history of transportation, (f) the history of domestic and foreign commerce, (g) the history of money and banking, (h) the history of the labor movement, (i) the history of industrial organizations, (j) the history of social legislation, (k) the history of federal and State finance, and (l) the history of the tariff. We have been supplied with histories galore dealing with the political, constitutional, and

military aspects of American development; but we have scarcely as yet begun to make a scientific study of the other phases of our national life which have just been mentioned. While some attention has been given to the study and writing of economic history this phase of our history has been approached more from the industrial and economic point of view; while the agricultural point of view has received hardly any consideration whatever. Moreover, these various divisions of our history are, strictly speaking, not divisions at all but constituent parts of our nation's history. They are rather phases or points of view in the study of human society; and no phase of the study can be properly understood or interpreted except in its relation to other phases of development. It goes without saying, then, that if we are to have a well balanced history of a nation, no little attention must be given to the study of our agricultural history as well as to military and political history.

After all is said, however, it must be understood, as has already been shown, that our agricultural history is not to be viewed in the strict or narrow sense, but in the broad sense to include the whole life of the rural population, the conditions which have affected the progress of agriculture in the different periods, and the influence of agriculture on our whole national life — economic, political, constitutional, military, religious, intellectual, moral, and aesthetic. Thus defined the economic history of agriculture is a constituent part of the life of the entire people closely related with other phases of our national development. To define it in this way is to direct attention not to a separate or distinct phase of American history but to a new point of view in the study of our national development. "The marking out of such a field is only a fresh example of the division of scientific labour: it is the provisional isolation,

for the better investigation of them, of a particular group of facts and forces", in order that a true history of our national progress and development may finally be written. In this study of history the Mississippi Valley must have a prominent place.

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