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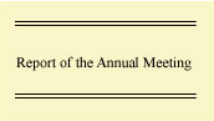

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AGRICULTURAL HISTORY AS A FIELD OF RESEARCH*

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FARMING, together with the accompanying rurality, has been the main way of life since long before the dawn of recorded history.[1] From prehistoric man's struggles with the forces of nature came the beginnings of agriculture and major contributions in the form of domesticated animals and plants. Agriculture was the main basis of the glorious epochs of the ancient world, and the same is predominantly true of the Middle Ages. Indeed, it is only since the impact of the industrial revolution that agriculture as the basic reliance of mankind has had a rival. Even in the case of the industrialized United States, it was only after the World War that the urban population came to outnumber the rural, and today the total number of the latter is still larger than at any previous period in the nation's history. The vast complex of forces and conditions of rural life constitutes a central theme of history, and yet far too often historians have done their work by blindly groping toward this theme rather than using it as a starting point.[2] Today, economic and social problems press for solution with more vehemence than ever before, and it behooves historians to supply the essential backgrounds of these current problems, many of which arise out of the rural past, if sound national and international economies are to be developed.[3]

Needless to say, there is no comprehensive volume or series covering the entire history of agriculture. The limitations of research workers and writers—notably in languages required, sheer longevity, and breadth of vision—have thwarted this objective. For general treatments, one must depend on summaries in the better economic history texts, and whenever there is need of detailed information it is necessary to turn to widely scattered articles, chapters, and monographs which, at best, reveal the subject only as a woefully incomplete and ill-fitted patchwork. Although many of these writings hold a high place in historiography, their usefulness as a contribution to the history of the basic industry is often vitiated by the fact that they have usually been written as

*Mr. Edwards's paper was delivered at a joint session of the Canadian Political Science Association and the Canadian Historical Association. A paper presented at the same session by Mr. V. C. Fowke, Visiting Professor at the University of Toronto, 1940-1, on "An Introduction to the Bibliography of Canadian Agricultural History" will appear in the November issue of the *Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science.*

[1]An approach, similar to the one presented in this paper, in terms of a specific geographical region was utilized by the author in his article, "Middle Western Agricultural History as a Field of Research" (*Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, XXIV, Dec., 1937, 315-28). For citations of similar articles, see the author's *References on Agricultural History as a Field for Research* (Washington, D.C., 1937).

[2]The author has discussed the primary sources of particular interest to historians of agriculture in his articles, "Agricultural Records: Their Nature and Value for Research" (*Agricultural History*, XIII, Jan., 1939, 1-12), and "The Need of Historical Materials for Agricultural Research" (*Agricultural History*, IX, Jan., 1935, 3-11).

[3]This question of the relations of the social scientists to their current environments is discussed in Robert S. Lynd, *Knowledge for What?: The Place of Social Science in American Culture* (Princeton, N.J., 1939) and the replies which this work provoked. For a broader approach, see A. R. M. Lower, "The Social Sciences in the Post-War World" (*Canadian Historical Review*, XXII, March, 1941, 1-13).

political, social, or diplomatic history. In other words, agriculture and rurality have been reached from the outside rather than used as the starting point.

Agricultural history in terms of national, state, and local administrative units has certain advantages. Political boundaries do not always correspond with natural geographical divisions, but agricultural production definitely tends to follow the latter. The data gathered by governments for administrative purposes are by political units, however, and the calls for agricultural history are in many cases in terms of those units.

Of all countries, England alone has acceptable histories of its agriculture, and even these are subject to constant revision because of the length of time and the diversity of geographical features involved. These same encumbering factors have thus far prevented the preparation of a suitable agricultural history of the United States, and many monographic studies of regions and periods involved will probably be necessary before a competent summary can be prepared. Of the forty-eight states only Colorado, New Jersey, New York, and Wisconsin have modern agricultural histories, and even these are subject to considerable qualification.

The treatment of local history as agricultural history deserves more emphasis than it has received. Unless or until a community has become industrialized, its history has been predominantly agricultural. The histories of small but distinct units present opportunities to exploit all the sources pertaining thereto, and a collection of such histories emphasizing agriculture would afford a substantial basis for the generalizations which are essential to the larger canvasses. The experimentation by Professors Theodore C. Blegen and Edgar B. Wesley of the University of Minnesota on ways and means of preparing scientific local histories holds much promise for the improvement of local and therefore of agricultural history.[4] The techniques developed and utilized by Dr. Joseph Schafer in his Wisconsin Domesday Book studies also have pertinence in this connection.[5] What is needed, as a basis for generalizations and for use with reference to local problems, is a series of historical Middletowns.[6] With these studies, the cultural patterns for larger regions may be projected.[7]

The recently organized American Association for State and Local History is also interested in the improvement of the quality of local histories, and it has proposed a series of handbooks to assist in the

[4]A concrete product of this experimentation is Edgar Bruce Wesley, *Owatonna: The Social Development of a Minnesota Community* (Minneapolis, 1938).

[5]For the last statement by Joseph Schafer concerning this subject, see his "The Wisconsin Domesday Book: A Method of Research for Agricultural Historians" (*Agricultural History*, XIV, Jan., 1940, 23-32).

[6]The allusion is to Robert S. Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd, *Middletown: A Study in Contemporary American Culture* (New York, 1929), and *Middletown in Transition: A Study in Cultural Conflicts* (New York, 1937).

The following are examples of community studies that are suggestive in their approaches: John F. Embree, *Suye Mura: A Japanese Village* (Chicago, 1939); Horace Miner, *St. Denis: A French-Canadian Parish* (Chicago, 1939); and Robert Redfield, *Tepoztlan, a Mexican Village* (Chicago, 1930). See also S. Warren Hall, III, *Tangier Island: A Study of an Isolated Group* (Philadelphia, 1939).

[7]For discussions of this subject, see Paul H. Johnstone, "Old Ideals versus New Ideas in Farm Life" (U.S. Department of Agriculture, *Yearbook*, 1940, 111-70); M. L. Wilson, "Cultural Patterns in Agricultural History" (*Agricultural History*, XII, Jan., 1938, 3-10).

promotion of this end. Possibly from one or the other of these focal points of interest in local history there will ultimately come a handbook on how to write the history of one's own community. Such a guide would be of great value to schools, boys' and girls' clubs, women's discussion groups, and local farm organizations. This need is felt especially in the United States where much of the responsibility for planning and administering agricultural programmes rests with county and local committees.[8] The union of this democratic process of administration with a democratic method of acquiring knowledge of the actual historical backgrounds of the communities involved would be an interesting and perhaps significant experiment.[9]

In studying the agricultural history of any country, consideration must be given to two primal factors—the people and the geographic moulds in which they lived. The physiography, climate, and soils of a region provide both limitations and advantages for those who undertake to farm there. An intelligent comprehension of many phases of agricultural history and especially the history of crop production, including the shifts and adjustments, is possible only if one considers the geographic factors. In this respect, the historian is, of course, largely dependent on the monographic literature of the geographers and the soil, climatic, and types-of-farming bulletins of the various departments of agriculture and experiment stations.

The history of the colonization and settlement of the physiographic provinces of the various countries of the world is a basic phase of agricultural history. For most countries, the story has been told many times and in many ways, and it is emphatically suggested that further work should be concentrated, in so far as the sources permit, on realities. In other words, historians should continue to seek what Frederick Jackson Turner termed "the vital forces" that called institutions into life and shaped them to meet changing conditions. The social and economic status of the settlers and of the succeeding generations of newcomers was a factor in the development of their farmsteads and communities. So also were the settlers' preconceived ideas of farming. Although they may have attempted to follow the agricultural practices familiar to them in the localities from which they came, they were compelled to respond to the actualities of their new environment.[10] The hesitation of the pioneers on the edge of certain geographical regions and the ultimate conquest of them are striking examples of this adjustment. The reasons why the different groups of settlers selected or perhaps simply found themselves on certain types of land also deserve attention. It is not without significance that certain national and subnational groups seem to have selected habitats as nearly similar to those of their native lands as they could find.

[8]This trend is discussed in Ellery A. Foster and Harold A. Vogel, "Cooperative Land Use Planning—A New Development in Democracy" (U.S. Department of Agriculture, *Yearbook*, 1940, 1138-56). See also Rensis Likert, "Democracy in Agriculture—Why and How?" (U.S. Department of Agriculture, *Yearbook*, 1940, 994-1002).

[9]For concrete illustrations of the use of historical data by laymen, see N. S. Hadley, "76 Farmers Make a Map" (U.S. Bureau of Agricultural Economics, *Land Policy Review*, III, Jan.-Feb., 1940, 15-21); and *Wadsworth, Center to City*, by the 1938 senior class of Wadsworth, Ohio, High School (Wadsworth, 1938).

[10]For an apt illustration, see James C. Malin, "The Adaptation of the Agricultural System to Sub-Humid Environment; illustrated by the activities of the Wayne Township farmers' club of Edwards County, Kansas, 1886-1893" (*Agricultural History*, X, July, 1936, 118-41).

The relation of the various immigrant elements to agriculture and rural life is an increasingly important part of agricultural history. Physical environment has been found wanting in explaining certain developments, and historians and sociologists have been seeking explanations in the cultural backgrounds of the human elements.[11] Professor Richard H. Shryock's studies of the contrasts of the agriculture of the British and Pennsylvania Germans in the American colonies have raised the question of the importance of the cultural heritage.[12] Many more studies of this sort are needed.

There is also ample opportunity for writings which emphasize the specific contributions of national elements which have migrated from their original homelands. Although there are many valuable monographs on the chief immigrant groups, specific treatments of the actual adjustments by which they became farmers in new lands and of their ultimate and distinctive contributions are still lacking. As examples of the latter, may be cited the nexus of the Swiss to the early history of the cheese industry in Wisconsin, of the Danes to co-operative creameries in Minnesota, and of the German-Russians to hard winter wheat in Kansas.

Although the outline history of the policies by which the land of the public domains has passed from the national governments to individual owners is generally available, there is still opportunity and need for clarification of the details. The policies pursued by the lesser units of government in the disposition of the lands granted to them as subsidies or otherwise are also important. The policies as outlined in statutes are not, however, the entire and probably not the most important part of the story. Probably more significant are the processes by which land ultimately came into the possession of farmers who actually turned the soil and developed farms. The activities of land companies and the extent and importance of land speculation as well as its connection with tenancy should be considered. Generally speaking, the public domain was distributed to private individuals with no restrictions on mode of use, and the result in many countries has been widespread human suffering and devastation of thousands of acres by erosion. How to reconcile private exploitation of land with protection of the public interest has become the crux of the problem of developing realistic land policies for present and future needs, and it is patent that historical studies of the land policies of the past have a distinctly pragmatic value.

At the present time, there is much discussion of the problem of farm tenancy. For the United States as a whole the percentage of tenancy is 42.1, and the number of farmers passing from the owning to the tenant class during the 1920's and early thirties caused widespread alarm in agricultural circles.[13] The related problem of farmers without farms—that is, of tenants with no farms for them—has also pressed for public attention. In many countries, the years immediately following the World War witnessed the breaking up of large estates and the

[11]See Ralph Turner, "The Cultural Setting of American Agricultural Problems" (U.S. Department of Agriculture, *Yearbook*, 1940, 1003-32).

[12]Richard H. Shryock, "British versus German Traditions in Colonial Agriculture" (*Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, XXVI, June, 1939, 36-54), "Cultural Factors in the History of the South" (*Journal of Southern History*, V, Aug., 1939, 333-46), and "The Pennsylvania Germans in American History" (*Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, LXIII, July, 1939, 261-81).

[13]U.S. Special Committee on Farm Tenancy, *Farm Tenancy: Report of the President's Committee* (Washington, 1937).

distribution of strips of land deemed suitable for farmsteads. In contrast, Russia experimented with collective farms. These passing statements serve to emphasize the problems centring in tenancy. Not the least important of these is the relationship of landholdings to political, social, and economic democracy.

Useful analyses of tenancy have been made by agricultural economists and rural sociologists, but thus far there have been very few adequate historical studies of this phase of agriculture. The nature of the available sources and the complexity of the subject may, in part, explain this relative neglect. In the case of the United States, for example, the fact that farm families received virgin and productive land free from the government a half a century or more ago and yet were unable to retain it as their own, indicates that most of the solutions thus far suggested may be merely palliatives. Discerning studies of the beginnings of tenancy and the economic and human factors accentuating its increase may indicate that it is undesirable to attempt to resuscitate individualistic farming and may justify experiments in new methods of farm economy. If solutions of this problem are worked out, limitation on the right to alienate holdings may well be included. In this connection, the need of studies on the vast differences in the economic and social status of farmers should also be emphasized. Accurate knowledge of the rural population in various periods and regions would dispel more than one popular delusion. Some farmers are entirely capable of coping with changing conditions, while others need varying degrees of aid and guidance.

The economic geographers divide countries into agricultural regions and indicate that, generally speaking, the various crops and livestock are dominant in the geographic areas best suited to produce them. In the case of Canada and the United States, the lines of the agricultural regions circumvent or overrule the international boundary. Historically, the agricultural maps have assumed their present forms because of the operation of the many forces that make up what is usually referred to as the agricultural revolution. The history of the various crops and livestock, including migration to the present centres of surplus production, is a vital part of agricultural history. The changing ways of farm management, the introduction of new and improved varieties of crops and breeds of livestock, and the efforts toward diversification also have a large place in the history of agricultural production.

In addition to land and management, the other instrumentalities of agricultural production and rural life—namely, labour and equipment—need consideration. The ways in which the inadequacies of the labour supply have been met, the indentured servant, the slave, the hired man, transient labour, etc., have hardly been mentioned, much less studied, by agricultural historians. The same statement may be made with reference to farm buildings, horse and other draft power, implements and machinery, fences, seeds, feeds, and other equipment.

The matter of financing farming operations is likewise important. Farm incomes and expenditures, banking methods, interest rates, mortgages and foreclosures, taxation, insurance in all its forms, and monetary legislation affecting rural areas are topics that have been left mainly to the economists. Possibly this phase of the subject will continue largely in their hands, but even so the historians must take cognizance of these

financial factors in much of the agricultural research that they may undertake.

Although even the public has probably been more generally aware of the mechanization that has been going on during the past century than of similar but less dramatic changes in agriculture, the history of agricultural implements and machinery has scarcely been touched by historians. The history of particular types of machines involves infinite patience in comprehending the significant improvements, and the history of mechanization necessitates the measurement of the increased efficiency that resulted from these improvements. Another phase that needs the attention of historians is the agricultural machinery industry—its history as an industry, as a business, and as a vital connecting link between industry and agriculture.

Mechanization—especially since the World War—has effected a mute but emphatic onslaught on the traditional units of farming. There is wide discussion of the family-sized farm and the desirability of instituting governmental policies that may preserve it. Conceivably detailed and discerning studies of the effects of mechanization may indicate the undesirability, economically and sociologically, of attempting to preserve these traditional units and the general layout of rural communities that are associated with them.

The marketing of agricultural products—the steps by which they were moved from the farmyard to the consumer's kitchen—has infinite ramifications. The conclusion of leading historians that the development of marketing is the central force in economic development adds emphasis to the importance of this topic. Problems incident to marketing have usually been a factor in the so-called farmer-protest movements, and the economic factors involved in the spread between what the farmer receives and the consumer pays may be the approximate common-denominator cause of these movements. The various ways in which the farmers have attempted to increase their share of the retail price and the multitudinous functions that governments have been forced to assume as a means of aiding them are significant parts of this subject.

Co-operative marketing alone deserves much more detailed treatment than it has heretofore received. In the New World, producer co-operatives have been organized largely in terms of separate commodities rather than embracing most of the economic activities of a community as is the case in Denmark and Ireland. Both consumer and producer co-operatives can make notable contributions to social and political as well as economic democracy, and comparative and chronological studies are needed if their possibilities are to be utilized intelligently.

The rural population as consumers outlines still other topics. The food raised on farms and its preparation; the migration of industries from farms to processing plants and factories; the role of the country store; and the rise of the mail-order house are among the subjects to be considered.

Transportation has been the subject of many economic and historical studies, albeit too few have emphasized the agricultural products carried. Less is known of the development of improved roads and especially of the effects of the automobile and motor truck.

While the truck has become a primary means of marketing in most surplus-producing regions, the automobile and the radio as modern modes of transportation and communication have less tangible con-

nections with the organization of rural life. At some time in their history most rural localities have had sufficient cohesiveness to justify their being referred to as communities or neighbourhoods. Sometimes the rural school was the focal point; sometimes it was the church; then again it may have been the local market centre. The advent of the automobile put the people of many communities on fast and far-moving wheels and shattered that cohesiveness. The radio, on the other hand, has assaulted intellectual rather than physical provincialism, and aside from the propaganda features, it may not be a disintegrating factor.

Here and there in the midst of the present social and economic chaos one encounters leaders groping, consciously or unconsciously, for the means of salvaging or redeveloping the social values incident to a modicum of stability—a stability that is not static but progresses in an orderly manner. Perhaps the automobile is merely a concrete manifestation of larger forces—perhaps Jacques Barzun's recent work on *Darwin, Marx, Wagner* is correct in attributing much of the present world chaos to this trio who were in themselves merely manifestations of cumulating forces.

The extension of the mobile range of the people of a community has also outmoded the traditional forms of local government and dealt a serious, if not mortal, blow to the fundamental basis of political democracy. In the United States, at least, there are evidences of the emergence of new institutions which will revitalize local government. However, the general lack of social, economic, and cultural cohesiveness in communities, both rural and urban, thwarts their achieving maximum fulfilments which, if taken together, produce integrated nations, united to achieve that destiny which history holds for them. That destiny, so far as Canada and the United States as well as certain other countries are concerned, is the preservation and enlargement of a democratic way of life in all its aspects. Ways and means of creating a living and growing twentieth-century substitute for the cohesiveness which communities once had must be devised and executed.

In this connection, therefore, the instrumentalities devised by farmers and by their governments to secure various economic and social ends deserve particular consideration. Agricultural organizations of all kinds and descriptions—fairs; periodicals; the national and lesser departments of agriculture; the agricultural schools, colleges, and experiment stations; the farmers' institutes; the extension and demonstration work; the county agent system; and the 4-H and similar clubs—have all served as media by which the findings of science and information on changing world conditions have reached the farmers. In the case of the United States, the county agent system and the 4-H club movement are particularly noteworthy. In the execution of its recent programmes of crop control and soil conservation, the federal Department of Agriculture has sought to root its activities in local processes, and the county agent system has been the vital link. With reference to the 4-H clubs, it is safe to say that anyone who has witnessed an annual encampment of the 4-H clubs in Washington, D.C., will never doubt that the movement is of signal significance for rural America.

The individuals who have contributed notably to agriculture also deserve the attention of the historians. As editors, writers, inventors, scientists, and promoters of protest movements, they aided in the

improvement of farming, and their writings and personal papers are frequently important sources for agricultural history.

Quite aside from these pressing matters, there has been little formal history of the rural home and community. The farm house with its furnishings, conveniences, and surroundings; rural manners, customs, and morals; amusements and entertainments such as games and sports, sociables, surprise parties, and spelling, husking, and quilting bees; and religious ideas and practices—these and many similar topics offer rare opportunity for those inclined toward social history. The lack of historical studies of rural health, including diet, sanitary conditions, home remedies, and the country doctor, may also be mentioned in this connection.

It is similarly pertinent to call attention to the significance of the training given by the rural grade and high schools. Granted that it is the function of education to develop the individual so that he may serve the common good as a rational and socialized being, it is important to know the extent to which the rural schools have played their part.

The relation of farmers to political movements, generally speaking, has not been neglected, possibly because group action that was vigorous enough to become known as a revolt was sufficiently dramatic to attract the attention of historians. Most of the articles and monographs on particular phases of agrarian politics are valuable, the main criticisms being that many of them have been prepared as if their subjects reclined in a vacuum.

Many other less tangible rural contributions to the national leavens deserve investigation. The drift of the younger generation from the farms to the cities is economically as well as socially important. It contributed brains and brawn, and its rural mores tempered the ever-growing domination of urbanism. The expense for its formal education was a charge against the cities that was never paid. When the parent generation on the farms passed away, its estates were usually divided more or less equally among the heirs. The urbanized members of the family, not wishing nor fitted to return, received financial adjustments from those who had remained on the farms. The resulting contribution of rural to urban income has probably been considerable. The retirement of farmers to nearby towns, leaving their holdings to be operated by tenants, is a comparable process. These and similar drains have contributed to the unbalance of the rural and urban elements.

Perhaps the prospectus for agricultural history as a field of research here outlined involves a broader interpretation than is usually associated with the term, and possibly the topics emphasized seem mundane and drab when compared with the more colourful aspects of history. Yet they are among the basic forces of historical development, and furthermore, on the basis of more than a decade of experience as an historian in the United States Department of Agriculture, the author of this paper can give assurance that there is a distinct, pragmatic need for historical studies of these forces.

DISCUSSION

Mr. Coke expressed the gratitude of the agricultural economists generally to Mr. Edwards and his associates for their work. He said that in the Dominion Department of Agriculture it had been necessary to emphasize

the economic aspects of research rather than the historical. In one study under way at the moment, however, an effort is being made to fill in the historical background of ranching on the prairies. One or two short articles also have been published, such as a recent one on the markets of the city of Quebec, and a study entitled "A History of Ranching in British Columbia" by C. W. Vrooman in the *Economic Annalist*, vol. XI, no. 2. The Department is interested in historical research, and Mr. Edwards's remarks about the pragmatic value of these studies are very pertinent.

Mr. Coke also remarked that historical material of value can often be found in weekly or monthly farm journals, particularly because of occasional references to personal experience. The editor of the *Canadian Cattleman* has shown great interest in the history of Canadian ranching, and has had access to the diaries of early settlers.

People who are engaged in research into the history of agriculture should have a thorough agricultural background in order to avoid errors of misinterpretation. It is important to notice that courses in agricultural history are already being taught in a number of Canadian universities and colleges. Mr. Coke recalled that when he was a member of the staff of the Ontario Agricultural College, he devoted some time to the history of agriculture as a part of a general course in agricultural economics. The late Dean Howes of the University of Alberta offered a course in agricultural history for a good many years. A course in agricultural history was developed at the University of Saskatchewan under the direction of the late Dr. William Allen and is now being given by Dr. E. C. Hope. Dean Clement of the College of Agriculture, the University of British Columbia, includes agricultural history among the courses which are now being given in the College of Agriculture, and other cases might be cited.