

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Great Plains Quarterly

Great Plains Studies, Center for

Summer 1981

Agricultural Pioneering In Dakota: A Case Study

Gilbert C. Fite

University of Georgia

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly>



Part of the [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#)

Fite, Gilbert C., "Agricultural Pioneering In Dakota: A Case Study" (1981). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 1905.
<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/1905>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Quarterly by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

AGRICULTURAL PIONEERING IN DAKOTA: A CASE STUDY

GILBERT C. FITE

In recent years many historians have increasingly turned their attention to what might be called microhistory. Rather than studying broad topics in a sweeping and comprehensive manner, they have preferred to examine a county, a city, political or social groups within a locality, or an individual firm or institution. The aim has been to present history from the grassroots or the sidewalks—a people-oriented history, so to speak. As a result of such works, historical understanding has been greatly enhanced.¹

Little serious microhistory, however, has been done on pioneer agriculture, farm life, and standards of living. While there have been numerous studies of ranchers and ranches, as well as large corporate farms, the ordinary 160-acre homesteader who really brought the frontier to an end has been neglected and ignored. Partially, at least, the problem stems from a lack of adequate statistics. Most small

farmers retained no accounts at all. When account books, diaries, and other materials have survived that reflect the daily living and business aspects of pioneer farming, they too often contain only incomplete bits and pieces of information. The records usually do not provide data over a meaningful time period. Consequently, it has been difficult to reconstruct on a year-to-year basis the experiences of settlers as they struggled to become established farmers on some raw frontier.² The manuscript censuses, local histories, court house records, and other sources are valuable, but they do not provide data on annual production, seasonal price fluctuations, operating expenses, and general living conditions over a significant time span.

The account books of Frederick A. Fleischman, who homesteaded in the east central part of southern Dakota Territory in 1880, provide an opportunity to take a detailed look at one of the thousands of homesteaders who moved to the unsettled frontier and turned his free land into a productive farm and comfortable home for himself and his large family. Unlike most farmers of the period, Fleischman kept fairly detailed records on his farming operations from the time he settled in Dakota until

*Gilbert C. Fite is Richard B. Russell Professor of History at the University of Georgia. Among his many books and articles is *The Farmer's Frontier, 1865-1900* (1966). He is a past president of the Agricultural History Society.*

50

1882 Farm Expenses. Hard on

Sept 15. To nails & Knives 50.	\$ 5.60
18. Cash on Wagon.	25.00
11. Ducts & Spooner.	10.00
12. Square crackers.	2.00
12. 1/2 lb salt & 7 Lumber	1.50
Lumber for granary	16.50
Lumber " "	9.00
Lumber " "	30.33
1 grain measure Kettle.	1.00
1 corn cutter	.70
1 Pair Boots	3.00
1 account book	1.00
7 grain paper & machine needles	.20
17 Lumber	32.40
" 1 hand ax & manure fork	2.00
" ginger soap	.10
15. Binder twine	3.20
20 1 lb powder & 2 of shot	.70
" 2 nose shoes set	.40
" Dishes	1.35
22. On Insurance.	8.00
23. 1 pint Bush	.50
" 1 bottle Kachways Relief	.50
50 Binder twine	43.00
" Hinges & Haws	.55
" Lumber	1.75
" 1 Roll paper	2.35
" 1 gal paint & 1/2 gal oil	2.25
" 2. Chair	1.60
" 1 Bushel Basket	.45
2 Paid Bookers for shearing	19.00
21 " "	58.80
" Paid B. Willis for Homesteading	29.75
" Paid H. Planty for work	11.50
28 Tacks & plow hog sharpened	.50
13 Tacks	.25
" Postage Stamp	.50
27 Basket & nails	.35
29 Paid Reifer Int. & Interest	121.50
" " Lecker Int. & Interest	51.20
6 Rail road fare	28.60
" Rope & Horse reins	3.90
" Dr. Plants & Hotel Bill	1.40

Page 50 from Fleischman's financial records showing expenses in 1882. Courtesy of North Dakota Institute for Regional Studies, North Dakota State University, Fargo, North Dakota.

he retired in the early 1920s, some forty years later.³ While differences existed among frontier farmers, Fleischman might be considered fairly typical of thousands who settled on the western prairies, just east of the Great Plains, in the late nineteenth century. He began farming on government land with very little capital and achieved that elusive Jeffersonian ideal of owning a family farm, which gave him independence and a reasonable degree of economic security.

Unmarried and alone, Fred Fleischman arrived in Dakota Territory early in June 1879. Born in New York in 1853, the son of a German immigrant, Fleischman had first moved to Wisconsin before deciding to homestead in Dakota. He may have been influenced by glowing accounts advertising the opportunities farther west. "Here is a place for a man to rebuild his fortune again," said a Dakota territorial legislative report in 1869. "Here there need be no poor or destitute, for all that will work there is abundance; here is a land yielding bountifully, open to all nations, where all may enjoy the blessings of a home."⁴ However exaggerated such claims may have been, it was free land that attracted Fleischman and thousands of other pioneers to the Dakota frontier. Then twenty-six years old, he selected land in Kingsbury County about forty-five miles west of the Minnesota border and some two miles north and a little west of what became the village of Oldham. Annual rainfall averaged about twenty-one inches in that part of Dakota. Fleischman was slightly ahead of the mass of settlers who flooded into the area in the early 1880s during the Great Dakota Boom. The census of 1880 reported only twelve farms in newly formed Kingsbury County, with a mere 197 acres improved.⁵ Fleischman was on the cutting edge of the farmer's frontier.

After filing on his land, Fleischman hired 20 acres broken at a cost of \$60. Three dollars an acre was the usual charge for this kind of custom work. He then returned to Wisconsin until the spring of 1880, at which time he moved to his new home in Dakota. He had 160 acres of raw land and \$425 in his pocket. Fleischman had accumulated his meager capital

by saving \$225 and borrowing \$200 from his brother in New York State. With part of that money he bought lumber for a small house, a team of horses, and a wagon.⁶ The record is not clear, but he probably also acquired some machinery. He planted wheat and oats on the land that had been broken the previous summer and constructed a small frame house that measured some twelve by sixteen feet.

In the fall of 1880, his first crop year, Fleischman harvested 181 bushels of wheat and some oats. He received \$170 for the grain he sold. Believing that his prospects were favorable, he returned to Wisconsin, where, on February 16, 1881, he married Mary Alla Towne. The young couple soon returned to their Dakota homestead to begin spring planting.

During 1880 Fleischman had broken more land in preparation for his 1881 crop. His second year on the homestead turned out well. Fleischman not only raised more wheat, but the price rose to over \$1 a bushel, one of the few times it reached that figure between 1870 and 1900. He sold 213 bushels for \$223. He also marketed \$128 worth of oats. His total income from grain reached \$351. The sale of a few other items from the farm brought an additional \$20 and gave him a total income of \$371 in 1881. Fleischman had started farming with only \$425 for capital and operating expenses, but in two years of farming on the Dakota frontier, his income from grain considerably exceeded his total investment.

Fleischman kept increasing his cultivated acreage, and his efforts were rewarded with good crops of wheat and oats. In 1882 he raised 756 bushels of wheat. The price was a little lower than it had been the year before, but he received \$606 for his crop. By selling oats and other products his total income in 1882 reached \$1,241, a figure that was not again equaled for many years. With a good income for a pioneer farmer, he spent freely. While the account books do not separate his capital expenditures and farm operating expenses, he recorded what he called "farm expenses." This included outlays for about

100

Farm produce sold in 1882.

Sept 11	Wheat	40.45	80.90	\$ 30.55
" 12	"	47.30	94.60	38.65
" 13	"	47.30	94.60	38.00
" 14	"	43.55	87.10	30.10
" 19	"	53.15	106.30	40.25
" 20	"	52.35	104.70	44.60
" 23	"	51.20	102.40	43.50
" 30	"	51.23	102.46	39.60
Oct 18	"	46.10	92.20	38.80
" 21	"	49.00	98.00	41.15
" 28	"	46.15	92.30	38.40
Nov 15	"	24.00	48.00	18.25
" 18	"	40.30	80.60	31.00
" 22	"	41.15	82.30	30.15
Dec 28	"	40.10	80.20	34.60
" 29	"	15.00	30.00	11.25
Dec 1	"	24.40	48.80	18.35
April 17	"	2.00	4.00	2.00
May - 7	"	8.50	17.00	7.75
Total for wheat				756 @ 15 = 9075
Total for oat				89 @ 30 = 2670
Total				875 @ 45 = 39375
Total for 80's per Bu				\$ 606.20
				419.95
				215.18
				<u>1,241.11</u>
Nov 27	to 21 lbs. of chickens			1.68
"	Rec'd for cutting grain			43.80
"	" for Tinner			1.70
"	" of Vanschaick			2.75
"	" of G. Boyant			7.80
Nov 28	for binding legs on ships			157.52
Nov 9	to 5/2 doz eggs at 10 c per doz			.60
"	to 1 doz eggs at 10 c per doz			.60
Jan 20	to 1/2 to dinner			2.50
"	to 1/2 to dinner			.60
July 27	to 1/2 bush of shingles and horse to plow			1.00
				2142.80
Rec'd during the year				
from Aug 1st '82 to Aug 1st '83.				

Page 100 from Fleischman's financial records showing income for 1882. Courtesy of North Dakota Institute for Regional Studies, North Dakota State University, Fargo, North Dakota.

everything except groceries and dry goods. In any event, in 1882 Fleischman listed \$1,036.50 for "farm expenses," more than double the next highest figure during the decade. His household expenses were listed separately and amounted to \$168.72. These included clothing, groceries, and other family needs. In the good year of 1882 his total income was slightly more than enough to cover his living, operating, and capital expenses. Fleischman was doing well. He had become firmly established on his homestead in three years and was living comfortably by the standards of the time. Caught up in the Dakota wheat fever, he stuck mainly to grain farming and only gradually increased his livestock operations.

In 1883 he had an excellent yield of wheat and sold 1,159 bushels. The price continued downward, however, and he received only \$740 for his crop. Even after selling other products, his total income dropped to \$985, some \$250 less than he had received the preceding year. Meanwhile, he had acquired a few cows and some chickens and hogs. In 1883 Fleischman began to sell butter, lard, and eggs to augment his income, but he continued to rely mainly on grain. In this respect, Fleischman differed from many other farmers on the western frontier who realized a much greater proportion of their cash income from livestock and poultry. Any examination of the manuscript censuses of agriculture shows clearly how pioneer farmers depended on the sale of butter for a good portion of their cash income.

As it turned out, Fleischman settled on his homestead at an ideal time. During his first years in Dakota, crops were good and prices were better than average. Luck, in other words, was important; he was in the right place at the right time. Many pioneers did not enjoy such favorable circumstances. Indeed, thousands of settlers did not succeed on the Dakota, Nebraska, and Kansas frontiers because crops failed the first or second year after they arrived. With meager capital, sometimes not more than \$200 or \$300, crop failure in the initial years of settlement often spelled disaster. To make matters worse, some settlers pioneered at a

time when the twin enemies of drought and low prices were present simultaneously. This situation prevailed in Dakota and elsewhere on the Great Plains in one or more years during the 1870s, 1880s, and early 1890s.⁷ To a considerable extent, then, successful pioneering depended on chance as well as other factors. Fleischman was among the lucky settlers. With dollar wheat in 1881 and fairly good prices in other years, Fleischman became firmly established in his farming operations within three years. He received one of his highest annual incomes in 1882, his third year of farming. By the middle 1880s he was in a strong enough financial position to weather low prices and poor crops if they should come, and as every farmer on the western prairies and Great Plains eventually learned, drought and unprofitable prices came sooner or later.

Although Fleischman's income dropped to \$985 in 1883, he reduced his expenses to only \$254, which gave him a large profit. In 1884, however, hard times began to set in. Wheat dropped to \$.46 a bushel, and Fleischman's 916 bushels brought only \$428.36.⁸ His income of \$616 from all sources was less than half of what he had made in 1882 and about one-third under that of 1883. To make matters worse, he increased his expenditures on the hope that 1884 would be another fairly good year. But that did not happen and his income was about \$500 below his outlays for operating and living expenses.

Economic conditions continued to be tough for Fleischman in the mid-1880s, even though he diversified his farming operations to reduce the risks. In 1885 his wheat, flax, and oats brought him \$701. He also began to raise a few potatoes for sale. While potatoes did fairly well in that area, he only received \$10 for the few bushels he marketed. Despite a total income of \$718, his expenses were \$1,117, giving him a loss of some \$400. Things got worse the next year. In 1886 his grain crop was short and prices were low. Wheat brought between \$.51 and \$.64 a bushel, depending on the time of sale. To try to live within his income of \$473, he cut his expenses and living costs nearly \$350

from the year before. He spent only \$90 for groceries and \$38 for dry goods and notions, but his outlays of \$513 still exceeded his current income. As he put it, he "fell short" about \$40.

The next year, 1887, his income rose by nearly \$200, reaching \$664. Moreover, he kept family spending under firm control and came out a little ahead. Fleischman failed to record his grocery expense, but assuming that the figure was about equal to that in 1886, his total expenditures were around \$539. This left him a small profit. Then, however, disaster struck. In 1888 thousands of western farmers suffered from a severe and widespread drought. Wheat prices actually advanced, ranging from \$.60 to \$.92 a bushel, but Fleischman raised only 246 bushels. The portion that he marketed brought him a mere \$121. He reported selling no oats or flax, and his income from butter, eggs, and other items added only \$20 to his total income. Return on a year's work and investment by the Fleischman family was only \$141. If his records are accurate, 1888 was the second worst year in all of Fleischman's farming career. As was so often the case, drought was the villain. Family expenditures were cut to only \$380, but that was still \$239 more than the farm produced in cash income.

Fleischman, like other farmers, was often adversely affected by short-range fluctuations in commodity prices. For example, when he sold the first of his wheat crop on September 29, 1885, he received \$.95 a bushel for it. On December 2, a little more than two months later, a small load of twenty-five bushels brought only \$.66, a decline of \$.29 a bushel, or about 30 percent. In 1888 he sold wheat at prices ranging from \$.60 to \$.92 a bushel. The prices of other farm products also fluctuated to the disadvantage of Fleischman and other farmers. Indeed, the impact of short-range price fluctuations on the economic success of farmers has never been adequately recognized as a factor contributing to hard times on the farm. Fleischman's records make it clear that varying and unpredictable drops in commodity prices often hurt farmers severely,

especially when the prices of things they had to buy stayed firm. Farmers like Fleischman did not have the financial ability to hold their crops for the best prices.

Although much of Dakota Territory suffered from a bad drought in 1889, Fleischman escaped its worst effects. His crop was about normal, but prices were still low. He raised nearly 800 bushels of wheat, most of which sold for around only \$.60 a bushel. By this time Fleischman was selling more cream and eggs, indicating further efforts to spread his risks and increase his income. He began to board the local school teacher, which brought in a few extra dollars. But even then he did not quite break even. His income totaled \$492 against expenses of \$503.

Despite some hard times, Fleischman may have looked back on his first decade of farming with some satisfaction. It is not known how much of his land he had brought under cultivation, but it was probably not more than 100 acres. In any event, starting with very little he had added such capital items as furniture, fencing, outbuildings, machinery, and livestock to his holdings. He began constructing a new house in 1889, when he built the basement and bought \$500 worth of lumber.⁹ Most of this capital outlay had been paid for out of current income, although he borrowed \$500 in the fall of 1889. By 1890 he had five children, half of the large family ultimately reared by Fred and his wife, Alla. The county had filled up with settlers and had become a stable rural community. There were 1,773 farms in the county, compared to only a dozen a decade earlier. Whitewood township was a pleasant place for its 526 inhabitants, filled with family farmers, many of whom were the Fleischmans' good friends and neighbors. From time to time conditions had been difficult, but not unbearable. Fleischman just kept plugging along on his original 160 acres, making a living and seeming to enjoy his way of life.

Unusually hard times, however, were just ahead. The 1890s were a depression decade characterized by low farm prices, high unemployment, and business failures. Although the

entire economy was depressed during much of the period, many farmers on the western prairies and Great Plains experienced a starving time. Severe droughts left much of the region from the Dakotas to Texas barren and nonproductive. Tens of thousands of new settlers were helpless and hopeless. Many of them in the central Dakotas, western Nebraska, and Kansas simply gave up and returned east. Conditions were so bad in parts of South Dakota in 1890 that demands rose for both state aid and private charity to rescue destitute settlers from disaster. The state legislature in South Dakota did not take any action to relieve hard-pressed farmers, but private charities distributed food, clothing, and fuel to hundreds of farmers in the drought-stricken state. Conditions were even worse in 1893 and 1894 as farmers suffered from the double tyranny of low prices and crop failure. Between 1890 and 1900 sixteen of South Dakota's fifty-three counties, mostly between the James and Missouri rivers, lost population.¹⁰ The worst conditions were west of Kingsbury County, but there were 335 fewer farms in the county in 1900 than there had been a decade earlier.

How did Fleischman weather that difficult decade? While he may not have been entirely typical, he was probably fairly representative of farmers in the eastern half of the Dakotas, Nebraska, and Kansas. Unlike many other farmers in South Dakota, Fleischman had a relatively good year in 1890. He raised less wheat than usual, only 517 bushels, but the price was up to nearly \$.80. His other grain failed, but his income from livestock and livestock products rose substantially. He also picked up a few dollars serving as a juror, received \$30 for boarding the teacher, and sold a cowhide and even some fresh meat. Fleischman was gradually shifting away from such heavy reliance on grain and giving more attention to livestock. For example, he sold two hogs in 1890, as well as butter and eggs. His total income rose to \$579 for the year. However, his expenses climbed to \$744, leaving him a deficit of \$165.

The following year, 1891, Fleischman's excellent wheat crop permitted him to sell

1,027 bushels at about \$.73 a bushel, giving him a reported income from wheat of \$755. But he continued his move toward greater diversification. He marketed two steers, butter and eggs, and a small wagon load of potatoes for which he received \$.35 a bushel. It is evident that he was ever alert to ways of reducing his risk. His sale of commodities other than wheat, however, produced only a few dollars of income, and the total reached only \$803. His expenses for groceries, dry goods, and notions were \$159, and his farm expenses were around \$750, making his total outlays exceed his income by more than \$100. However, 1891 seems to have been a reasonably good year, as Fleischman's "farm expenses" included some capital costs. In 1892 he again had a good crop, but farm prices had begun to decline well before the business and industrial panic of 1893. Most of his wheat sold for \$.48 to \$.52 a bushel. He also sold butter, eggs, potatoes, onions, lard, and other items, and took wheat to the grist mill to make his own flour. His total cash income was only \$508, down some 37 percent from the year before. It was at this very time, incidentally, that President Benjamin Harrison was talking about the nation's widespread prosperity.¹¹ Fleischman and thousands of other farmers were certainly not among those enjoying good times.

The years 1893 and 1894 were extremely tough for Fleischman and most other western farmers. He sold the first part of his wheat crop on September 16, 1893, for only \$.47 a bushel. Thereafter prices dropped to between \$.35 and \$.40. Fleischman received only \$216 for his 559-bushel crop. His total income in 1893 was a meager \$271, but that was still better than the 1888 figure. He sought income wherever it could be found, even receiving \$.50 from a peddler for overnight lodging.

In 1894 calamity struck. The drought was devastating and he raised only 62 bushels of wheat. The price of wheat around Oldham and Lake Preston was actually not quite as low in 1894 as it had been the year before, but most farmers had little or nothing to sell at any price. With income of only \$27 from wheat,

Fleischman lived mainly from the sale of butter and eggs. He received \$.06 a dozen for eggs and \$.11 to \$.15 a pound for butter. His total cash income in 1894 was only \$95.73. This was the worst year in Fleischman's farming experience. It was so bad that he enclosed the word "income" in quotes!

How did a farm family continue to exist on so little cash? Like most western farmers in times of economic pressure, Fleischman ceased buying from commercial sources and produced most of his absolute minimum requirements at home. The other alternative was simply to postpone purchases and do without. From August 1, 1893, to July 30, 1894, the Fleischmans spent only \$34.72 for groceries and provisions. For the next twelve months the figure was even less, \$29.72. During those years, the family was very nearly self-sufficient, not from choice but from necessity. Expenditures for groceries in 1893 and 1894 were only about one-third as much as they had been in 1886 when Fleischman was a fairly new settler in Kingsbury County. The experience of the Fleischman family demonstrates the dogged determination and willingness of farmers to sacrifice in order to survive hard times. They tightened the family belts and did without.

In 1895 conditions began to improve for the Fleischmans and other farmers. Indeed, while wheat prices were still only between \$.38 and \$.47 a bushel, he had a good crop of more than 1,000 bushels. The sale of other produce gave him a total income of \$555, nearly six times more than he had received in 1894. He had kept his expenses to only \$391, giving him one of his best profit years in a decade. By 1896, the year Democrat William J. Bryan appealed to distressed farmers for support, wheat prices had advanced to about \$.60 a bushel and Fleischman sold some for above that figure. His total income was down a little because of a smaller crop, but overall, things were looking much better. His yearly income totaled \$516, only a little less than in 1895. The family standard of living was creeping upward again as he spent \$61 for store-purchased groceries.

During the rest of the decade, Fleischman continued to make steady economic progress. He had become well diversified by the 1890s, indicating management decisions designed to spread or reduce economic risk. He sold cream, eggs, hogs, cattle, vegetables, and other products. Hogs and cattle brought \$100 in 1898. As milk-processing plants developed in eastern South Dakota, Fleischman began to sell whole milk. His checks for milk provided an additional small but steady income by the late 1890s. He also expanded his laying flock and sometimes he sold as many as thirty dozen eggs at a time in 1898 and 1899. But wheat continued to be his main source of cash. In 1898 about 60 percent of his income came from that staple crop.

By 1898 his income was up to \$846, while his expenses were only about half that amount. He also showed a profit in 1899. He completed his new house in 1900, after a decade of work on it, at a cost of \$1,062. This reflected his growing prosperity. By the late 1890s the large family of a wife and nine children was spending an increasing amount for store-bought groceries and dry goods. In 1898, for example, outlays for dry goods reached \$78.38 and for groceries, \$95.07.

Fleischman lived on his farm near Oldham until his death in 1929. Unlike many farmers in Dakota, he added only one small piece of land to his holdings, and continued farming his original homestead of 160 acres.¹² His income in those years that have been called the Golden Era of American Agriculture varied from as little as \$729 in 1901 and 1907 to a high of \$3,608 in 1916 and \$3,303 in 1917 after the demands of World War I began to affect prices. Usually, however, during the first two decades of the twentieth century, Fleischman reported an income of between \$1,000 and \$2,000 a year. The high prices of World War I and the demand for particular crops favored Fleischman. For example, during the war period he expanded his potato output and actually sold potatoes in carload lots. Potatoes were more profitable for Fleischman than wheat, especially during 1916 and 1917. He

was fortunate in that his land would permit switching from wheat to potatoes, allowing him to pursue the more profitable enterprise. The good prices for both potatoes and wheat accounted for his unusually large income during the years of World War I.

Fleischman was a commercial farmer from the outset. The degree of his involvement in the market economy varied with economic conditions, but except during two or three years of extreme hardship he was never very self-sufficient. Of course, like most midwestern farmers, the Fleischmans had a garden and grew potatoes and other vegetables. They raised chickens for both eggs and meat, kept cows for milk and cream, made and sold butter, and butchered hogs and cattle. Much of the work of gardening, making butter, and raising chickens was the responsibility of Mrs. Fleischman. She was among that generation of farm women who worked very hard and contributed a great deal to the livelihood of the family.

From the first the Fleischmans sold their grain and other products, and with the money received they bought a wide variety of food, clothing, and farm supplies. In 1882 the family food purchases included sugar, tea, flour, fish, coffee, rice, syrup, crackers, candy, and even pork. As time went on, cheese, gingersnaps, dried beef, molasses, oatmeal, pickles, and starch appeared on the grocery list. It is clear that the family had special foods for holidays and other occasions. Oysters, cranberries, currant jelly, coconut, frosted cookies, candy, lemons, raisins, grapes, and other delicacies are among the groceries purchased in the 1880s. The list of dry goods included overalls, gingham, calico, underwear, shoes, boots, stockings, gloves, coats, and "Christmas goods."

Fleischman's largest cash outlays went for what he labeled "farm expenses." Among these items were lumber, fencing, nails, hardware, tools, dishes, rope, kerosene, twine, coal, grease, machinery, and even taxes. Besides regular machines such as a plow, harrow, and seeder, he bought a corn cutter, manure fork, and ax (1882); a fanning mill, harness, and rope (1883); corn sheller, horse collar, and

nursery stock (1884); sausage machine, lumber, nails, chains, and a bedstead (1885); a water tank, lumber, and seeds (1886); and fencing (1887). Almost every year after 1882, so-called farm expenses included such items as rope, lumber, nails, ammunition, small tools, grease, kerosene, twine, and garden seeds, as well as the less frequent outlays for larger machines and equipment. He bought his first McCormick reaper in the mid-1880s, and a second one for \$120 in the 1890s. These were among his most expensive pieces of machinery.

The Fleischmans also bought things for their house. Mrs. Fleischman got a new washboard and clothes ringer in 1886 and a hand-operated washing machine in 1888. Other household items included a new sewing machine and a bedstead. As time passed and income permitted, the Fleischmans spent larger and larger amounts not only for necessities but for some minor luxuries. In 1905, for example, the family spent \$349 for groceries and \$116 for dry goods. Some of the food items purchased that year included bananas, walnuts, pineapples, and prepared cereals. Judging by the groceries and list of dry goods purchased, it seems clear that the Fleischman family lived reasonably well by the standards of the time. Because they bought such a wide variety of manufactured and processed goods, the market relationship between the price of those commodities and farm products was very important to their economic welfare. Even more crucial was whether or not Fleischman raised a good crop.

The Fleischman farm was strictly a family operation. He and his wife, and later the growing children, provided most of the labor, but at some busy times, Fleischman hired additional workers. For example, his records show that he paid \$68.50 in 1891-92 for shocking and stacking grain. The next year his outlay for employed labor at harvest time was about the same. One regular cash expense was for threshing his grain. He recorded in his account book for October 14, 1898, that he had paid his threshing bill of \$59.70. The larger expenditures for labor came before Fleischman's

children were old enough for field work. By the late 1890s some of the sons were mature enough to do all kinds of farm work. The Fleischmans operated in the best family farm tradition, providing most of their own labor and making the business decisions.

One thing that Fleischman's records do not adequately reveal is his credit and debt situation. However, there is ample evidence that from time to time he had to borrow money and pay interest. It appears that Fleischman was able to remain largely debt free until 1889. Following the bad year of 1888, however, he mortgaged 80 acres of his land in order to borrow \$500 from F. O. Pitts of Madison, South Dakota, who was representing the Chemical National Bank of New York. Dated September 17, 1889, this was a five-year mortgage at 7 percent interest payable on October 1, 1894.¹³ As it turned out, the mortgage came due during the depths of the depression following the Panic of 1893, and Fleischman had to borrow another \$75 before the payment date, presumably to pay the interest.¹⁴

With low grain and livestock prices, it is not surprising that Fleischman could not pay off his mortgage. Indeed, he was forced to borrow even more. On October 31, 1896, he mortgaged an additional 40 acres in order to get a loan of \$150. He paid 10 percent interest on this note, or 3 percent above that of seven years earlier. In order to pay off his old loans and apparently to consolidate his debts, Fleischman negotiated a loan for \$500 from the Phoenix Mutual Life Insurance Company on December 1, 1899. He managed to get his money for 6 percent. With better times on the farm, he paid off his mortgage on schedule and was debt free by late 1904.¹⁵

Meanwhile, Fleischman borrowed small amounts of money during the 1890s by putting up chattel property as security. In December 1895 he borrowed \$150, giving two mares, two horses, one cow, and a grain harvester as security. A few months later, in August 1896, he bought a new harvester and had to put up only the machine as security for the \$120 note. He also negotiated other small chattel

mortgages, but these were paid off by November 1899.¹⁶

Fleischman's accounts show that interest costs and debt repayment were a regular part of his operating expenditures, especially during the 1890s. For example, in 1891 he paid \$229 in principal and interest out of a total income of \$803. The following year he paid interest of \$58.68 and in 1893, \$55.45. He also borrowed some money from relatives. But Fleischman was also able to make some modest loans to individuals in the community. Just when he made certain loans is not clear, but he had four notes due for a total of \$420 in 1898. Some \$250 had been loaned at 8 percent interest and \$170 at 10 percent. There is no evidence that Fleischman was particularly burdened by debt during either the hard times of the late nineteenth century or the prosperous years of the early twentieth century. His policy seemed to be to do without or postpone purchases when he did not have the money for living, operating, or capital expenditures. At times, however, he took out loans to purchase capital items and to cover other debts. Judging by his own account books, these loans seemed to represent good business judgment.

Although many homesteaders on the Dakota frontier failed, Fleischman represents the thousands who achieved modest success. He transformed 160 acres of raw prairie into a successful family farm. He worked hard and experienced some difficult times. The record shows that he sometimes suffered poor health, but the overall evidence indicates that he and his large family enjoyed a fairly good life. They had a decent house and plenty of food and clothing, and occasionally experienced the pleasure of travel. Fleischman was a respected man in his community and had security in his old age. He was no doubt considerably better off than many of the country's urban and industrial workers during that period. The glowing promises held out to prospective settlers on the Dakota frontier in the 1870s and 1880s were highly exaggerated, but to some degree they became a reality for Fleischman and his family.

What can be learned about pioneer farm settlement on the western prairies from the experiences of Fred A. Fleischman? What conclusions can be drawn from the study of a single farmer? First of all, Fleischman's career clearly emphasizes the importance of time and place of settlement. If a pioneer homesteaded in a period when crops and prices were good, he was able to get established before the normal periodic droughts and low prices threatened his ability to continue. Fleischman was lucky in that he settled at a time when both weather conditions and prices were favorable. This permitted him to improve his financial position quite rapidly and to develop some reserves. Fleischman more than doubled his annual income between his first and second year of farming, and his third year, when the sale of products exceeded \$1,200, was extraordinarily successful. On the other hand, many pioneers who settled in the middle 1870s or the late 1880s were faced with drought and low prices during their initial farming years. Those two enemies were too much for hundreds of farmers who lacked enough capital or money for operating and living expenses. They saw their hopes ruined and their dreams dashed on the hard rocks of frontier reality. Also, it is important to note that Fleischman got to Dakota fairly early and was able to get land in a part of the territory where rainfall for crops was generally adequate. Those pioneers who had to settle farther west found geographic conditions much less favorable.

Fleischman's experiences also show how a homesteader could get established with very little capital. Although undercapitalization was one of the main economic problems facing pioneer farmers, Fleischman and thousands of others were able to develop family farms with only a minimum of investment. The general practice was to save or borrow a small amount, usually not more than a few hundred dollars, and then to acquire additional capital from current production. Fleischman illustrates this situation ideally. He borrowed nearly half of his original capital of \$425 from his brother. Then he gradually made enough money to buy

additional machinery and livestock, and finally, after nearly twenty years, to complete a new house. Neither historians nor economists have given enough attention to the importance of family-supplied capital for pioneer farmers, but the diaries and letters of frontier settlers indicate that gifts and loans from relatives helped many farmers get started and assisted them over hard times.¹⁷ The amount of these sources of capital for new farmers is obscure, but it was undoubtedly more significant than has generally been recognized.

It is important to note also that pioneer farmers such as Fleischman existed year after year with very little money for living expenses, operations, and capital improvements. Even as he moved out of the pioneer stage of farm development, his income did not increase substantially. In the twenty years between 1880 and 1900 Fleischman's annual cash income varied from a high of \$1,241 in 1882 to a low of \$95 in 1894. Both of those years were abnormal; he usually took in between \$400 and \$700 a year. His average annual income over the two decades between 1880 and 1900 was \$547. Out of this amount he had to pay living costs and operating expenses and provide for capital expansion. It might be expected that a homesteader with a single quarter of land would have a small or very modest income in the initial years of settlement. What is surprising is that Fleischman's income increased so little during those years after he became well established with a fairly diversified farming operation. Despite a rapidly expanding economy in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Fleischman's income shows that he, like many other farmers, failed to participate in the nation's economic growth. Even during the so-called Golden Era of American Agriculture, Fleischman made only modest gains. It was not until the higher prices of the World War I period that his annual income customarily exceeded \$1,000.

One characteristic associated with establishing a successful farm on the frontier was the willingness to sacrifice family wants and needs in hard times. The Fleischmans provide a

valuable case study of a family that reduced their cash expenditures to a bare minimum in the depression of 1893 and 1894 and got by without losing their farm. By cutting purchases of nonfarm commodities to approximately one-fourth or less of what they had been in earlier years, the Fleischmans were able to ride out the depression. Even in ordinary times farm families often postponed purchases of consumer goods in order to invest more money in income-producing livestock, machinery, or other productive facilities. The need to delay purchases of personal and household items in order to buy a new harness or cultivator was a major factor in souring so many women and young people on farming.

The matter of management on pioneer farms has not attracted much attention from scholars. As is true with the modern farmer, however, management played an important role in the success of early settlers. The decisions on what crop or combination of crops to raise, the mix of crops and livestock, farm size, the use of debt capital, and knowledge of when to buy and when to sell were among the critical questions that affected the outcome of farm operations. Luck contributed to the success of some pioneers, but hard work and good management were the determining factors for a great many more. Evidence points to the fact that Fred Fleischman managed his quarter-section farm quite well over many years. He diversified his operations and avoided excessive debt. The fact that he kept better records than most farmers indicates his desire to keep a close watch on his business operations.

Fred Fleischman never made the history books. He was simply what most people would call a plain dirt farmer. However, he is a good example of those thousands of settlers who, assisted by the Homestead Act, achieved the Jeffersonian ideal. As a young man Fleischman was landless and without any property. He took his patrimony from the federal government and, when judged by the times, succeeded in making a good home for himself and his large family. There were widespread abuses of the Homestead Act and many pioneers

failed to find a decent life on the public domain, but Fleischman was among the thousands who utilized the law successfully and contributed to building the family farm system in American agriculture.

NOTES

1. Two pioneer studies of this nature, one dealing with a rural and the other with an urban community, are Merle Curti, *The Making of an American Community: A Case Study of Democracy in a Frontier County* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1959), and Stephen Thernstrom, *Poverty and Progress, Social Mobility in a Nineteenth Century City* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1964).

2. There are a few excellent diaries and account books preserved that throw light on pioneer farming operations, but most that remain are sketchy and incomplete. One of the best unpublished diaries of a western farmer was kept by Elam Bartholomew, who settled in northwestern Kansas in 1875 and who maintained daily entries of some kind from 1871 to 1934. Charles A. Thresher, who settled near Topeka, Kansas, in the 1870s, preserved fairly good accounts for his 160-acre operation from 1871 to 1891 and from 1893 to 1897. Both the Bartholomew and Thresher diaries are in the Kansas State Historical Society. The Nebraska State Historical Society has the diary of John A. Sanborn, who settled in Franklin County, Nebraska, in 1885 and kept records during the years from 1886 to 1896. Two useful published diaries are Clarence S. Paine, ed., "The Diaries of a Nebraska Farmer, 1876-77," *Agricultural History* 22 (January 1948), and Powell Moore, ed., "A Hoosier in Kansas, The Diary of Hiram Young, 1886-1895," *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 14 (May, August, November 1896) and 15 (February and May 1947).

3. Photostatic copies of the Fleischman account books are in the North Dakota Institute for Regional Studies at North Dakota State University, Fargo, North Dakota. These records are excellent when compared to what most farmers kept at the time. However, Fleischman's bookkeeping left much to be desired. He maintained two basic categories of expense and

income. His income included money received from wheat, other productions, and miscellaneous items. He broke his expenditures down into three subcategories, "farm expenses," "household expenses," which included groceries and other household needs, and "dry goods and notions." The difficulty in getting a complete picture of his operations stems from the fact that he did not separate living and operating expenses from capital outlays. Thus in the years when total expenditures exceeded income, he did not necessarily lose money. He simply spent more, including capital items, than he took in. Furthermore, he had no concept of depreciation. Despite some weaknesses in his bookkeeping, it is possible to get a fairly clear picture of Fleischman's farming operations and living standards from his records.

4. *Council Journal of the Eighth Session of the Legislative Assembly of the Territory of Dakota, 1869* (Yankton, 1869), p. 203.

5. *Tenth Census of the United States, Agriculture, 1880* (Washington, D.C., 1883), p. 36; the manuscript census for Kingsbury County, enumerated June 7, 8, and 15, 1880, reported only eleven farms. For the description and location of Fleischman's land, see Deed Record Book, Kingsbury County, DeSmet, South Dakota, vol. 9, p. 435. Fleischman's final homestead entry was dated May 7, 1886. See Deed Record Book, Kingsbury County, vol. 9, p. 435. See also *Atlas of Kingsbury County* (Fergus Falls, Minn., 1966), p. 39; A. T. Andreas, *Andreas' Historical Atlas of Dakota* (Chicago: Lakeside Press, 1884), pp. 150-51. Andreas said of Kingsbury County in 1879 that "the increase in settlement was very marked."

6. Stated by Fleischman at the beginning of his account books, but dated January 12,

1923. All of the following figures on income and expenditures are from Fleischman's accounts.

7. See Gilbert C. Fite, *The Farmers' Frontier* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966), pp. 55-74 and 126-31.

8. Fleischman's arithmetic was either slightly off or he got a little more per bushel than he figured.

9. The Fleischman account books for various years show when certain larger household and farm expenses were incurred, as well as the prices paid and received.

10. Fite, *Farmers' Frontier*, p. 110.

11. Benjamin Harrison, "Fourth Annual Message to Congress," December 6, 1892, in James D. Richardson, *Messages and Papers of the Presidents*, vol. 9 (Washington, D.C., 1898): 306. Harrison said that "so high a degree of prosperity and so general a diffusion of the comforts of life were never before enjoyed by our people."

12. Fleischman added about 25 acres to his farm from the corner of an adjoining quarter section that was cut off by the railroad track.

13. Mortgage Records, Kingsbury County, DeSmet, South Dakota, vol. 9, p. 587. Two days later he borrowed an additional \$50.50.

14. *Ibid.*, vol. 23, p. 93, and vol. 37, p. 573.

15. *Ibid.*, vol. 43, p. 49; vol. 51, pp. 358-59; and vol. 63, p. 512. The manuscript census of population for Whitewood Township, Kingsbury County, South Dakota, for 1900 listed Fleischman as a farm owner but indicated that the farm was mortgaged.

16. Chattel Mortgage Index, Kingsbury County, vol. 11, pp. 170-71. See also vol. 12.

17. The diaries of pioneer farmers, as well as their correspondence, indicate that money from relatives was an important source of capital and credit on the frontier.