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Summer 2001

Review of *The Family Farmers' Advocate: South Dakota Farmers Union, 1914-2000* By Lynwood E. Oyos

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The Family Farmers' Advocate: South Dakota Farmers Union, 1914-2000. By Lynwood E. Oyos. Sioux Falls, SD: The Center for Western Studies, 2000. viii + 392 pp. Illustrations, appendices, notes, bibliography. \$24.95 cloth, \$15.95 paper.

Two themes stand out in this extraordinary analysis of decline in family farm population on the Northern Great Plains since the 1930s. One is the organization of farmers and ranchers as a reaction to economic colonialism and inhospitable natural conditions. Lynwood Oyos properly portrays the Farmers Union as the largest rural organization with a politically liberal disposition in the history of his state. Its leaders, representing as many as

21,600 members (in 1949), fashioned “a triangle” of functions to include cooperative services, education of members, and lobbying for assistance from both state and national governments. Oyos chronicles the Farmers Union’s negative reactions to spokesmen for the Farm Bureau, who favored no governmental interference in a free market economy, and to members of the American Agriculture Movement, who called for exaggerated governmental regulation and economic guarantees. Between these extremes, Farmers Union members lobbied in favor of price supports while channeling increasing energy into regional cooperative efforts to alleviate economic distress.

Oyos reveals that, as a group, Farmers Union members favored isolationism until World War II, then international commitments by the United States government. The Cold War supplied initial rationale for the change, but soon a need for federal involvement in marketing surplus farm and ranch products abroad provided greater incentive. Global marketing fast became an integral component of Farmer Union policy.

Oyos makes his greatest contribution to historical literature with a detailed analysis of federal farm policies from the Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA) of 1933 through the implementation of the Freedom to Farm Act of 1996. Beginning with Franklin Roosevelt and Henry Wallace in the 1930s, he traces the administration of congressional agricultural policies by presidents and secretaries of agriculture to the end of the twentieth century. With clear and substantial descriptions he explains parity, price floors, target prices, crop loans, deficiency payments, acreage controls, the Soil Bank, Set Asides, Payments in Kind (PIK), and the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). His text exposes administrative chicanery and instability in federal policies as principal causes for the steady decline of family farming. In the absence of remedial amendments to the Freedom to Farm Act, which is designed to phase out federal support, Oyos predicts continuing deterioration in family

farming and corresponding change in rural sociology.

Some professional historians might differ with him about scattered facts or interpretations, but all should appreciate his sharp presentation of significant themes in a clear and pleasing style. A remarkable selection of photographs greatly enhances the text. Endnotes and bibliographical categories provide ample evidence of thoroughgoing research in both primary and secondary sources. Prospective readers with interests in rural organizations, family farming, federal farm policies, and Great Plains history as a general subject will all enjoy this intriguing book. Librarians who feature Western Americana should regard *The Family Farmers’ Advocate* as an essential acquisition.

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