

Harvest of Hazards: Family Farming, Accidents, and Expertise in the Corn Belt, 1940–1975

Katherine Jellison
Ohio University

ISSN 0003-4827

Copyright © 2017 State Historical Society of Iowa . This article is posted here for personal use, not for redistribution.

Recommended Citation

Jellison, Katherine. "Harvest of Hazards: Family Farming, Accidents, and Expertise in the Corn Belt, 1940–1975." *The Annals of Iowa* 76 (2017), 456-457.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.12442>

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](#)

Wisconsin on the Air is a welcome contribution to the extant literature about American broadcasting, which is disproportionately devoted to descriptions of commercial pioneers. It is a history full of interesting personalities, political conflict, and struggles to recognize and adapt to changing competition, radio listeners' habits, and technological change. The methodology is an effective and credible approach for similar institutional histories in Iowa.

Harvest of Hazards: Family Farming, Accidents, and Expertise in the Corn Belt, 1940–1975, by Derek S. Oden. Iowa and the Midwest Experience Series. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2017. xi, 251 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$65 paperback.

Reviewer Katherine Jellison is professor of history at Ohio University. She is the author of *Entitled to Power: Farm Women and Technology, 1913–1963* (1993).

In this long overdue history of the farm safety movement, Derek S. Oden provides a thorough accounting of how midwestern farm families, agricultural organizations, government agencies, safety experts, and farm implement manufacturers made mid-twentieth-century farming a less dangerous occupation. Although the various players in the campaign to improve farm safety did not always seamlessly coordinate their efforts, their common crusade produced results: The Corn Belt farm was a safer place to live and work in 1975 than it had been in 1940.

Oden begins his study of the farm safety movement with the World War II-era effort to reduce farm accidents as part of the national campaign to increase overall agricultural production. During that time of national unity, midwestern farmers, industrial safety experts, and government agencies shared a common premise: safer farming would maximize production of food, fiber, and fats for military use. Following the wartime emergency, interest in improving farm safety continued as increased mechanization and greater reliance on the use of chemicals raised new concerns about the hazards of postwar farming. Agricultural colleges, farm implement manufacturers, and 4-H clubs were just a few of the institutions that raised awareness of farm safety issues by providing equipment demonstrations, tractor driving courses, farm safety contests, advice literature, and other prescriptive measures to lessen the dangers of farm work. During this educational phase of the safety movement, farm families largely embraced its principles and goals. Only when employee and consumer protection activists of the 1960s and 1970s called for greater government regulation of the conditions, equipment, and products of the American workplace—including the family-owned farm—did midwesterners begin to question the efficacy of the farm safety movement. Farm operators began to view safety

experts as intruders who were attempting to disrupt traditional patriarchal control over the farm family's maintenance and use of agricultural equipment. When the credentialed experts called for stricter state regulation of farm machinery — such as proposed legislation mandating installation of rollover protective systems on all farm tractors — Corn Belt farmers and implement manufacturers balked. The era of cooperation among farmers, educators, industrial safety experts, manufacturers, and the government thus came to an end. Oden appropriately concludes his study with this collapse of the original farm safety coalition. Examination of the movement beyond the mid-1970s, he states, is better left to “a separate work focusing on that period's unique aspects” (4).

Oden recounts his story of mid-twentieth-century farm safety in thorough, workmanlike fashion. His numerous sources include oral histories with midwestern farmers, local newspaper accounts, farm safety periodicals, extension service and 4-H publications, and the papers of Iowa-based farm safety specialist Norval Wardle. Although his study deals with the entire midwestern Corn Belt, most of his evidence is centered in Iowa, and the book's photographs of mid-century farm life are all from collections housed at the State Historical Society of Iowa. Oden neglects to provide any dates or specific locations for these Iowa farm scenes, however, and he does not identify the men, women, and children portrayed in these rich visual sources. These omissions are particularly puzzling given the exhaustive detail with which the author otherwise covers his subject.

Harvest of Hazards is nevertheless an important study of a topic that historians have largely ignored. It provides necessary context and background information for anyone wanting a better understanding of contemporary farm safety debates, as well as those interested in the history of mid-century Corn Belt farming more generally. Historians of both U.S. public policy and U.S. agriculture will find it useful reading.

Invisible Hawkeyes: African Americans at the University of Iowa during the Long Civil Rights Era, edited by Lena M. Hill and Michael D. Hill. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2016. x, 230 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$20.00 paperback.

Reviewer Patrick Naick is associate professor of English at Coe College, where he also coordinates the American studies and African American studies programs. His research interests include twentieth-century African American literature and American urban studies.

In the summer of 2016, just a few months prior to this book's release, author James Alan McPherson died in Iowa City. McPherson, the first African American to win the Pulitzer Prize for fiction, was alumnus and