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Corn Huskers and Master Farmers:

Henry A. Wallace and the Merchandising of Iowa Agriculture

by Richard S. Kirkendall

Richard S. Kirkendall was the featured speaker at the State Historical Society's 1983 Annual Banquet. The following article was prepared for that event, and it is with a great deal of pleasure that I am able to publish it in this issue of the Palimpsest.

—Ed.

Fifty years ago, Henry A. Wallace became secretary of agriculture, an event worthy of note by people interested in the history of the state for this Iowan became one of the most important occupants of that high office, surely the one with the biggest impact on the state and nation. One point that deserves attention, however obvious it is, is that the philosophical outlook he brought to his tasks in 1933 had been largely shaped by his experiences in Iowa. Two lively events that he sponsored as editor of *Wallaces' Farmer*, the corn husking contest and the Master Farmer program, just as well as his more weighty proposals on farm policy, support important generalizations about that outlook: Wallace strongly believed that farming and rural life were of great importance to the nation's welfare; he feared the direction of population movements in the state and the nation, and he designed and promoted proposals and programs to check the decline of the rural population. During his years as editor, which ran from 1921 to 1933, a period of crisis in Iowa's agricultural history, he gave these contests to the state, hoping they would work against a population trend that, in his

view, threatened the quality, even the survival, of American life.

Wallace wrote frequently of the declining farm population and its meaning for the future. If present trends continued, he predicted in 1929, the United States would soon have "about twenty-five million people living on the land and a hundred and fifty million people living in the towns and cities." While such a mix might have some benefits, it would be highly unstable and seemed certain to have only a short life, in part because a nation with such an unbalanced population would surely blunder badly in handling its food problems. "After people in the towns have been more than a generation away from the farm they lose all sympathy with the farmer and all knowledge of his situation," Wallace maintained. "Such a situation is full of peril, once the prices of food begin to soar, as they inevitably will some day."

Although not greatly alarmed by the existing population mix in the state, Wallace did worry about the kind of civilization toward which it was moving. Iowa shared in the nationwide trend. Its rural population had dropped from a high of 1,255,000 in 1900 to 1,019,000 in 1925, a fall of more than 200,000, while its urban population had grown from 975,000 to 1,401,000, an increase of over 425,000. The balance had tipped toward the city, but not seriously so. Yet what lay ahead? "How big a population can we maintain in the cities of Iowa?" he asked in 1926. "How far can we go in the direction of making farms merely places where men work efficiently rather than homes for families?"

The quality as well as the quantity of rural people concerned him, and that concern focused his attention on the decisions made by rural boys as they approached their adult years. He recognized that some must leave the farms for about 17,000 babies were born on Iowa's farms each year while only about 7,000 rural people died and the extra 10,000 could not be used to advantage on the farm, but he hoped that the most intelligent boys would enter farming and that the less intelligent would be the ones who moved to the cities. "We can



Fred Stanek of Fort Dodge, winner of four national corn husking championships, hard at work during the 1925 Iowa meet. (courtesy Herb Plambeck)

spare a few of our farm boys to become doctors, lawyers, editors, etc., and a larger number to work in the factories, machine shops and garages," he advised in 1928. "The farm boys we want to hold on the farm are those who have real common sense and intelligence, a love of their fellowman and a vision of building up a fine community and a fine national civilization based on agriculture." By the time he offered this advice, he had designed two contests to influence those boys.

In 1921 his father had moved to Washington, D.C., to become secretary of agriculture, and H.A. had taken on the editorial responsibilities for the family newspaper. Soon he began to promote a corn husking contest. Local contests had been held earlier, but he advocated a state championship. A desire to test the skeptical notions of an opinionated farmer with whom he liked to visit supplied the initial stimulus, but Wallace quickly saw other values that could be served. At first he emphasized increased efficiency as the goal. Farmers spent a great amount of time husking corn, yet improvements had come slowly and opinion was divided on the best husking tool, the "peg" or the "hook."

Writing during what has often been called the "golden age of spectator sports," Wallace made use of enthusiasm for sports to generate interest in his proposal. "If the spirit of athletic contests could be applied to corn husking, it is probable that we should soon become much more efficient," he predicted. "We believe that a genuinely good corn husker is entitled to more fame than the man who made the touchdown for Iowa against Yale University." Making such an appeal and offering a prize of \$50 to the winner, he urged Iowa farm men and boys to enter the contest.

Elaborating on this theme of the rewards that farmers deserved, the farm editor called attention to what he regarded as a good practice in the new Soviet Union. There, Lenin was



The contestants and crowd ready for the start of the 1926 Linn County corn husking contest, held at Marion, Iowa. (courtesy Herb Plambeck)

making "economic heroes" out of men who increased production spectacularly. "What most of us want more than anything else," Wallace assumed, "is to stand well in the eyes of the community, and it is fitting that those men who contribute most to the community's welfare should gain the most prestige." Thus, he proposed that the United States should recognize economic heroes. Aware that men such as Edison and Ford had already achieved such status, he wanted to recognize "men who have added greatly to the productive power of the community by doing things unusually well with their hands," such as husking over 130 bushels in a day. "We in the United States are

too prone to give praise and wide publicity to athletic heroes and at the same time overlook the economic heroes," he concluded.

With Henry writing the article, *Wallaces' Farmer* gave prominent, full-page coverage to the outcome of the first contest. He divided the prize between two contestants: Louis Curley of Lee County and John E. Pederson of Iowa County. Curley was recognized as the champion for he had husked at the fastest rate, but Pederson shared in the prize money for he had husked the largest number of bushels. Functioning like a sportswriter, Wallace described the physical makeup of the contes-

Corn huskers and spectators return from the field and await the final results, possibly on the occasion of the 1926 Iowa meet. (courtesy Herb Plambeck)



tants and the tools they used. (Both used hooks.) And he challenged "any two football players from Iowa University's championship football team" to try "to husk as much corn in a day as Louis Curley can husk by himself." Curley was a farmer, a tenant farmer, but Pederson was not. He was a baseball umpire! "He umpires games between the country town teams of the state during the summer and when fall comes on, husks corn," Wallace reported.

By fall 1923 interest in the contest had grown. Farm Bureaus were involved, holding township and county contests; *Wallaces' Farmer* increased the prize money to \$100 for first place, and about 1,000 spectators watched the eighty-minute final near Des Moines. Greater efficiency continued to be held up as a goal; so were recognition and prestige. And Wallace repeated the comparison with sports, expressing hope that soon "Iowa's champion corn husker will have more favorable publicity than the star football player or the crack hurdler at the university."

This time, John Rickelman of Lee County emerged as the victor, using the thumb hook. "Curley displayed splendid sportsmanship," Wallace reported proudly. "He had been 'off feed' for several days and was 'all in' at the close. Just the same he took his disappointment like a man and was among the first to congratulate his neighbor." After describing the physical and personal characteristics of the top finishers, Wallace turned to their techniques:

All the men used about the same style of husking except Rickelman. Rickelman [had] an unusually powerful grip and instead of turning his left hand over with the thumb down so as to elevate the ear he [had] his thumb up. . . . We hope in the future to get more definite comparisons of the Rickelman and the standard type of hook husking. The question is, can a man less powerful than Rickelman use a method demanding such a strong grip in the left hand?

A week later, Wallace reported that the Iowa champion had defeated a challenger from Illinois backed by a Chicago manufacturer of husking hooks. The challenger had, according to Wallace's description, "a free and easy, rhythmical swing which [made] his husking rather prettier to watch than the Rickelman husking." The Iowan won a total of \$150 in the two contests, but the farm editor believed he had "returned to the state of Iowa value far greater than this. Thousands of powerful huskers will adopt his method and thus increase their ability five or ten bushels per day." They would be helped by films made of the contests.

By the mid-1920s Wallace had even more in mind than greater efficiency and prestige. He hoped that farmers would develop a "feeling of workmanship" in husking and other farm activities. "Pride in our work," he wrote, "will help us to live more pleasantly thru the hard years until production is finally readjusted and farm products are again selling as high as they should." Pride in farming might, in other words, counteract the pressure from low farm prices to move to town.

With the journalist supplying much of the leadership, the contest continued to develop and grow. Rules and procedures were clarified, elaborated, and improved. Counties held qualifying events, with impressive performances in them becoming the chief way of getting into the state event, in which the number of participants was kept small. Many organizations got involved in the staging of the contests, and public interest grew. Attendance at the state meet reached nearly 20,000 by 1930. Illinois and Nebraska, later Minnesota, Indiana, Missouri, and Kansas, introduced state contests of their own, enabling a Midwest championship to be held, beginning in 1924. Fred Stanek of Webster County, Iowa, won the first Midwest championship, and he was champ again in 1926, 1927, and 1930. In 1931, 60,000 attended what was by then called the national

championship. It was held in Grundy County, Iowa.

Wallace was ecstatic! "Probably never before in the history of the corn belt have so many strictly farm folks been gathered together on one farm," he exclaimed. He hoped that future organizers would "line up extensive experiments with fertilizers, different varieties, different kinds of machinery, and a dozen other things of that sort, so that the crowd can have the advantage of learning something in compensation for the gasoline and time spent in going to the contest." He warned that the crowd would become so large that the huskers "will not be able to husk at all." Nevertheless, he was very pleased with what had been accomplished: "There were twice as many people there as had ever attended a football game in Iowa, more than ever [had] been gathered in a similar area at the state fair, and yet there was less confusion and infinitely less rowdiness than you find in a crowd of a few thousand coming out of a hall in Chicago." He obviously found a corn husking contest superior to a football game, and rural folk superior to city people.

Throughout the early years of the contest, Wallace supplied elaborate coverage. He described the huskers and performances rather like a sports commentator portraying a boxer, a baseball batter, a golfer, or a runner (or a race horse). "Fred [Stanek] is the most powerful and at the same time the most graceful man I have ever seen husk," he wrote in a typical description. "Harmon, the new champion, looks something like Red Grange," he observed in 1928. He evaluated the different types of hooks and pegs that were used. He explained the differences in output from man to man and event to event. "Balko was probably the best husker, altho the breaks of the game gave the decision to Welch," he commented on one contest. "Welch was harvesting in Land No. 3, not far from the barn, where



Spectators closely followed the huskers' progress through the field, as the tight gathering around E.H. Hendricks, Grundy County, illustrates in this 1931 contest photograph. (courtesy Herb Plambeck)

more manure had evidently been spread, and where the ears averaged around 155 to the 100 pounds, whereas Balko was harvesting in Land No. 12, farther away from the barn, where the ears were running better than 170 to the 100 pounds." He also offered advice as to ways of improving performances, suggesting, for example, that all one husker needed to do was "to leave a little less corn behind him in the field, and he will be one of the leading contestants for [the] state championship in another year" and that "while it is disastrous to leave behind many ears which are more than six ounces in weight, it is a mistake to pull the husks off too carefully." And he displayed intense interest in how Iowa did in competition with its neighbors.

Like many other sportwriters, Wallace held up the champions as men to be imitated for their moral qualities. As he wrote of one Mid-

west winner: "He lives on his own farm and does not smoke, chew nor swear. . . . He is a good example to many other young corn huskers who seem to think that it is smart to smoke cigarettes and to use strong language."

The contest had, in Wallace's eyes, become even more than a way to reform the morals of young Iowans. He had come to see it as a means of combatting the population trends that troubled him. Thus, the rapidly growing interest in the event pleased him very much. In 1925 he had reported that Dazzy Vance, regarded by many as "the best pitcher at work in either of the big leagues," had been born and raised in rural Iowa, and he suggested that the problem was "to make the thousands of potential Dazzy Vances who are now growing up on the farms of the corn belt feel that they have a chance to win fame even tho they stay on the farm." Since the press paid almost no attention to unusual farm exploits, "our Dazzy Vances go where they are appreciated." Three years later, however, it seemed to Wallace that his contest had become

"one of the accepted fall sports." It received extensive newspaper and radio coverage. "All over the corn belt," he wrote, ". . . folks waited around to hear the radio announcement of the winner of the national contest." Now, every boy who husked corn could "picture himself in a year or two competing before thousands for substantial prizes and for the distinction that today means as much as distinction in any field of athletics."

Unlike baseball, however, the life of the contest was threatened by technological change, and Wallace recognized that. As early as 1924 he reported that "Folks at the contest had a chance to compare expert human huskers with the mechanical kind. A one-man outfit, including a wagon, corn picker and tractor to draw both, started with the gun with the rest of the pickers. The mechanical picker put about three times as much corn in the wagon in that time as the fastest husker." A small number of machines had already been sold in the state; many farmers were convinced that eventually they would replace corn huskers, and some men predicted that the machines might soon make the contests unpopular. (They might also have prophesied that the machines would persuade some former corn huskers to move to town.) "In time the corn husking contest may share the fate of the old-time hay cutting contest," Wallace wrote four years later. "The mechanical corn picker may put the hand husker, with his peg or hook, in the same class as the old-time hay harvester, with his scythe. . . . Athletic contests based on farm jobs are bound to change with the times." Nevertheless, he was confident that, while they lasted, the corn husking contests were making "a valuable contribution to the farm in lending to a gruelling fall job the zest of spirited competition and playful sport."



John P. Wallace, left, presenting the Wallaces' Farmer trophy to Lee Carey of Marshall County, winner of the 1931 Iowa contest. (courtesy Herb Plambeck)

Long before the corn husking contest died and well before Wallace left Iowa for Washington, D.C., he developed another con-



By the late 1920s and early 1930s thousands of spectators showed up for corn husking contests. The crowd for the 1931 Iowa state championship meet is suggestive of the high level of spectator interest. The 1931 national meet, also held in Iowa, attracted 60,000 spectators. (courtesy Herb Plambeck)

test with a similar purpose but a longer life expectancy. In 1926 he began for Iowa a Master Farmer contest, copying a practice begun the year before by a Chicago-based journal, the *Prairie Farmer*. Henry C. Taylor, former chief of the Bureau of Agricultural Economics of the Department of Agriculture, commended him for doing so, writing that the new contest would “show that while corn belt farmers have been putting forth a strenuous effort to secure a more equitable price ratio, they have in no way overlooked the prime importance of doing everything they can to help themselves.” But the contest involved more than such a demonstration. It was, at least in Wallace’s eyes, a method of affecting the ways in which farmers perceived themselves and were perceived by others and of influencing the size and quality of the rural population.

In selecting Master Farmers, Wallace and his associates looked at more than farming practices and the profits and soil building realized from them. The judges also considered contributions to the community and such matters as education of the children, physical conditions in the farm home, and leisure. *Wallaces’ Farmer’s* motto — “Good Farming, Clear Thinking, Right Living” — supplied the basis for the scorecard employed. The people

selected, Wallace pointed out, “are those who are helping to build a sound rural community and a sound rural civilization as well as providing for themselves and for their families.” Friends and neighbors nominated farmers for the honor; the field editor of the magazine, Jay Whitson, interviewed the most promising candidates and other people in their communities, and a three-judge panel that included Wallace made the final decisions, selecting more than a dozen masters each year.

Although good farming practices were not the only criterion for success in the contest, the improvement of such practices was an obvious aim. Wallace assumed that the farmers of the period were living through an “agricultural revolution” in which methods were changing rapidly, new competitors were rising, and shifts in the price level, international trade, and eating habits were complicating the situation. Further, he assumed that those who survived in agriculture would be the ones who were most alert and adaptable. “One of the best guides to successful farming practice is the experience of leading farmers who have been able to meet these new conditions,” he believed. “The Master Farmers . . . are examples of what can be done.” So the paper reported on their activities.

The contest had other aims, including changing the prestige or status of farmers, a task that seemed essential. "Honors and popular approval are among the desired rewards of living," Wallace argued. "Since the farmer is in no danger of becoming a millionaire and earning attention in this way, it seems especially important that a proper share of the more intangible rewards should be his." He should not be forced to depend solely on his own sense of satisfaction or the applause of his family. "The man who can take care of his own business satisfactorily, who can raise his children in the way they should go, and in addition find time to lead community affairs, deserves to stand well in the eyes of his neighbors," the editor maintained. "He also deserves to stand well in the eyes of the business men of Iowa." An aim of the program, he explained in 1929, was to



Winner of the 1935 Iowa and national corn husking contests, Audubon County's Elmer Carlson poses "with an armload of his favorite ammunition and wearing a smile that runs about 85 bushels to the acre." (courtesy Herb Plambeck)

"honor the farmers who deserve honor." Many people misused the term "fame," he argued. Its true meaning was "the recognition of distinguished work by folks capable of knowing a good job when they see it." All people worked for and wanted fame; farmers were "denied it too often," but the contest was changing that. "We still don't give as much honor and applause to great farmers as we do to great athletes, but we're making a start," he concluded after several years of the contest.

Wallace hoped the program would have a broad impact, affecting both rural and non-rural people. "The recognition accorded farmers who are not only leaders in operating their farms, but likewise in community development, is not only an inspiration to those who receive the honor," he observed, "but also to other farm folks who have the ambition to make their efforts to build a prosperous agriculture and a prosperous community count for the most." Beyond that, the contest aimed to give agriculture "the standing it ought to have in the eyes of the non-agricultural world." The contest proclaimed, he explained: "Here is work that is the most important in the nation. Here are men who are efficient producers, who are expert business men, who are unselfish community leaders, in this most important field." The contest showed to "the people outside of agriculture something of the vigor and the virtues that agriculture, at its best, seems to develop in those who trust to it for a livelihood." If the work of leading farmers was not brought to the attention of urban dwellers, they would not appreciate the enormous amount of energy and talent at work on the farm, would not realize how productive and efficient farmers were, and would minimize the importance of agriculture and underestimate the value of suggestions on national policies from farm organizations. The program cost *Wallaces' Farmer* "a good deal of money and . . . work," but it seemed worthwhile, Wallace argued, "in order to impress the



Carl Carlson, middle, winner of the 1936 Iowa meet and brother of the 1935 Iowa contest winner, Elmer Carlson, receives his trophy in front of the contest scoreboard from A.T. Thompson, representing Wallaces' Farmer. On Carlson's left is E.H. Hendricks, runner-up in the 1936 Iowa contest. (courtesy Herb Plambeck)

importance of agriculture on other groups, and to let our boys and girls on the farm see that distinction can be achieved by hard, intelligent, cooperative work on the farm and in the farm community."

As with the corn husking contest, a major aim was to hold good people on the land. Wallace assumed that Iowa farm boys were often "discouraged about farming" because it did not offer "intangible" rewards and that the farm would mean more to them "as a field of future activity" if they could "see outstanding accomplishments in farming getting due recognition." Many made poor selections of heroes, a matter of considerable importance. They saw "fame of a sort going to relatively unimportant men" and wondered why it was "necessary to be a ball player or a prize fighter or a successful speculator in order to win the admiration of the crowd." Even some who liked farm life saw "the honors and attention going to men in the cities" and wondered if the city was "therefore the place to go." Thus, the Master Farmer program aimed to "make distinction in farming take on its proper importance in the eyes of farm boys." It held up "to the young people on the farms an example worth following" and tried to "turn the attention of farm boys to the size and the importance of the farm job." By

1930 Wallace was confident that the contest had "dramatized excellence in farming for thousands of young people."

As Wallace's words suggest, he was trying to solve a somewhat puzzling problem. He assumed that farming was a superior activity, yet he saw rural areas losing population. In the flamboyant 1920s, publicists threw the spotlight on pursuits that he regarded as inferior and captured the imagination and ambition of boys that rural America needed for its continued welfare — and that of the nation. Thus, the farm journalist fought back, using the tools of the new public relations industry, employing new techniques for conservative purposes.

A few critics accused Wallace of elitism, although without using the term, and did not do so unfairly. Wallace did hope that a large number of people would continue to farm and dissented from a national policy that seemed to be designed to force large numbers to move to the city. But he assumed that he had special responsibilities to the readers of *Wallaces' Farmer*, to do what he could to help them survive in the struggle for existence in farming, and he assumed also that a high percentage of his readers were in a small class of superior farmers. One critic challenged this class bias,

asking how many of the Master Farmers "started out with nothing but their own hands and health" and how many "inherited a good farm to start with," and suggesting that attention should be paid to farmers who had been less fortunate. "I would like to hear about the fourteen most unfortunate farmers in Iowa, because I am sure that it would make quite a contrast to the account of the fourteen Master Farmers," he wrote. "It would be interesting and stimulating to our sympathies, although perhaps not very profitable, to search out the fourteen unluckiest farmers in Iowa," Wallace replied. "We could make out a score card for them, giving points to ignorance, laziness, slack business methods, lack of conveniences and out-of-date machinery." Thinking perhaps that his words might seem harsh, he went on to suggest that there were "slums on the farms as well as in the cities, but that we do not have any organized way of taking care of our farm unfortunates as they have in town," and he agreed that his critic had made a good point in asking for thought about the class structure of rural Iowa. Suggesting that the class system there was a recent development, he concluded: "In the pioneer days, the contrast between the best farmers and the worst farmers in a community amounted to very little. Today, the gap is enormous and is continually growing wider."

The criticism persisted briefly. A second reader complained that Wallace concentrated on farms and farmers that were "well fixed" and had the means "to run their farms to the best advantage." He wanted to read more about farmers who were in the "same fix" as he was and were "unable to get enough money to farm as they know they ought to farm." Wallace recognized that there were "hundreds of thousands" of farmers like this in the corn belt but had nothing to suggest other than that they "should have a heart to heart talk with their local banker, in an effort to get him to work out with them a practical soil-building program which will get them into a sounder situation

within four or five years."

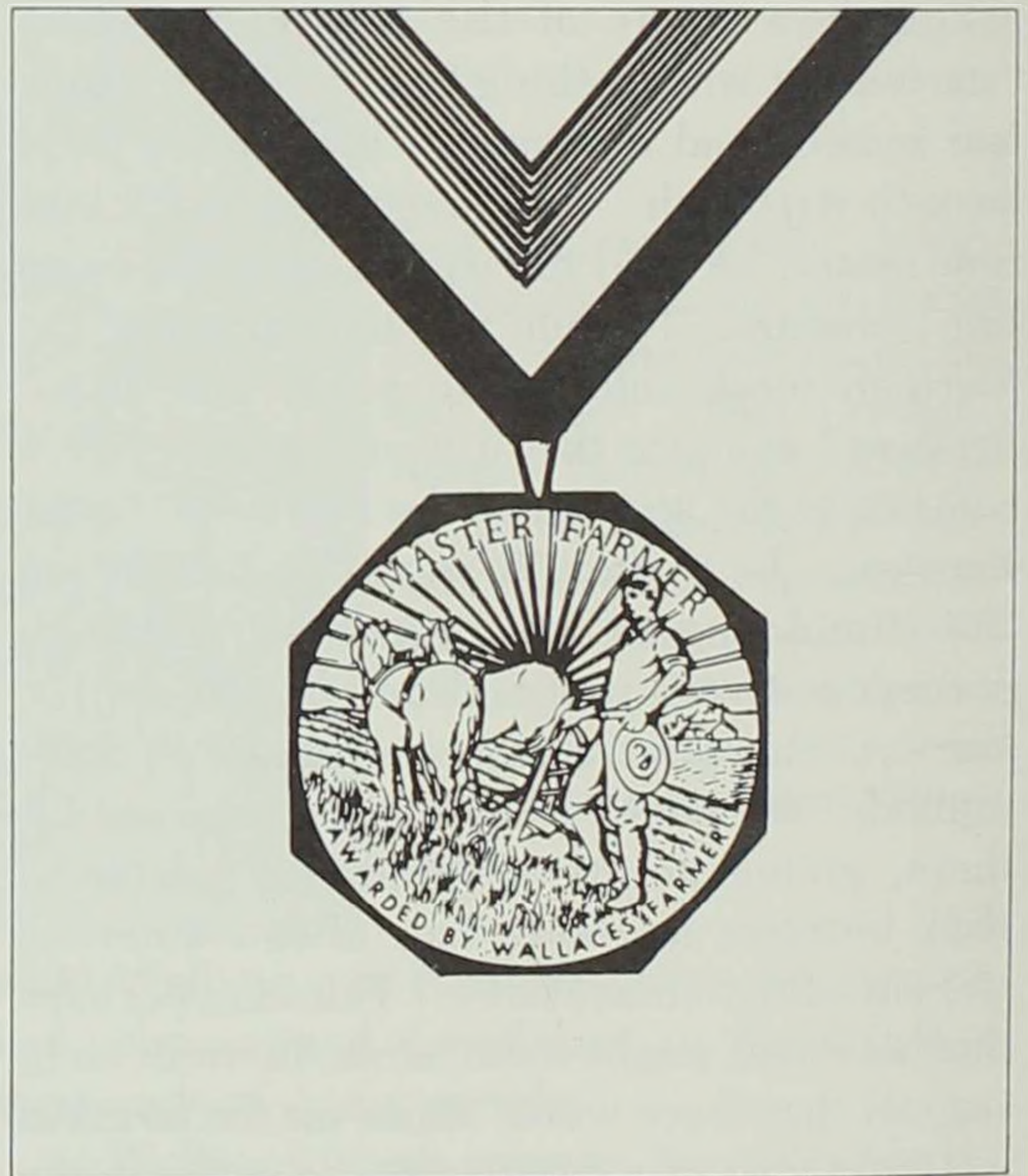
Such men were not Wallace's chief concern at the time. He was more concerned about the people of high ability who were leaving rural America. "It seems to me that the men who have the foresight, ability and money to build up their soil, are just the kind of men to make incomes of five thousand dollars a year or more in the cities," he suggested. "Many men of such abilities, therefore, find their way to town, where they feel that there is more satisfaction for themselves and their families than on the farm."

Wallace seemed no more than mildly troubled by these criticisms, perhaps because they were not expressed in the forceful, insistent way that he would encounter when, as secretary of agriculture, he ran into the class system of the rural South. He recognized that Master Farmers were no more than a narrow elite, arguing that "only about one farmer in a thousand is deserving of the title," and he realized that "in some places there is a prejudice against the whole Master Farmer idea." He permitted himself to suggest that it might be "a mistake to honor those who are more fortunate" and that perhaps "we should spend more of our time thinking about those who are not born right and not trained right," but he believed more strongly that if more farmers worked to become Master Farmers the results would be "beneficial rather than otherwise." For Master Farmers were "much interested in the general social and economic situation" and wanted to "know how the general situation is affecting not only themselves but also their neighbors." If the impossible happened and all farmers became Master Farmers, "it would be very easy to form large cooperative organizations to control production and marketing."

Although the Master Farmers were an elite, they did not owe their standing solely to inheritance or great wealth. "Some started with nothing but their hands — and some good brains," Wallace generalized in 1932; "some had the

doubtful help of being left farms with heavy mortgages attached.” They were financially successful — or as much so as the times permitted, but financial success was not the sole test. The farmer’s work in the community and his role as head of a farm family were more important. The Master Farmers, Wallace proclaimed during the depths of the Great Depression, “indicate the promise of Iowa agriculture. In a year of discouragement, it is heartening also to think of a man starting life as an immigrant boy, doing a careful and unpretentious job of farming, reaching a position of financial security, and coming to be the sort of community leader and good farmer each of us would like to have living on the next farm.”

Had the term “sexist” been available, Wallace’s non-political programs would have been vulnerable to that charge. A few years earlier, another prominent Iowan, Herbert Quick, had argued that the discontent among farm women was the major force behind the movement to the cities, but Wallace’s programs did not address that discontent, at least not directly. He did write at the beginning of the Master Farmer competition: “In strict justice, duplicate medals should have been given to the wives of each of these men. No farmer ever reached the first rank without the help of an able wife.” And in 1932, he did recognize, for the first time, a woman as a Master Farmer, Mrs. J.E. Hoopes, a widow from Muscatine County. Furthermore, he found much validity in Quick’s thesis. Wallace was “quite sure that one of the greatest drawbacks to farming is that few women like the farm.” They disliked the hard work, the lack of modern facilities, and the sparse social life. “I am sure that there are thousands of men who would be on the farm today if it were not for this feeling on the part of their wives,” he wrote in 1927. “Of the families that leave the farm I suspect that women are responsible for the departure of more than half.” He saw signs that attitudes were chang-



Each Master Farmer received a gold medal. Wallace's Farmer's motto — “Good Farming, Clear Thinking, Right Living” — and the name of the Master Farmer appeared on one side of the medal. On the other side was the image of a farmer standing behind a plow, with the words “Master Farmer” above and “Awarded by Wallace's Farmer” below the image. (courtesy Ervin J.J. Koos)

ing and predicted that they would change “very rapidly when household conveniences become more widely spread.” But the “outstanding change needed” was “to build up farm communities which will not look to town for their social life.” Otherwise, “large numbers of farm women” would “insist on moving to town” as soon as the family could afford to do so. He was “beginning to think that the farm problem” was “as much a problem of the farmer’s wife” as it was of anything else, and he feared that even when the farmers got a fair share of the national income, the “farm wife problem” would not be solved. Yet, although his paper devoted many pages to matters of direct concern to rural women, he personally emphasized rural males.

The corn husking and Master Farmer contests focused on rural males, boys as well as men, and were designed chiefly to encourage them — at least those Wallace regarded as the best — to stay on the land. The contests attested to his high regard for farming and rural life and his great concern about population movements and constituted two of his non-political efforts to check rural decline. The state's farm population continued to fall, doing so at a stepped-up pace after 1940. Corn husking contests eventually died out, victims of

increasing mechanization of the corn harvest, as Wallace had expected, but Master Farmers continued to be recognized. That recognition is one symbol of his large impact on Iowa. □

Note on Sources

This essay rests on the writings of Henry A. Wallace in *Wallaces' Farmer* during his years as editor of that publication. For a related essay on his thinking about farming and rural life during that period see the author's article, "The Mind of a Farm Leader," in the *Annals of Iowa* 47 (Fall 1983), pp. 138-153.