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Sowing the American Dream: Consumer Culture in the Rural Midwest, 1865-1900

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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

SOWING THE AMERICAN DREAM:
CONSUMER CULTURE IN THE RURAL MIDDLE WEST, 1865-1900
VOLUME I (CHAPTERS 1 TO 6)

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

BY

DAVID BLANKE

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

The modern consumer culture is so pervasive in society today that we often lose sight of the important connections that are established and reinforced through purchasing decisions. The products we consume offer visual guides that place us either within or beyond the realm of artificial and often mercurial communities. Whether consciously or by habit, Americans have come to rely on consumption as one of the most prevalent and manifest means by which to express popular political and social sentiments.

The historical profession has attempted to address the origins of this powerful cultural influence. Yet the canon of consumer history has focused only on the most direct expressions of this phenomenon. For this reason much of the historiography is dominated by works on urban, working-class consumers after 1920.

This study is an effort to find the roots of the modern consumer culture. The dissertation focuses on rural consumers of the American Midwest from 1865 to 1900. The "rural consumer ethos" of these farmers provides a unifying concept that highlights the significant changes that took place during this era. This *mentalité* was formed from the common experiences and mores of the region's commercial

agronomists and was based on four loosely connected principles: a demand-driven consumer economy, a commitment to communal economic equality, an effort to apply rationalized efficiency to meet consumer demand, an endeavor to apply standards of fairness and honesty that was part of most Midwesterners' Protestant heritage. These elements were extremely contentious and often self-destructive. In the long run, these inconsistencies made it easier for new and established suppliers to maintain or augment their advantage in the face of organized agrarian opposition.

The prolonged struggle by Midwestern farmers to use their unique cultural and economic cohesion to stave off the splintering effects of consumerism offers contemporary readers a glimpse at the social costs of rampant materialism. Without an honest accounting of these rural ventures, our understanding of the development of America's consumer culture remains incomplete.

INTRODUCTION:

SEEKING THE "LINE OF MAXIMUM HAPPINESS," MIDWESTERN FARMERS AND CONSUMER CULTURE IN THE GILDED AGE.

By the close of the nineteenth century the American economy had undergone a fundamental change. Driven by an intensified rate of large-scale industrialization, new mass-production technologies, the proliferation of decentralized management professionals, and a general increase in discretionary income, the retail economy emerged as the primary engine of economic growth in the United States. This budding mass market was reflected not only in the rapid rise of heretofore unorthodox merchandising techniques, such as the department store and the mail-order catalog, but also in the appearance of a unique consumer culture. The cornucopia of new goods exhilarated many Americans and created a perception of unlimited material abundance that is still with us today.¹

The renowned economist John Bates Clark was one of the earliest to comment on these profound changes. Clark earned his academic credentials while studying at Brown, Amherst, Heidelberg, Germany, and Columbia, and authored some of the most influential economic tracts of his generation. Born in 1847, Clark first appreciated the burgeoning retail culture as a young man selling agricultural machinery to local

commercial farmers. Clark's theories of the late nineteenth century posited that the recent economic changes engendered new moral and social behavior. According to Clark, these modern belief systems contradicted the central assumptions of Classical economics, showing the traditional school to be outdated and overly deterministic. His works demonstrated that Adam Smith and David Ricardo relied too heavily upon independent self-interest and unfettered competition, neglecting the hegemonic aspects of human behavior such as religion, status, and community as corrective forces in the market economy.²

As a utilitarian revisionist, Clark infused the reigning dogma with a beneficial appreciation for the organic nature of society. He believed that the singular attention paid to fiscal accounting by the dismal science overlooked the important social and moral regulation demanded by an ordered community. The quixotic nature of the consumer economy offered Clark provocative evidence for this conclusion. For example, his famed Marginal Utility Theory of Value advocated that the relative worth of a product was determined less from supply or demand and more by the shifting appreciation that society bestowed upon that good. Clark held that this social evaluation was much more than illogical mood swings quickly corrected for by the market, but rather the very engine of economic growth. America's ostentatious industrial economy was in fact wholly dependent

upon these cultural norms by the turn of the century. Clark wrote,

Out of these lists of individual price offers emerge the complete demand schedules, indicating what quantity and quality of commodities will be taken off the market at various prices. It is in response to these demand schedules that the forces of production adapt themselves, so distributing themselves between one use and another as to equalize their earnings at all points.

Clark's efforts were instrumental in turning economists and sociologists toward the evolving demand-based consumer economy in the twentieth century.³

By design Clark intended to contrast the underlying economic principles, what he termed the "static laws," to the dynamic fluctuations of retailing. Yet he also offered an interpretation of the evolving consumer culture which fueled this phenomenon. On the whole, he maintained a guarded optimism in regard to materialism. While his work betrayed a fear of its leveling effects, Clark suggested that the hedonistic pleasure of acquiring a good ultimately outweighed the fiscal pain of working for and then spending capital. In large part, consumer choice became the central unifying element of the modern capitalist economy, replacing the "invisible hand" of the supplier with the "coveting eyes" of the mass-market patron. This is perhaps the most pointed affirmation of Clark's universal belief in a progressive, ordered, and harmonious society -- one that was, by his definition, productive because the enjoyment outweighed the economic anxiety. In a sense, Clark offered

Americans a more appealing, optimistic, and communal prospect than the combative individualistic struggles championed by the social Darwinism of Herbert Spencer and William Graham Sumner.⁴

Clark reflected a faith that many contemporary Americans held: that materialism might provide a passageway to individual gratification while still contributing toward communal harmony. In particular it was hoped that the relative ease of obtaining desired physical comforts granted citizens tangible evidence of this nation's commitment to social and economic equality. Clark went so far as to suggest that the conventional laborer abided in greater ease than even the Robber Baron, who was forced to both display and conserve his newly won wealth. He wrote,

If an earthly Eden is to come through competition it will come not in spite of, but by means of an enormous increase of inequality of outward possessions; but this very change will bring with it a continual approach to equality of genuine comfort. The capitalist may be too rich to sleep, while the laborer becomes so relatively rich that he can live in comfort and rest in peace.

Clark concluded that this new economic order, centered as it was around consumerism, guaranteed the common patron a life lived "near the line of maximum happiness."⁵

Implicit in Clark's analysis is an admiration for the constructive civic aspects of modern mass consumption -- an esteem that beguiles the American psyche to this day. Materialism provides the essential emollient that eases the anguish brought on by the harsh realities of industrial

capitalism. In addition to this pleasure the dominant consumer culture is thought to furnish a large number of Americans the palpable experience in this nation's underlying political principles. In theory, the rapid industrial growth afforded by a domestic, consumer economy leads to new employment opportunities and upward mobility for the masses. Further, the consideration paid by the "Captains of Industry" to the power of consumer demand necessitates changes in production that ultimately reduces prices and makes coveted goods even more generally available. John Bates Clark foreshadowed nearly a century of such wishful thinking when he wrote, "We shall surround ourselves with a profusion of useful things, and so small will be the labor that many of them will cost that it will seem as if genii (sic) had a hand in bringing them to us."⁶

The bitter reality -- that all citizens do not share the same means nor the access to rapid upward mobility -- was often masked by the dramatic economic changes and widespread promise for material equality. Yet some of Clark's contemporaries were more critical in their assessment of the civic consequences ushered in by unbridled materialism. Many writers targeted their attacks on the social ramifications of consumerism without regard to the potential of economic uplift. Still, the positivist tone of Clark's research provides a useful context in which to more fully understand this critique.⁷

Two noteworthy critics were Edward Bellamy and Thorstein Veblen. Both writers represent the two dominant strains of reproach leveled against the new consumer culture. The first appraised materialism based on Protestant concerns for simplicity and self-control. The second relied upon the time-honored traditions of republicanism and producerism.

In the novels *Looking Backward* and *Equality*, Edward Bellamy predicted that twenty-first-century America finally realized its fundamental goals of economic justice and republican virtue. The author's socialist vision, termed "Nationalism," was expressed most directly in his predictions regarding future consumer practices. In the future, all interest in fashion and elitist luxuries were excised from material goods. For example, Bellamy believed that the ultimate victims of the competitive consumer culture in the nineteenth century were middle-class women. By contrast, women in twenty-first-century Boston were freed from the gendered clothing, jewelry, and cosmetics that constituted their earlier cultural prisons. Further, retail outlets for the general consumer consisted of "public stores" that offered a wide variety of low cost, guaranteed goods. As with gendered products, these changes liberated patrons from their dependency upon modern distribution network. To Bellamy, these transformations aided Americans in their attempt to regain self-control and resulted in a

population that again cherished simplicity and utility. The dramatic gimmick of time travel allowed the main characters to compare and contrast two Americas, and generated a thinly veiled censure of contemporary culture.⁸

Bellamy's forecast turns sour from our modern perspective. As we near the twenty-first century we recognize that such a cultural revolution failed to transpire. Yet Bellamy's efforts reflected the notion that many Americans had seriously considered the ramifications of unconstrained consumerism. Significantly, in his sequel Bellamy recognized that the changes to industrial capitalism and individual materialism could not transpire without a revolution. Incited by farmers who rejected the high-priced technology needed for their craft, Bellamy saw agrarian unrest of 1873 as the "beginning of the final or revolutionary period of the pseudo-American Republic which resulted in the establishment of the present system." The forthcoming socialist order possessed a decidedly communal appreciation for materialism. Bellamy's censure of the existing order stands in stark contrast to Clark's guarded optimism.⁹

Thorstein Veblen provided an equally harsh critique while remaining grounded in more traditional analytical methods. Veblen, born in 1861, came of age in rural Wisconsin at the height of the first phase of agrarian unrest. By 1880, Veblen had graduated from Carleton College

under the tutelage of John Bates Clark. Veblen went on to John Hopkins, Yale, Cornell, and finally the University of Chicago where, for a short period he joined other notable progressive critics such as John Dewey and Jacques Loeb before being forced to leave in 1905. Veblen style was sardonic and combative, yet he successfully founded a school of thought that more closely scrutinized the underlying reality of modern materialism.¹⁰

Veblen's appraisal of consumer culture, popularized in his 1899 work *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, highlights the extremely unproductive nature of "conspicuous consumption" as practiced by families of more than moderate means. Sheltered by their considerable assets, these individuals were blind to the larger needs of society. Their fashionable purchases drained capital away from the mass production of goods desired by the vast majority of Americans, thereby increasing unit costs and stultifying the economy. According to Veblen, this prodigal behavior squandered a rare evolutionary opportunity for the capitalist order to progress. Unlike his mentor, Veblen held out little hope that the organic nature of American society or a harmony of economic interests might correct these disruptive practices.¹¹

This negative assessment of the price of materialism has only intensified in the twentieth century. From Robert and Helen Lynd's study of Muncie, Indiana, to Theodore

Adorno and the "Frankfurt School," to Vance Packard, scholars and journalists have returned to modern consumer culture as the source of many of this nation's social ills. Gary Cross notes that after the Second World War, Americans turned away from "democratic leisure" and toward shopping as our national pastime. Buying inadvertently reinforced the "work ethic" that many capitalists feared had been extinguished. As recently as the August, 1995, writer Douglas Coupland offered a list of 55 "statements about the culture" that continue this critique. First among them was his contention that "Abundance renders all issues personal and apolitical." Number eleven stated that "Desire seems to have boiled down to shopping," and number fifty-five suggested that "Your own awareness of your own complicity in the commodification process is no longer any concern."¹²

These palpable tensions created by the transformation of America's retailing practices are the impetus behind the large body of scholarly research that currently exists. Historians have probed consumer practices looking for the origins of the modern consumerism. A loose definition of this modernity emerges from their efforts. The contemporary material culture is dedicated to gratifying the needs of the individual, is primarily directed by large corporations that endeavor to bureaucratize and rationalize the distribution of merchandise, and is promoted chiefly by positivist advertising appeals that highlight a product's benefits to

the personal efficiency of a patron. Two recent publications examine these central principles very effectively.

Jackson Lears latest book, *Fables of Abundance*, goes a long way in demonstrating how the development of a professional advertising industry supported and quite possibly impelled this modernization. Lears maintains that commercials best represent the dynamic cultural values of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America. His interpretation shows how ads created a "symbolic universe" for American consumers that led them away from a more traditional relationship with the material world to one that was individualistic, rational, and oriented toward personal efficiency. According to this view, modern consumerism did not displace the traditional concerns of materialism -- self-control and producerism -- as much as it altered the understanding of these principles. Consumption lost its carnivalesque and exotic character for more staid notions of modern respectability and uniformity.¹³

By contrast, William Leach in *Land of Desire* focuses not on the advertising industry but rather the physical infrastructure that reached out to the mass consumer from 1880 to 1920. The blossoming distribution network of small retailers, mail-order houses, and department stores democratized the access to goods. This transformation obscured many of the traditional concerns over monopolies, producerist values, and the fear of high consumer debt.

While Leach saw pockets of local resistance to these changes, in large part this transition was accomplished by 1920 through the use of modern mass marketing techniques such as novel lighting and dramatic retail space. As retailers gained experience, they used the emerging strength of the distribution system to further manipulate the American public and to overshadow any lingering fears.¹⁴

While the historiography of advertising and consumer culture is wide-ranging, several common themes predominate and provide a general understanding of the modern consumer ethos. Beginning around 1880, suppliers of retail goods gained the upper hand in relation to their patrons. The standardization of mass merchandise lowered the cost but limited the ability of consumers to exact their specifications on those goods, such as quality, variety, or function. In simple economic terms, the new consumer culture was "supply-driven" rather than "demand-driven." Further, the egocentrism bred by materialism left little room for customary communal concerns such as equality or the common good. As noted by Veblen and Bellamy, conspicuous consumption, fashion, and other privatized elements of materialism further separated the individual from their neighbors.

This foundation allows twentieth-century advertisers to successfully manipulate the consumer in order to spur sales of their wares. The modern shopper's endless pursuit of

individual identity through mass-produced goods creates an irrationality that almost begs for the artifice of the pitch. As Jackson Lears notes, advertisers "dematerialized" mass consumption by 1920. The process of acquiring a specific good became secondary to the need to sate the artificial hunger created by the ads. Yet desire can never be fully gratified. Clients are capable of only maintaining a quest for fulfillment through the experience of perpetual shopping. This narcotic effect is only exacerbated by the banality of the products offered, as the psychological promises made by advertisements are always -- and often intentionally -- unmet in reality.

Finally, the economic brawn of large corporations have ingrained these trends into American culture since 1920. The sheer size of many manufacturers, distributors, and retailers often provides them an unfair advantage. They dominate the national airwaves and pay lavishly for the talent of leading advertisers. Their messages are pounded into the minds of the average consumer by simple over-exposure and crass flirtatiousness.¹⁵

While historians disagree over when and where traditional beliefs were jettisoned, most agree that the process was accomplished by 1920. Modernization, whether driven by advertisers or the distribution network of manufacturers and retailers, created tensions that went beyond the pre-modern world view defined by republicanism or

Protestant self-control. Yet these vestiges were important in how Americans understood and described the new ideology.¹⁶

Clearly it is dangerous to offer a complete summary of this diverse and often conflicting historiography. Such an effort invariably omits subtlety and over-simplifies complex historical questions. Unlike many other social constructs that are freer from the control of the marketplace, modern consumption offers citizens few opportunities to successfully manipulate the larger material world. For example three recent studies by Andrew Heinze, Lizbeth Cohen, and Dana Frank, admirably demonstrate these structural limits. All three show that even cooperative and well-organized groups were unable to use consumption as a constructive social tool because of the ensconced forces described above.¹⁷

Given these modern realities, it is little wonder that Edward Bellamy, and to some extent even John Bates Clark and Simon Patten, are often seen today as utopian theorists. Yet beyond Bellamy's simple messages and veiled warnings lay something deeper, a real expectation that as late as 1887 modern consumerism could still be shaped by a democratic society. Our historical perspective shows that in the nineteenth century professional advertising agencies were still in their infancy, that bureaucratic control of the distribution network was limited, and that rationalized

business operations were still a dream. A large body of work has verified that until the turn of the century, American business practices were at best a chaotic free-for-all. The opportunity for organized and economically sophisticated citizens to direct retail consumer operations did exist when Bellamy and others penned their conjectures.¹⁸

Taken in this light, Bellamy's work gains greater significance. The author recognized that extensive labor was needed in order to change the direction of industrial capitalism and its handmaiden, modern consumerism. As noted above, Bellamy ultimately suggests that it was the agrarian unrest of the 1870s which acted as the clarion call for future reform. These "chronic revolutionaries" of the grain belt were not only closely tied to the capitalist order but possessed the means and the organizational skills by which to mount a challenge to the growing hegemony of urban suppliers. This population first recognized and later initiated the greatest challenge to modern consumerism. In order to better understand and contextualize the consumer revolution of the 1920s, we need to know what were the alternatives posed by this population. What common experiences led to their formation? How did these solutions fail, and what does this suggest, given the rich historiography of modern consumer culture? Lastly, what do the actions of these farmers show us in regard to the agrarian unrest of the late nineteenth century?¹⁹

Commercial farmers, particularly in the Midwestern states of Illinois, Indiana, and Wisconsin, were in fact the leading proponents of political and economic reform in the years immediately following the close of the Civil War. These husbandmen were relatively wealthy, suffered from little tenancy, and were responsible for the significant increase in agricultural output both during and after the war. Henry George marvelled that while their wealth made Midwestern farmers "a class which... is the least likely to accept radical ideas," they were the most active in the agrarian unrest of the era. Finally, the region was well settled by 1865, and at the vanguard of the transportation revolution, making these farmers uniquely responsive to shifts in the market economy.²⁰

Economic independence and market participation allowed Midwestern farmers both the rationale and the ability to express themselves politically throughout the Gilded Age. While farmers were not the key leaders of the Independent or Greenback parties, nor central to the enactment of the "Granger Laws" regulating railroad and granary rates, their voices were heard in both local and national elections. In 1875, Charles Francis Adams complained that "politicians and editors of rival factions have vied with each other in flattering [these farmers'] vanity, extenuating his shortcomings, and excusing his misdeeds." Freed from the political control by landlords and local merchants, farmers

were able to express themselves if they so desired.²¹

Most importantly, Midwestern commercial farmers maintained and expressed a unique consumer vision that was grounded in the shared experiences of the region. Ideas such as scientific farming, a positivist and pragmatic stance taken toward commercial agriculture, were popularized in farm journals. Planters advanced resolute views on the role of suppliers of all forms of retail goods. Additionally, local farmers' clubs and later granges staged county and state fairs that were geared to highlight merchandise both for the farm and for personal consumption. Finally, rural consumers explicitly addressed the common fear of ponderous consumer debt brought on by modern retailing practices.

The consumer practices of Midwestern farmers are a central and often ignored component of their socio-economic experience. As a young man working for *Agricultural Advertising* in 1902, the writer Sherwood Anderson suggested that many contemporary retail suppliers overlooked the consumer élan of neighboring farmers. Anderson noted that only recently "big, general advertisers" became aware that rural journals were "tucked up close to the hardest reading, best living class of people in the World, the American farmer." Driving home the point in later contributions, Anderson asked, "Don't you remember how your old daddy used to settle himself down before the fire... and spend long hours pouring over the advertising columns of the farm

papers?" Then as today, few people beyond the grain belts recognized that the seeds of the modern consumer society were already sown in the Midwestern prairie.²²

One aspect of rural consumerism in the Midwest -- purchasing cooperatives -- has been extensively remarked upon by scholars and typifies the treatment of this population in the larger historical analysis. Focus on small independent cooperatives and larger ventures sponsored by the Patrons of Husbandry, also known as the Grange, have been seen as potential links to the Populism of the 1880s and 1890s. The success of the People's Party as a mass movement challenged historians to look for the economic and communal values of rural America that directly supported this coalition. The strong connection between cooperatives, the resulting "movement culture" of the National Alliance, and Populism was first established by Lawrence Goodwyn in *Democratic Promise*.²³

Unfortunately, the momentous weight of this new perspective on the National Alliance captured the Midwestern Grange in its historical orbit. For example, Goodwyn saw the "first fragile foundations of a class consciousness in the nation's farming regions," through local Patron chapters. However, the institution proved unwilling to cross the boundary between fraternal and political action. In Texas local granges failed to recruit and educate farmers on economic and political cooperation -- activities which were

crucial to the propagation of the unique "movement culture" of the later Alliancemen. Goodwyn concludes that the Patrons conservative roots were the source of this political inactivity.²⁴

Yet such an interpretation does a disservice to the millions of active Grangers from 1867 to 1875 who indeed held and expressed a unique and insurgent economic doctrine. As Stanley Parsons *et al.* noted in an article aimed at tempering Goodwyn's conclusions, Grange cooperatives outnumbered those of its more famous cousin. A teleological focus on the People's Party can only show us what Midwestern farmers were not during this formative period.²⁵

The pivotal ideological construct around which this comparison revolves is that of producerism. This belief system has a rich heritage in America. During the Jacksonian era, the producer ethos was tempered by the rapid movement toward a market economy in which labor was commodified. This protocol championed social harmony and communal order over capitalist individualism. Crushed by the depression of 1837, producerism was revived and modified during the 1850s under the new Republican Party. This second iteration was different from the first in that leaders expressed their opinion that property-owners and labor might peaceably coexist within a capitalist frame. Republicans used the slave-holding south as a political foil. They advanced notions of upward mobility and the inherent dignity of labor

that were at odds with the peculiar institution. Through the GOP, producers found a home in market capitalism.²⁶

The People's Party often harkened back to this antebellum producer rhetoric. Historians in the 1950s, led by Richard Hofstadter, concluded that farmers' reliance upon this antiquated and largely pre-modern belief system reflected the underlying conservative and "backward looking" stance of their cause. Rather than facing the challenges presented by the rapidly modernizing economy husbandmen retreated into a bigoted and misanthropic dogma that sought to return farmers to the status promised by the Jeffersonian yeoman ideal.²⁷

The conviction that rural producerism in the Gilded Age was conservative, xenophobic, and "backward looking" has been thoroughly revised since 1955. The interest generated by Hofstadter's compelling thesis led to a new focus on agrarian unrest. Scrutiny has shown that Populism was not anachronistic but rather a logical response to the conditions of the day. As Norman Pollack writes, Midwestern Populism was a "progressive social force... expressed not in terms of pre-industrial producer values, but of a common ideology stemming from a shared critique of existing conditions."²⁸

Despite these efforts, lingering doubts remain about the conservative nature of agrarian unrest in the Midwest. In some sense, farmers attempted to contain the spread of

market capitalism while still benefiting from its largess. Further, while railing against monopolies and unfair advantages, rural Americans were quick to form cooperatives aimed at securing those very same advantages for themselves. Most works on Populism question the logic of such a crusade given the economic realities that existed. The interpretation of the Patrons of Husbandry has suffered at a result of this paradox.

The National Grange of the Patrons of Husbandry was a brief but very extensive fraternal organization for American farmers. Launched in the Spring of 1868, the Order swiftly grew in the west, collapsed, and then was rebuilt by new members in New England and the eastern half of the Midwest. These two phases of the Grange have led to its precarious position in the history of agrarian unrest. Only relatively recently have historians provided a focused revision of the 1913 standard by Solon Buck, *The Granger Movement*. While these efforts have done much to improve our appreciation for the second phase of the Grange, there remains an ambiguity regarding the first.²⁹

The rapid state of flux in the post-war economy, the uncertainty in the historiography regarding the place of the first phase of the Grange, and the complexities of producerist rhetoric have clouded the historical conception of the Patrons of Husbandry. For example and noted above, the presumption that early Grangers did not share with later

Alliancemen political notions of producerism has resulted in a belief that grange cooperatives were in a sense illogical and backward looking when contrasted to these later efforts. The relatively late revision of the Grange historiography only exacerbated this comparison.³⁰

Yet the organized efforts by Midwestern farmers of the 1870s were no more illogical than those of other national groups. The economic changes unleashed by the Civil War and the persistent political traditions of republicanism created great tensions in America's civic fabric. At the national level, political and economic leaders were torn between the activist potential of a strong central government and the conservative tendencies of bigotry, localism, and *laissez-faire*. Further, there were competing notions of what constituted progressive reform. While western farmers and urban merchants believed that railroad and granary reforms were based on patient and level-headed precepts, others such as Charles Francis Adams held that the "Granger Legislatures" proceeded "like so many bulls at red flags."³¹

Historians run the risk of overlooking the significance of belief systems that are described in such paradoxical or illogical terms. An ideology is simply the shared interpretation of many similar individual experiences. People create a descriptive vocabulary that is intended to make sense of their world, and only then express these ideas through group rhetoric and behavior. Barbara

Jeanne Fields demonstrates in her work on racial prejudice that these shared belief systems act almost as living organisms which feed, reproduce, mutate, and can also die for lack of relevancy. Accordingly, ideologies are often irrational and inaccurate depictions of economic verity, but they are nonetheless always real to those who express them.³²

Our understanding of Midwestern farmers needs greater empathy for this ambiguity. Research by Allan Kulikoff and others demonstrates that nineteenth-century commercial farmers were by their very nature a paradoxical population. This class was active as both consumers and producers in the modern market economy. The rural sector also retained strong traditional cultural mores that can best be defined as part of a moral economy. Consequently these husbandmen expressed an understanding of producerism that was tied to the market -- such as a general respect for manual labor and an expectation of upward mobility -- and to their ethics -- communal solidarity, extended family, and a keen sense of what was fair in economic relations. This subtle balance resulted in a fluid expression of producerism that was by no means irrational.³³

This distinction bears fruit in our understanding of Midwesterners' participation in the People's Party. First, rather than ask why this population failed to rally around the populist banner, it is more instructive to recognize the

contingent factors that made Southerners and those in the Great Plains good Alliancemen. Steven Hahn and Jonathan Weiner have demonstrated that farmers in the south constructed more radical notions of producerism in order to support their unique social development. This "Prussian Road" to market capitalism delayed many of the hardships that Midwesterners experienced in the 1870s. In the Great Plains, most farmers were still within the first generation of sod-busting. As a result start up costs were high, tenancy was common, families were physically and socially isolated, and competition with the well established Midwest fierce. Again, regional activists in the 1880s could borrow from antebellum producer rhetoric because conditions were suitable for its application. In a very real sense, the success of the third party was made possible because of the synchronicity of these events.³⁴

The Midwest did not share in the timing of these economic and social patterns. Commercial farmers of the region confronted the market economy much sooner than their southern and western counterparts. Commercialization and the centrality of cash transactions -- for transportation and more importantly for the price that their produce brought in the increasingly structured futures market -- took place in the region well before the Civil War and only accelerated in the ensuing years. Ann Mayhew concluded that agrarian protest during the 1870s was a reaction to the new,

technologically superior form of farming that was reliant upon mechanization and transportation facilities. These components were acquired only with money. Planters were therefore forced to participate in the market economy. For Midwestern farmers accustomed to economic and political autonomy, this development was seen as a move toward coerced dependency.³⁵

The rapid advance of large commercial entrepôts in this region was equally threatening. Chicago, St. Louis, Milwaukee, Cincinnati, and other towns actively campaigned for the control of the rural hinterland. William Cronon's masterful study of Chicago demonstrates how business and political leaders employed urban technology toward these ends. This aggressive market stance induced farmers to expand their participation in the market economy. While Cronon's thesis suggests that rural agency was negligible -- a point disputed in this dissertation -- clearly the outreach by the city and its control over capital resulted in a market footing that was unique to the region and era.³⁶

Social conditions in the rural Midwest shaped the way these economic changes were implemented. From 1840 to 1880 farmers experienced the transformation from the isolation of "island communities" to this market position through the lens of local experience. As entrepôts emerged, planters were torn between traditional and often familial links to the market economy and the less personal connections to the

distant city. Further, farmers were the central focus of local, small town boosters as these villages attempted to survive under the onslaught of the metropolis. This heritage was greatly disrupted by the Civil War, which hurled many Americans into a national controversy for the first time and challenged local beliefs about social harmony and republican virtue.

These volatile economic and social conditions meant that rural belief systems were in a rapid state of flux. For example, during the 1873 post-war recession farmers quickly reconstructed their producer ideology in order to account for the bust. The currency issue proved to be useful in this intellectual evolution. Largely mute on their inclinations toward bimetallism and hard money before 1873, farmers employed the silver issue to validate their conventional notions of natural law, social harmony, and liberalism in order to make sense of this change. In the context of commercial agriculture it may be paradoxical for farmers to object to the normal cycles of industrial capitalism. But in terms of a useful ideology the "money question" provided a context for them to address the real problems of affordable credit, their relationship to an impersonal world market, and the proper function of national legislators.³⁷

The similarity of the "money question" in the 1870s to bimetallism in the 1890s is more than coincidental. Both were seemingly illogical and pedantic considering the

structural realities that were closing in on many yeoman farmers. Goodwyn believed the silver question was merely a "shadow movement," and one of the central factors cited in the defeat of the People's Party. Yet during both crusades farmers utilized the problem as a vehicle by which to better understand the more global changes that were taking place.³⁸

The money question acts as a compass, leading investigators to the historical challenges of commercial agriculture. Conditions in the Midwest exposed that region's farming community to these hazards at an earlier date than in the south and west. The resulting belief system was tied to this place and time. Given that rhetoric is the basis for a shared ideology and that Midwestern farmers developed a unique understanding of producerism by 1873, it was doubtful that when the Farmers Alliance revisited this issue in 1888 Grangers shared their Pauline movement culture.

The unifying theme of this seemingly discordant relationship between rural beliefs and behavior was the farmer's new role as active consumer. Consumerism touched on all of the elements discussed above: the spread of railroads, the growth of urban centralization, currency retraction, rising debt, the need for new technology. Most significantly, farmers expressed their belief that they could control the direction of the modern consumer culture. Their access to material goods in relation to the existing and still evolving distribution system gave farmers the

opportunity to interpret notions of producerism in a particularly modern context. They believed that an opportunity existed -- however fleetingly -- for consumers to retain control of modern materialism and advertising media as no one believes possible today. This consumer perspective shifted the existing priorities and understanding of the consensual definition of producerism. The transformation was the central explanation for why Midwestern farmers no longer shared a meaningful producer rhetoric with later Alliancemen.

Agrarian consumerism was much more than an odd assemblage of shop-worn credos and slogans, but a unique ideological construct. This rural consumer ethos was built upon the solid foundation of farmers' economic and social experiences of the region. The first goal of this ethos was to establish a demand-driven consumer economy. Midwestern farmers created local purchasing agencies and boycotted manufacturers in order that their consumer preferences, and not the bureaucratically controlled availability of certain mass-produced goods, might direct the type, quality, and cost of merchandise. Rural patrons sought to contain the developing supply-driven distribution system and objected most vocally when retailers relied upon exclusive territorial agents. While conventional producerism sought the total control over the distribution system, this new ethos merely demanded a greater responsiveness to consumer

demands.

The incongruities of this doctrine are obvious. Was it reasonable to expect suppliers to bow to the wishes of this population when providers maintained favorable economic leverage? Further, if farmers only sought responsiveness did it matter to them who controlled the process? If not, then how sturdy was their crusade as the repository of shared communal behavior? In the long run, these inconsistencies made it easier for established suppliers, as well as those in Chicago who held access to the new dynamic distribution network, to maintain or augment their advantage in the face of organized agrarian opposition.³⁹

A second leading component of the agrarian consumer ideal was a commitment to communal equality. The common experiences of many Midwestern farmers not only provided the rationale for unified action but also justified their consumer behavior. Through local clubs, granges, and cooperatives, independent farmers established purchasing practices that provided all rural consumers with commensurate economic benefits. Concepts of class solidarity and community were palpable as farmers fought with territorial agents and local retailers in an effort to express their desire for greater control over the distribution process. Organized ventures succeeded by building communal bridges between individual commercial farmers. One farmer in Illinois' Mercer County believed that

such consumer activism was not driven by the various rural organizations, but rather the result of shared and "deep-felt feeling[s] that the times demand a change." Through autonomous experience, farmers came to agree that "this change must be brought about by concerted action."⁴⁰

The deepening "crisis of community" during the Gilded Age only lent farmers added incentive to form local granges. These bodies promoted shared social principles about education, the status of women, and the desire for rituals of belonging through the institution of the Patrons of Husbandry. But more importantly, this communalism made their economic activities possible. In *The Patron's Hand-Book*, published in 1874, John G. Wells wrote that "experience proves... that the members of the society or organization must belong, for the most part, to the same class; must have many interests in common, and must be drawn to each other by such ties that they will feel a deep interest in each other, and be disposed to look out for each other's welfare." Without such fellowship, Wells concluded, purchasing activities were fated to fail.⁴¹

Overlooked by many grangers was the obvious fact that purchasing cooperatives provided benefits only to official members. Outsiders and, later, competitors opined that these assemblies were as exclusive and monopolistic as those they intended to replace. While these claims were often overblown, it was true that many Patrons objected to

providing benefits to non-members. Further, many purchasing agencies were spawned from a direct confrontation with a specific provider. This focus gave farmers' early efforts in a decidedly vindictive patina and biased many small-town retailers against the agrarian consumer ideal.⁴²

A third element of this mentalité was a progressive effort to apply rationalized efficiency in order to meet consumer demand. Based on notions of scientific farming, Midwesterners hoped to refine their existing relationships to agents and new corporate suppliers with an eye toward making their farm operations more businesslike. The most obvious element of redundancy in the mind of many planters was the exclusive territorial agent. As one man succinctly stated the case: "We are not unwilling to support a sufficient number of middle men to do the business, but we do not want such a host of barnacles sticking to our ship."⁴³

Progressive economic reforms were sympathetic to rural communalism. Through collective actions, a farmer exerted pressures to reform the individuals and industries that were once "far beyond his reach," and which prohibited him from "increasing the price of his produce." While providing economic benefits to the entirety of farm operations, these reforms were first and foremost geared to enhance the open expression of rural consumerism.⁴⁴

The interpretation of the morality of a consumer

culture was the last significant element of the unique rural mentalité. Combining the three previous components, this ethic sought an underlying fairness and honesty that was part of most Midwesterners' Protestant heritage. As Paul Johnson demonstrated for Rochester, New York, religious virtue can be utilized by a homogeneous society in an effort to stave off rapid social and economic change. Aiding this morality was the historic appreciation for republican virtue, a concept fresh in the minds of post-Civil War Americans recently challenged to provide their nation with a "new birth of freedom."⁴⁵

Notions of integrity were woven through much of the organized efforts of the Patrons of Husbandry. In a speech to his colleagues, Isaac Beeson, a charter member of the Nettle Creek Grange of Dalton, Indiana, argued that their current consumer position resulted in unfair economic advantages to some while unjustly harming others. He argued that if all Dalton township traded at one store regulated by local farmers, business would be fairer and "goods afforded at a lower percent than under the present system." Beeson added,

Merchants as a class do not make too much for the amount of work that they do, the number who become rich & remain through life are very few, their trade is all uncertainty -- rich today and poor tomorrow. This of itself is evidence that their profits are not honestly earned. But simply a game of fleece & get fleeced. The goods are marked high & the price at which a sale is made depends altogether on the shrewdness & brass of the purchaser. Now at a cooperative store [it] is evident that the same goods can be sold to one person

just as cheap as another, and no cheaper.... [The Grange believes in] stores where we all are interested in its success... [as apposed to] a store run on the usual plan [where] everyone's interest is against the interest of the store.

Such an invective succinctly illustrates the combination of Protestant and secular economic virtue in the rural Midwest.⁴⁶

The fear of market abuses led individual farmers to collective protection. In a second speech, Beeson added that "the old system of competition or everybody skin everybody else" should be ameliorated by grange purchasing practices. The unmerited practice by suppliers who "regard[ed] any profit they can obtain as legitimate" was found to be "too expensive for [farmers] to have to foot the bill." The republican virtue of this practice was heralded by many as the central justification for the pursuit of individual savings via the purchasing agency. A contributor to the *Prairie Farmer* reckoned that "The feeling 'How can I help my neighbor?' predominates as a necessary result. The wants of a neighbor are known, and a brotherly or sisterly pride taken in satisfying that want. Everyone is willing to do his or her part, and a little more if necessary, [so that] many dollars are saved in ways too numerous to mention."⁴⁷

The evolution of this rural consumer ethos has a direct bearing on the debate regarding twentieth-century consumer culture. As was suggested by Edward Bellamy and others, the negative moral implications of materialism were recognized

by this early population. Yet farmers also believed that through collective actions they might avoid many of the greatest difficulties associated with this practice. Their consumer ideology was far from being utopian, unrealistic, or primitive. Rather, the agrarian mentalité sustained collective action because it was based on the real and perceived needs of this homogenous society. Accordingly, a genuine alternative to the modern consumer culture was attempted, with an enthusiastic expectation for success.

Yet farmers were clearly being drawn in two directions during this era -- toward the local community and market individualism. The rural consumer ethos reflected this ambiguity and contained elements of both. One Ripon, Wisconsin newspaper editor suggested that rural purchasing cooperatives were "a dangerous experiment of riding two horses, each going in different directions." The institutional response by the Grange and other farm organizations attempted to have it both ways and suffered as a consequence.⁴⁸

Ultimately this paradox proved unstable. The ideology was too new and too loosely defined, allowing competitors to swiftly copy the outward attitudes of the crusade without furthering its cause. Communal solutions were dependent on a wide range of factors beyond the control of local leaders. To make matters worse, farmers were unskilled at the complex retail operations needed to succeed in business. Their

efforts coincided with the retrenchment by small and medium sized towns which faced stiffening competition from the larger cities of Chicago and St. Louis -- making them particularly aggressive when defending their small home turf. Finally, the economic depression of 1873 -- useful in generating the initial appeal of Grange-sponsored consumer cooperation -- undermined the solvency of many of their efforts.

Grange purchasing cooperatives in the 1870s were the best expression of agrarian consumerism. Their rise and fall throughout the decade traced both the external economic conditions of the era and the intensifying internal contradictions of this ethos. During the decade the Order feverishly debated the relative merits of its two consumer societies: the purchasing agency and the more conservative Rochdale plan.

In many respects, the purchasing agency was the more honest representation of rural consumerism. Based on the very capitalist nature of small farmers, these bodies gave members the greatest flexibility in regard to purchasing goods. One either aggregated his order with other members, or, if the price was right, went beyond the agency to purchase merchandise from traditional suppliers. These outlets offered basic merchandise, such as farm implements, bulked dry goods, and sewing machines, but also an interesting variety of luxury items. These nonessential

goods intimate that rural patrons were moving beyond the simple yeoman lifestyle of traditional republican farmers.

Many local purchasing agencies failed due to operational considerations. For example, local competitors offered temporary price reductions in an effort to undermine the financial stability of these start-up cooperatives. Moreover, farmers were prone to the very paradoxes that were defined in their ideology. They frequently bolted from their communal solutions in order to take advantage in individual savings being offered by competing retailers. The large volume of orders, a general distrust of all middlemen, including those in the employment of the Grange, and haphazard accounting practices added to the agency's woes.

By contrast, the Rochdale plan required members to purchase stock in order to participate in volume discounts. This investment ensured that farmers bought goods only through the Grange cooperative. While reducing the consumer's options, the English-based Rochdale plan fostered community, economic simplicity, and equality among its members. The relative stability of the Rochdale system earned it a reputation among national leaders as the one "true" form of cooperation. In 1875, the National Grange began a concerted effort to replace the purchasing agency with this safer, and more communal alternative.

Yet this rearguard strategy was based on protectionism and limited the ability of farmers to adapt to the ever-

changing market conditions. By design, the Rochdale plan isolated the farmer from the market without changing the underlying conditions of the economy. As such, it subverted the principles -- rural consumer ethos -- that led to its acceptance in the Midwest. While many local Rochdale societies flourished under Grange auspices, after 1880 the Order lost its ability to orchestrate a national consumer strategy.⁴⁹

The construct of agrarian consumerism was free of these institutional limits. Other enterprises proved more faithful in addressing the needs of commercial farmers according to this doctrine. The best example of this fidelity was the Chicago mail-order firm Montgomery Ward and Company. Ward grounded his company in the early Grange principles that were so effective in drawing farmers to the Order. Ward's catalogs demonstrate that the agrarian consumer construct that was abandoned by the Patrons of Husbandry was consolidated into mainstream consumer culture.

Yet the privatization of this belief system left individual consumers at the mercy of the marketplace. With the loss of democratically controlled institutions such as the purchasing agency, regional and national consumer patterns developed that are all too familiar to a modern audience. Firms such as Wards and especially its late competitor Sears, Roebuck and Company utilized new advertising schemes to move the debate away from those

contained within the rural consumer ethos and toward notions of fashion, special one-time offers, and exclusivity. Eventually, businesses successfully appealed to the acquisitive desires of rural consumers.

Given these modern antecedents, consumer practices by Midwestern farmers presage the development of twentieth-century materialism. While these people expressed a desire to defend their own sense of moral and communal rectitude, ultimately individualism and acquisition proved to be more tempting. Their consumer ideology was an attempt to maintain the elusive balance between these two extremes. The loss of communal consensus to consumer desire generated within the farm community the very tensions and individual anxieties that modern suppliers have swarmed to meet.

Their effort foreshadows our own uneasy relationship with modern consumerism. Real alternatives were offered to individual rural consumers. Midwestern farmers believed that they could live near the "line of maximum happiness" only as long as materialism served a larger, communal purpose. Their quest to find this boundary illuminates the limits of our own consumer culture.

ENDNOTES

1. For recent discussions of these structural changes, see Jackson Lears, *Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), 9-13, 18-133; William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993), Introduction; James D. Norris, *Advertising and the Transformation of American Society, 1865-1920* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990), Chapter 1; and Richard L. McCormick, "Public Life in Industrial America, 1877-1917," in Eric Foner, ed., *The New American History* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), 93-117. Also useful are Robert H. Wiebe, *The Search For Order, 1877-1920* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967); David Potter, *People of Plenty: Economic Abundance and the American Character* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954); and Daniel Boorstin, *The Americans: The Democratic Experience* (New York: Random House, 1973).
2. For an overview of Clark's beliefs, see John Bates Clark, *The Philosophy of Wealth. Economic Principles Newly Formulated*, Second Edition (Boston: Ginn & Company, 1904), 174-202; and Clark and Franklin H. Giddings, *The Modern Distributive Process. Studies of Competition and its Limits, of the Nature and Amount of Profits, and of the Determination of Wages, in the Industrial Society of Today* (Boston: Ginn & Company, 1888). See also Paul T. Homan, *Contemporary Economic Thought* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1928), 15-103; and John R. Everett, *Religion in Economics: A Study of John Bates Clark, Richard T. Ely, Simon Patten* (New York: 1946).
3. The Marginal Utility Theory of Value was a general revision of the basic notions of value and distribution. To Clark, "value" was not tied to the supply-demand curve, as suggested by Smith and others, but rather was a stated amount determined by society. Cost changed with the relative changes in social beliefs, hence utility and not availability was the key. Citation in Homan, *Contemporary Economic Thought*, 75-76. Clark's economic mien was in large measure conservative, and usually in fear of a rampant consumer economy. Unlike Karl Marx, who earlier suggested that "commodity fetishes" would unfairly redistribute wealth, Clark's consternation was more traditionally American. By this I mean he disliked the potential loss of self-control and producer values that might be spawned by a consumer society. For more on this, see Leach, *Land of Desire*, Chapter 1; Gary Cross, *Time and Money: The Making of Consumer Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 17-46; and John E. Hollitz, "The Challenge of Abundance" (Ph. D. diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1982), Chapter 1.

4. Rather than simply surviving, Clark suggested that the "fittest" economy would be more pleasurable and responsive to the needs of the average consumer. For Sumner's views, see Robert G. McCloskey, *American Conservatism in the Age of Enterprise: A Study of William Graham Sumner*, Stephan J. Field, and Andrew Carnegie (New York: Harper and Row, 1964); and Robert C. Bannister, "Sumner's 'Social Darwinism,'" *History of Political Economy* 5 (1973): 89-109.

5. John Bates Clark, "The Society of the Future," *The Independent* 53 (July 18, 1901): 1649-1651.

6. *Ibid.*, 1649. For a useful analysis of these hopes and fears, see Lears, *Fables of Abundance*, 46-53.

7. Clark was not alone in his guarded optimism. Simon Patten was also a noteworthy advocate. See Lears, *Fables of Abundance*, 113-117; and Cross, *Time and Money*, 17-25. See also Simon Patten, *The Reconstruction of Economic Theory* (Philadelphia: The Academy of Political and Social Science, 1912), 4; where the author considers himself, Clark, and Franklin H. Giddings founders of the new deductive school of economics which created so much interest in consumer culture. See also Daniel Horowitz, *The Morality of Spending: Attitudes Toward the Consumer Society in America, 1875-1940* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1985), 31-35.

8. For examples of gendered clothing, cosmetics, and jewelry, see Edward Bellamy, *Equality* (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1897), 43-47, 129; for fashion and luxury, see *Ibid.*, 181. See also Bellamy, *Looking Backward: 2000-1887*, The Bedford Series in History and Culture, Edited and Introduction by Daniel H. Borus (Boston: Bedford Books of St. Martin Press, 1995), 78-82. For more on Bellamy and other like-minded authors, see Carl Guarneri, *The Utopian Alternative: Fourierism in Nineteenth-Century America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992); and David Montgomery, *Beyond Equality: Labor and the Radical Republicans, 1862-1872* (New York: Vintage Books, Alfred A. Knopf, 1968).

9. Bellamy, *Equality*, 240-2, 310-11, 324-5.

10. For Veblen and his influence, see Lears, *Fables of Abundance*, 4-6; Homan, *Contemporary Economic Thought*, 107-192; and John P. Doggins, *The Bard of Savagery: Thorstein Veblen and Modern Social Theory* (New York: 1978).

11. While Veblen eschewed Christian morality, he viewed conspicuous consumption in evolutionary terms that belied a distinctive progressive and positivist sensibility. Daniel Horowitz noted that Veblen saw consumerism as spreading the

destructive, "savage qualities" of acquisition within American society. See Horowitz, *The Morality of Spending*, 40. See also Morton G. White, *Social Thought in America: The Revolt Against Formalism* (New York: Viking Press, 1952).

12. Gary Cross, *Time and Money*, 5-13; Douglas Coupland, "Agree/Disagree: 55 Statements About the Culture," *The New Republic* 4,205 & 4,206 (August 21 & 28, 1995): 10.

13. For citations, see Lears, *Fables of Abundance*, 1, 3. The best works on U. S. advertising are Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920-1940* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985); Norris, *Advertising and the Transformation of American Society*; and Daniel Pope, *The Making of Modern Advertising* (New York: Basic Books, 1983).

14. For the loss of republican consumer values, see Leach, *Land of Desire*, 82-84. Yet Leach notes that by 1900 there "were still many places -- rural towns, religious communities, even urban enclaves -- untouched to some degree by consumer capitalist culture." *Ibid.*, 12. See also Lewis E. Atherton, *Main Street on the Middle Border* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1954); Susan Strasser, *Satisfaction Guaranteed: The Making of the American Mass Market* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1989); Thomas Schlereth, *Victorian America: Transformations of Everyday Life, 1876-1915* (New York: Harper-Collins, 1991); Richard S. Tedlow, *New and Improved: The Story of Mass Marketing in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1990); Warren Susman, *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984); and Elaine S. Abelson, *When Ladies Go A-Thieving: Middle-Class Shoplifters in the Victorian Department Store* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

15. For the most vocal proponents of this belief, see Stuart Ewan, *Captains of Consciousness: Advertising and the Social Roots of the Consumer Culture* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976), Preface, Part II; and Christopher Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and its Critics* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1991), 13-39.

16. Lears latest effort is the boldest challenge to the "Veblenesque" critique that consumerism sapped the vitality of America's producerist ethos. See Lears, *Fables of Abundance*, 4-11, 46-73. For examples of historians who do see stark contrasts between a traditional and modern mentalité. See Warren Susman. Susman held that consumerism, coupled with the power of the new visual advertisements, created conflict between the old, Puritan, "producer-capitalist" and the new "culture of abundance." Susman,

Culture as History, Introduction, 19-21. See also Daniel Horowitz, *The Morality of Spending*, Introduction, xii. For ideological construction, see discussion below and Barbara Jeanne Fields, "Slavery, Race, and Ideology in the United States of America," *New Left Review* (May-June, 1991): 95-118.

17. All three have been roundly lauded for their use of consumer culture to expand our understanding of traditional historical subjects. Heinze is most positive about how materialism can be managed by a small population. His work demonstrates how immigrant Jews used consumerism to rapidly assimilate into mainstream society while maintaining their own cultural identity. Cohen demonstrates how modern materialism lowered ethnic and neighborhood barriers between Chicago laborers, and aided in the transformation to New Deal pan-unionism. Frank focuses on the limits of consumer cooperation during the Seattle labor strike of 1919. Andrew Heinze, *Adapting to Abundance: Jewish Immigrants, Mass Consumption, and the Search for American Identity*, *Columbia History of Urban Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990); Elizabeth Cohen, *Making A New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 99-158; and Dana Frank, *Purchasing Power: Consumer Organizing, Gender, and the Seattle Labor Movement, 1919-1929* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 40-65, 87-107.

18. For an overview of existing business practices during the late nineteenth century, see Wiebe, *The Search for Order*, 133-163; Samuel P. Hays, *The Response to Industrialism, 1885-1914* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 50-71; Alfred D. Chandler, *The Visible Hand, The Managerial Revolution in American Business* (Cambridge Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1977); and Lears, *Fables of Abundance*. For more detailed and regional examples of the developing distribution network see William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (Chicago: W. W. Norton & Co., 1991); and Timothy Mahoney, *River Towns in the Great West: The Structure of Provincial Urbanization in the American Midwest, 1820-1870* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 90-128. For early agents and retailers, see Timothy Spears, *100 Years on the Road: The Travelling Salesman in American Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995); Jeffrey S. Adler, *Yankee Merchants and the Making of the Urban West: The Rise and Fall of Antebellum St. Louis* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991); and Leach, *Land of Desire*, Chapter 1.

19. Few of Bellamy's contemporaries viewed his work in the cynical light it is often received in today. In fact, both the National Farmers Alliance and the Knights of Labor made

large purchases of *Equality* in order to distribute copies among their membership. For notions of farmers as chronic revolutionaries, see Stanley B. Parsons, *The Populist Context: Rural Versus Urban Power on a Great Plains Frontier* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1973); and Norman Pollack, *The Populist Response to Industrial America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962), 1-12.

20. For George quote, see Morton Keller, *Affairs of State: Public Life in Late Nineteenth-Century America* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1977), 171. For Midwestern economic and agricultural growth, see Allan G. Bogue, *From Prairie to Corn Belt: Farming on the Illinois and Iowa Prairies in the 19th Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 169-192; Gilbert C. Fite, "The Pioneer Farmer: A View Over Three Centuries," *Agricultural History* 50 (January 1976): 275-289; Paul Wallace Gates, *The Farmer's Age: Agriculture 1815 - 1860*, Volume III, *The Economic History of the United States* (New York: Harper & Row, 1960); and Fred A. Shannon, *The Farmer's Last Frontier: Agriculture, 1860-1897* *The Economic History of the United States*, Vol. V (New York: Farrar & Reinhart, Inc., 1945), 123-147.

21. C. F. Adams, Jr., "The Granger Movement," *North American Review* 120 (April 1875): 395.

22. Citations from two issues, both printed in February, 1902, of *Agricultural Advertising*, in Ray Lewis White, ed. *Sherwood Anderson's Early Writings* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1989), 9, 12. Given the fact that Anderson was attempting to promote advertising in his publication, such claims about the strength of the rural retail economy are not surprising. A salient point remains: few advertisers recognized that farmers for a long period of time were active consumers of a large number of retail goods.

23. Lawrence Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise: The Populist Movement in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 47-51, 109-153. Goodwyn's thesis has met with numerous challenges and corrections since its publication. See Robert W. Cherny, "Lawrence Goodwyn and Nebraska Populism: A Review Essay" *Great Plains Quarterly* 1 (June 1981): 181-194; James Turner, "Understanding the Populists" *Journal of American History* 67 (September 1980): 354-373; and Martin Ridge, "Populism Redux, John D. Hicks and *The Populist Revolt*," *Reviews in American History* Volume 13 No. 1 (March, 1985): 142-154.

24. Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise*, 45; for a lack of Grange "movement culture," see *Ibid.*, 71.

25. Stanley B. Parsons, Karen Toombs Parsons, Walter Killilae, and Beverly Borgers. "The Role of Cooperatives in the Development of the Movement Culture of Populism" *Journal of American History* 67 (September 1980): 866-885.

26. The works dealing with producerism as a unifying historical concept are too extensive to note. A good place to begin is Sean Willentz, "Against Exceptionalism: Class, Consciousness, and the American Labor Movement, 1790-1920," *International Labor and Working Class History* 26 (Fall, 1984): 1-24; Bruce Palmer, "Man Over Money" : *The Southern Populist Critique of Northern Capitalism* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina, 1980), 9-19; Paul E. Johnson, *A Shopkeeper's Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815-1837* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), 15-36; and Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party before the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 11-39. See also Sean Willentz, "Society, Politics, and the Market Revolution, 1815-1848," in Foner, *New American History*, 51-73.

27. For myth see Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F. D. R.* (New York: Knopf, 1955), 36-59; for discussion of producerism see *Ibid.*, 120-130; for the farmers illogical doctrines see *Ibid.*, 46-59. For a related article, see Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965), 238-314.

28. This revision was led by Walter T. K. Nugent, Norman Pollack, and Lawrence Goodwyn. For citation see Norman Pollack, *The Populist Response to Industrial America*, 11. See also Walter T. K. Nugent, *The Tolerant Populists: Kansas Populism and Nativism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1963), 231-243; Bruce Palmer, "Man Over Money": *The Southern Populist Critique of Northern Capitalism* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina, 1980), 199-221; and Steven Hahn, *The Roots of Southern Populism: Yeoman Farmers and the Transformation of the Georgia Upcountry, 1850-1890* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), Introduction.

29. The most complete accounts of the Patrons of Husbandry are Dennis S. Nordin, *Rich Harvest: A History of the Grange, 1867 - 1900* (Jackson: The University Press of Mississippi, 1974); Thomas Allan Woods, *Knights of the Plow: Oliver H. Kelley and the Republican Origins of the Grange* (Ames: University of Iowa Press, 1992); and Margaret K. Andersen, "Agrarian Union: The Grange in the Midwest, 1870-1900" (Ph.D. diss., Northwestern University, December 1989).

30. Given the relatively late revision of Grange history, most of the leading works on the "Populist Revolt" referred to Solon Buck's 1913 account of the Order. Here Buck contends that the Grange was wholly an economic phenomenon based on the very "yeoman myth" attacked by Hofstadter and others. Accordingly, the Patrons were often castigated as the perfect example of what the Alliance was *not*: backward looking, illogical, and conservative. See Buck, *The Granger Movement: A Study of Agriculture Organization and Its Political, Economic, and Social Manifestations, 1870-1880* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1913), Chapter 1; and Buck, *The Agrarian Crusade: A Chronicle of the Farmer in Politics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1920).

31. For rail and elevator controversy, see George R. Miller, *Railroads and the Granger Laws* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1971), 24-58; Harold D. Woodman, "Chicago Businessmen and the 'Granger' Laws," *Agricultural History* XXXVI, No. 1 (January 1962): 16-24; and Keller, *Affairs of State*, 177-180. For trends both toward and away from state activism, see Keller and Sidney Fine, *Laissez-Faire and the General Welfare State: A Study of Conflict in American Thought, 1865-1901* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1956), 303-304. For citation, see C. F. Adams, Jr., "The Granger Movement," *North American Review* 120 (April 1875): 408.

32. See Fields, "Slavery, Race, and Ideology," 95-118; and Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men*, 3-6. In many ways the historiography of the Grange has, until relatively recently, been a captive of Richard Hofstadter's successful assault of the status anxiety underlying the agrarian revolt. Many Grange publications expressed classical yeoman rhetoric, making them the perfect foil for this "backward-looking" thesis.

33. See Allan Kulikoff, *The Agrarian Origins of American Capitalism* (Charlottesville, Virginia: University Press of Virginia, 1992), 1-59; and Kulikoff, "Households and Markets: Toward a New Synthesis of American Agrarian History," *William and Mary Quarterly* 3rd Series, Vol. L, No. 2 (April 1993): 342-355. Additional works dealing with this paradox between definitions of market and moral economy are found in Winifred Barr Rothenberg, *From Market-Place to Market Economy: The Transformation of Rural Massachusetts, 1750-1850* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 7-23; Joyce Appleby, "Commercial Farming and the 'Agrarian Myth' in the Early Republic," *The Journal of American History* 68 (March 1982): 833-849; Pollack, *The Populist Response to Industrial America*, 28-33; Palmer, "Man over Money," 9-19; and Ann Mayhew, "A Reappraisal of the Causes of Farm Protest in the United States, 1870-1900," *Journal of*

Economic History 32 (June 1972): 465-475.

34. For the origins of the southern populist movement, see Steven Hahn, *The Roots of Southern Populism: Yeoman Farmers and the Transformation of the Georgia Upcountry, 1850-1890* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983); Bruce Palmer, "Man Over Money," 69-137; Jonathan Weiner, *Social Origins of the New South, Alabama: 1860-1885* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978), 73-75; Weiner, Robert Higgs, and Harold Woodman, "AHR Forum: Class Structure and Economic Development in the American South, 1865-1955," *American Historical Review* 84 (October 1979), 970-1006; and Gavin Wright, *The Political Economy of the Cotton South: Households, Markets, and Wealth in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978), Chapter 5. For Great Plains, see Walter T. K. Nugent, *The Tolerant Populists: Kansas Populism and Nativism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1963), Chapter 1; Parsons, *The Populist Context*; Norman Pollack, *The Populist Response to Industrial America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962), 1-12; James Turner, "Understanding the Populists." *Journal of American History* 67 (September 1980), 354-373; and Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise*, 104-105.

35. For market participation and development, see Ann Mayhew, "A Reappraisal of the Causes of Farm Protest," 469; and Mahoney, *River Towns in the Great West*, 16-54. For ancillary supporting information, see Mary Eschelbach Gregson, "Rural Response to Increased Demand: Crop Choice in the Midwest, 1860 - 1880," *Journal of Economic History* Volume 53, No. 2 (June 1993): 332-345; and Jeremy Atack and Fred Bateman, "Self-Sufficiency and the Marketable Surplus in the Rural North, 1860," *Agricultural History* 58 (July 1984): 296-313.

36. Cronon saw the "logic of capital" flows and technologies such as the railroad and grain elevator as the prime instruments of this regional conversion. See William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (Chicago: W. W. Norton & Co., 1991), 81-93.

37. Walter Nugent and Robert Sharkey demonstrated how flexible rural Americans proved to be in regard to this issue. Walter T. K. Nugent, *Money and American Society, 1865-1880* (New York: Free Press, 1968), Chapter 3; Robert P. Sharkey, *Money, Class, and Party: An Economic Study of Civil War and Reconstruction* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1959), 135-140; and Sidney Fine, *Laissez-Faire and the General Welfare State: A Study of Conflict in American Thought, 1865-1901* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1956), 67-71, 304-310. The best example of this transformation was the success of Henry George's 1879

treatise *Progress and Poverty*. George hoped to explain the paradox of both depression and urban industrial expansion to America's predominantly rural population. His runaway best-seller suggested that social harmony was being destroyed by emerging monopolies and large absentee landlords. George convinced many that currency reforms and a huge increase in taxes on rent would address these inequities. For George see Keller, *Affairs of State*, 180-195.

38. Goodwyn believed that Northern concerns regarding the "money question" cast a shadow movement on the People's Party, see Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise*, 201-211, 259-264.

39. Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis*, 310-340.

40. For quote, see *Chicago Tribune*, 15 September 1873, 4.

41. For crisis of community, see Robert Wiebe, *The Search For Order*, 44-75; for the shared social beliefs of many Grangers, the heart of much of the current work being done on the Grange, see Nordin, *Rich Harvest*, Chapters 3-6; Andersen, "Agrarian Union," Chapter 3; Donald B. Marti, "Sisters of the Grange: Rural Feminism in the Late Nineteenth Century," *Agricultural History* 58 (July 1984): 247-261; and Marti, "Woman's Work in the Grange: Mary Ann Mayo of Michigan, 1882-1903," *Agricultural History* 56 (April 1982): 439-452. For citation, see Wells, *The Patron's Handbook*, 163. For other works on the essential ties between community and cooperation, see C. R. Hoffer, "Co-operation as a Culture Pattern Within a Community," *Rural Sociology* 3 (1938): 153-158; and more importantly, Steven James Keillor, "Democratic Coordination in the Marketplace: Minnesota's Rural Cooperatives, 1865-1917" (Ph. D. diss., University of Minnesota, December 1992), Introduction, Chapters 1-5.

42. For such criticism, see Chapter 4 below, and Adams, "The Granger Movement," 394-424.

43. Other factors, discussed below, such as the concentration of capital, the standardization of basic goods, and the use of centralized communal depots, also played a key role in the expression of this ideal. Such actions mirrored those by many institutional and political leaders during the early part of the Gilded Age. For quotation, see *The Prairie Farmer*, 22 November 1873, 371. For a skillful overview of "progressivism," see David P. Thelan, *The New Citizenship: Origins of Progressivism in Wisconsin, 1885-1900* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1972), Introduction. Remarkably, Grange efforts involved in all three of the historiographical "camps" defined by Thelan: progressivism rooted in the class and status of a social group, that based on national interest

groups by professional associations, and the progressivism of national elites hoping to suppress competing groups.

44. For quote, see *Chicago Tribune*, 23 August 1873, 8. For consumer focus, see Thelan, *The New Citizen*, 2; Mayhew, "A Reappraisal of the Causes of Farm Protest," 467-469.

45. Johnson's focus was on the "Burnt Over District" of western New York in the 1820s and 1830s. Many of these individuals were the parents of the Illinois, Indiana, and Wisconsin farmers detailed in this work. See Paul E. Johnson, *A Shopkeeper's Millennium*, 136-141.

46. Stressing virtue and democracy, farmers expressed their beliefs in a manner that was much less radical than many antebellum republican movements. For antebellum agrarian radicalism, see Ronald P. Formisano and William G. Shade, "The Concept of Agrarian Radicalism," *Mid-America* 52, No. 1 (January, 1970): 3-30; and Woods, *Knights of the Plow*, Introduction. For Beeson, see Isaac and Benjamin B., *Papers, 1870-1897*, Box XI, Folder 9, Indiana State Library, Indianapolis, Indiana. For a similar stance, see *The Chicago Times*, 28 May 1873, 3.

47. For text of speech, see Isaac and Benjamin B., *Papers, 1870-1897*, Box XI, Folder 9, Indiana State Library, Indianapolis, Indiana; for letter, see *Prairie Farmer*, 1 February 1873, 35.

48. For the following debate surrounding the Grange store, see *Ripon Free Press*, 17 January 1878; and 7 February 1878. For support of the Grange, see *Ibid.*,

49. John Bates Clark, *The Philosophy of Wealth*, 190. The avoidance of real reform to the distribution system was only one of the Rochdale Plan's deficiencies. See Chapter Five below.

CHAPTER 2

INDEPENDENT AGENTS AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF A DEMAND-DRIVEN CONSUMER ECONOMY, 1840 - 1861

Antebellum Midwestern agents were among the earliest professionals to rely completely upon the national economy for their success. For example, the economic fate of Isaac T. Greene, a St. Louis based middleman, hinged upon the new transportation and credit links that defined modern capitalism in the region. Greene mastered the complex river trade in raw timbers, provided credit and consumer goods to small retailers in the countryside, and balanced the cash payments to his various suppliers in an era of extremely constricted money supply. Greene and other agents regularly smoothed out the distribution problems associated with supplying remotely located Midwesterners with consumer goods manufactured in Boston, New York, and Cincinnati. As no other profession before, independent agents were the operational glue which bound the expanding local markets into a national whole.¹

Market facilitation of this kind, while potentially profitable, was extremely risky. The supply of raw goods was unpredictable and eastern money markets highly volatile. Middlemen stood to suffer if either end of this distribution

network failed.

Isaac Greene was stung by these economic perils. He found himself indebted to eastern manufacturers while his unconsigned merchandise upriver went unsold. When his supplier of timber met with an unforeseen delay, Greene's ability to cover these credit gaps stretched beyond his limit. Writing to his Wisconsin associate on 28 May 1849, Greene was candid that,

... I wish you would write me on receipt of this letter how soon you can pay me the amount of your note, for I am suffering for the want of money. I have not got @ dollar in the world to buy any lumber with.... I wish in this you would be positive and explicit, for I have no business now, and must get to doing something immediately.... It is evident that both parties here and there at St. Croix should be paid, and it belongs to the same parties to pay them, and hence it is all nonsense to go to quarrelling among one or the other in regard to it.

Adding to the pathos, Greene's insolvency came at the same time as the St. Louis fire. His pending bankruptcy occurred when the city's demand for lumber and the services of general middlemen was greatest.²

The role of middlemen was vital to the Midwestern economy. Agents liquidated the raw materials sent to them by local developers -- such as lumber, grain, or livestock -- and saw to it that consumer goods were shipped to the rural frontier. At both ends -- selling raw materials on the open market and in providing various consumer goods to settlers -- the agents assumed the largest share of the financial risk associated with the vagaries and pressures of the market

economy. Tim Spears notes that these agents were the "aggressive, logical consequence of the expanding national market system."³

A fixed definition of the role of agents remains elusive. In the early years these men assumed the role of wholesale distributors, or "jobbers," who attempted to respond to new opportunities wherever they might appear. Later, roughly after the Civil War, agents were more commonly commissioned salespeople who represented a single manufacturer and sold specific products or services. This initial capacity as harbinger of modern capitalism was central to the expression of a consumer economy in the Midwest from 1840 to 1861.

Isaac Greene epitomized the transformation of the Midwestern agent. Greene's initial success was closely linked to the milling town of St. Croix, in northwestern Wisconsin. The area was rich in natural resources such as white pine forests, fertile farm land, and copper ore. The site was unique in its attractive physical location on the river. The St. Croix River dropped more than fifty-five feet in elevation in less than six miles, making "the Falls" region an excellent location for mill works. Following a surveying expedition, led by Henry Schoolcraft in 1832, a lumber company was formed in 1837. Construction began on a mill the following year.⁴

Investors in St. Croix saw the potential for easy

profits. Ownership of the mill repeatedly changed hands between speculators. One historian of the region noted that by 1846, "who was actually in possession of title to the land was a question which kept Wisconsin law courts busy with suits and countersuits for many years to come." By 1849, William S. Hungerford and Hamlet H. Perkins owned and operated the St. Croix timber mill and its associated store. In Boston, Robert Rantoul, Jr., Benjamin H. Cheever, and the notable Caleb Cushing claimed joint title to the mill and to some nearby copper lodes. Both groups indicated that they intended to utilize the Falls as an investment which could be easily liquidated.⁵

Yet, as with other regional improvements, excellent opportunities did not always translate into quick profits. Local developers failed to reckon with the river's strength. As a result, from 1838 to 1842, little finished lumber was sent downstream except for what the river tore from the foundations of local construction. Further, legal battles between local and Boston-based businessmen slowed efforts to rebuild the mill. By June, 1849, only half of the constructed housing was occupied, while other non-residential structures moldered from disuse. The boomtown's "Grand Hotel" housed cattle in its unfinished basement in lieu of more traditional human guests.⁶

By contrast Isaac Greene actively involved himself in development of the town's economy. He established a reliable

system by which the town merchant, Perkins, was supplied with consumer goods and the eastern investors were funded from the sale of any finished lumber that was delivered. Greene's efforts were representative of his class. He provided Perkins with the necessary credit to transact business, sought to improve the transportation of goods up to the logging town as well as the delivery of their surplus downriver, and pressed provincials to practice prudent business practices when selling manufactured goods to local loggers. Yet this explains only half of the agents' significance, for they fail to adequately explore the relationship between consumer demand and the agents' role in assuming the risk of meeting those needs.⁷

Greene and Perkins did not suffer from a lack of local consumer desire for manufactured goods. Materially, rural patrons demanded a variety of wares from their suppliers. Surviving invoices and account books record the predominance of orders for staple goods such as sugar, rice, and salt. But surprisingly -- at least in regard to the images of a desolate and debilitating existence on the frontier -- luxury goods were ordered equally as often, if only in smaller quantities. One historian noted that researchers "cannot turn many pages in a merchant's day book without realizing that such goods were in steady demand." By 1859, one traveller to the region noticed that there "seems to be a market for everything in the West, the spirit of 'trading'

is so tho e." Midwesterners clearly had an early itch for the "goods life."⁸

St. Croix was no exception to this trend. As early as 1847, with less than four hundred settlers and itinerant loggers for patrons, Perkins repeatedly placed orders for luxury items such as satin clothing, silk handkerchiefs, and "fine linen." By the fall of 1847, merchandise such as this often filled over sixteen trunk loads above the regular demand for essential goods. Only eight months later, Perkins hastily ordered more of these decorative items noting to his St. Louis supplier that the goods were "absolutely necessary as soon as they can be sent to keep our business alive."⁹

Yet if the consumer market was thriving, how could it be that Greene failed by 1849? The answer to this question highlights the pivotal nature of middlemen in the expression of rural consumer behavior. The economic engine that brought about these changes was the assumption of business risk by the multitude of independent agents. As demonstrated in St. Croix, agents staked their money -- in the form of orders placed to eastern wholesalers -- against the promise of a marketable agricultural surplus from the hinterland. Obviously, they gambled in the hopes of earning profits and not for hidden altruistic reasons. Still, the antebellum agent can appear today more honest and courageous than the "heroes" promoted during that period -- from Davy Crockett to the odd assortment of Indian-fighters, gunslingers, and

filibusters haunting American folk lore. Greene's failure to plan for this risk, or more likely, his dangerous gamble that he could maintain his liquidity while meeting consumer demand was his ultimate undoing.

With an optimistic belief in the pledges of their countrymen to deliver the goods, and in expectation of a fair return for their efforts, agents shouldered huge personal liabilities. Their efforts sometimes led to great wealth. But usually, agents either got by or failed outright. Isaac Greene noted that the psychological stress associated with these risks was "enough to move the equilibrium of any one." One woman, writing to her agent brother, "fear[ed] so much care & anxiety as you must have in purchasing goods and getting started in trade will be too much for you... I was glad to hear you were so well pleased with your purchases in NY."¹⁰

Recent scholarship provides a more detailed account of how this risk was managed. For example, Jeffrey Adler relates that in antebellum St. Louis many Yankee traders maintained their economic viability by relying heavily on their family ties to eastern markets and credit. Timothy Mahoney's skillful account of regional development explains two other important examples of risk management by local dealers -- involving transportation and credit -- which the author concludes deeply affected the direction of the regions growth.¹¹

Jobbers and other urban suppliers practiced risk assessment most directly by predicting the costs and hazards of transportation. Mahoney demonstrates that these providers gained some stability through the use of regional short haul transports -- generally within a couple hundred miles of their point of origin. These smaller journeys were less likely to run the risk of stranding shipments due to bad weather or low water. In a very real sense, this problem directly affected Isaac Greene, as his business relied on an extremely long trade route between St. Louis and St. Croix (more than 500 miles). His miscalculation resulted in the failure of his business.¹²

In a second example, Mahoney shows how agents established predictable time-tables during which they might transact their regional business. Timing of shipments, in conjunction with the length of the haul, were pivotal in netting profits. Agents such as Greene had extensive credit obligations. Managing receipts through intricate timing schedules was one way to mitigate the unpredictability of the Midwestern marketplace. The Dubuque *Herald Express* wrote that "it required a merchant of more than ordinary firmness and judgement to buy and sell goods on the western market. Unfortunately, we have, especially in smaller towns, a class of merchants utterly inexperienced in business who are led into serious errors in buying and selling, and on selling on letters [with] insufficient security." Agents exploited this

business opportunity by assuming this risk and insulating many town merchants.¹³

By contrast, local retailers and distant investors held little risk beyond their initial investment. During the formative years of the region -- from about 1840 to 1860 -- most local store owners were not under economic pressures to respond to demands for non-essential goods. Often incorporated around economic mainstays such as the grist or lumber mill, these depots generally were not dependant on customer satisfaction for their survival. If the store failed, owners fell back on their primary economic venture while consumers awaited another speculator to assume the mantle of "town merchant." The earliest commercial ventures generally provided only the most basic provisions in trade for bulked agricultural surplus. Such a "store" had little intention -- and even less ability -- to respond to the individual consumer demand. One typical establishment, set up in an Illinois farming town in 1836, was housed in a simple log cabin, and, according to an early settler, opened exclusively "for the sale of liquor, [yet] in those days [was] called a grocery." A second local vendor marginally expanded his stock of goods to include a small inventory of "general merchandise." Aided by their advantageous market position, the economic livelihood of early merchants was not vulnerable to daily consumer demands.¹⁴

Representing a second node on the network linking

frontier consumers to manufactured goods were the speculators and developmental financiers. Often based in eastern cities, these men funded Midwestern development in an effort to improve the value of their land holdings, or to more profitably control and harvest the natural resources of the west. This group often acted as a wholesaler of bulk processed and manufactured goods that were then shipped west. These goods -- such as packed pork, coffee, or textiles -- met with an almost constant demand from the interior. The only market pressures facing these speculators, therefore, were those expressed within the eastern markets as wholesalers battled for control of the various shipments. As with local developers, then, members of this place in the distribution system were generally free from the economic pressures stemming from local consumer demand.¹⁵

Blessed with local monopolies or small oligarchies, rural proprietors and distant investors reaped significant economic benefits simply by providing basic commodities. The process of dispersing goods to rural consumers acted as an economic shelter to a number of such "developers" in the earliest years of white settlement. As a result, the call by rural consumers for a larger variety of merchandise was left unanswered by their most direct link to the network disbursing those goods. Yet, a thriving consumer market and mentality was present by the dawn of the Civil War.

Understanding the changing nature of the distribution system from 1840 to 1861, therefore, is key in order to appreciate the growing expression of rural consumerism.

The experiences in St. Croix were representative of the regional development of the rural consumer market. Agents' vulnerability to the gyrations of the marketplace made them uniquely responsive to the demands by rural consumers. Yet, the question remains, what were the practices that they employed to meet these needs? Further, how did these conventions change the behavior of others along the distribution network? Finally, and most importantly, how did the actions of these independent agents change the ability of rural patrons to express their desires for material goods?

Early settlers to the Midwestern countryside faced a particularly vexing problem in regard to local dealers. In order for their commercial farming efforts to thrive, farmers were dependent on merchants to provide access to a variety of staple goods not produced on their homesteads. In addition, husbandmen required the assistance of merchants in order to market the surplus agriculture. Farmers were subject to the success of these local depots in ways that limited their ability to demand change. As noted above, this led to the insulation of local merchants from the

traditional market pressures of supply and demand. Retailers did not have to respond to consumer needs for specific goods because they had often captured this clientele through their other services.¹⁶

The conceptual aspects of a "store" are so familiar to modern readers that they seem to defy definition. Yet central to the contemporary understanding of a retailer is the belief that consumer demands drive the proprietor's business decisions. In this relationship, the supply of goods in relation to customer wants creates a reliable pattern which vendors can then use to establish profitable inventory controls. The essential aspect of this relationship is the fact that, ultimately, the consumer drives the decision of what to stock in the store and when to stock it, rather than forcing customers to accept the goods that are presented to them at the time most convenient to the retailer. Essentially, this second scenario was the norm for most early stores in the Midwest.

Regional agents changed this limited role of a "store" into a more responsive vehicle for rural consumers. Given their unique position and vulnerability to the financial loss, agents such as Greene demanded that their merchants "look very closely into affairs at [the] store, t'is very important that it should be clearly looked after, pardon our anxiety on this head."¹⁷

Middlemen, exerting a subtle leverage over the flow of

goods into a region, induced local merchants to change their marketing styles in several ways. First, agents pressed retailers to cultivate local methods of inventory control. Briefly, this business method was important as a means to spur sales of goods by making them easily available to consumers *at the time at which they were desired*. The turnover of goods through one's business was essential for the profitability of each node of the distribution network. If merchandise was desired, but unavailable, then manufacturers would lose sales. On the other hand, if goods were being stocked months in advance of their need -- for example keeping winter boots on the shelves in July -- then retailers would have tied up their money in goods not immediately needed, as well as used precious storage and display space.¹⁸ Because few Midwestern retailers could afford such a luxury, they often erred on the side of caution and stocked only the most basic of goods for their establishment.

One Chicago agent, Charles L. Harmon, described to his brother how a balanced inventory was achieved. The drummer provided an understanding of "the nature of business operations here, character of stock wanted, & time of sale &c &c" without "wast[ing] many words." First, Chicago agents needed to be wary of carrying off-season stock without the prospect of quick sales. Harmon noted that,

it may be well to say that I do not desire it necessary or judicious for any one who may be interested in the

trade to keep a large stock on hand during the summer months. On the contrary I think it best to order as the articles are wanted. It is my opinion that the stock should be enlarged for the fall trade say to commence about the 1st of Sept[ember] and calculate to dispose of a very large proportion of the stock by the first of Dec[ember] in fact to nearly close it up.

Despite more vigorous sales than in the previous year, Harmon urged caution not to overstock. The products that he saw as the most profitable -- which, in his letters he referred to as "trimmings" -- reveal that agents responded to consumer demands not met by providers of staple goods. Harmon concluded that "[i]t is an object, for profits, to have as complete a stock of 'trimmings' and to sell as large a proportion of that class of articles as possible. I have therefore added to the list sent several articles not usually kept by the trade in NY."¹⁹ Inventory management was central to the profitability of agents, and one of the leading tenets directly supporting consumer demand. Agents worked hard to compel retailers to use this method of merchandising control.

The role of agents in bringing about this change is seen in the correspondence between dealers and rural retailers during this era. For example, Isaac Greene wrote to Perkins, in St. Croix, urging him to anticipate his customers' demands for sugar, molasses, tobacco, tea, and sundry other goods. More importantly than simple reminders to resupply his stock, Greene actively encouraged Perkins to carry a wider variety of goods to create and meet potential

demand. In addition to an order for basic commodities, Greene noticed that he "had no order from [Perkins] for Beans, but we know that are wanted for the woods, and have no knowledge of any being purchased for you, so we took the liberty to send them." Two weeks later Greene sent and additional two dozen axes "in case you are short, new article, said to be superior, cost high, try them and see how they go." An associate of Greene's more forcibly stated the agent's indispensable role in balancing inventory and consumer demand along the distribution network. The middleman lamented that their "eastern friends have not had much experience in purchasing evidently, or they would have anticipated our want and provided for them with greater punctuality."²⁰

The increased and diversified inventory of goods provided to retailers by regional agents was closely allied with the burgeoning consumer preference for specialty goods. Much like those expressed by Perkins in the introduction and Harmon's "trimmings," luxury items were increasingly required to fill out a firm's inventory.²¹ Again, agents both instigated and then responded to this need by supplying retailers with fashionable goods. The label of "eastern-bought" goods became a mark of a products' desirability. Illinois retailer John Bennett explained in a letter to his father that the reason they missed meeting each other was that he was intent on obtaining a variety of goods from

eastern wholesalers for his fall stock.

I was afraid that it would be too late if I waited for you and it would not sound well in the peoples ears for all the rest of the merchants to be getting their goods from the east and for us to buy exclusively in St. Louis. As all you have to do with some is to say that your goods were bought in the east.²²

A second important capacity of agents ameliorating the process of consumption for rural Americans was their efforts in stabilizing and balancing the prices for locally available goods. Fair pricing was advised by agents to keep customers happy while providing just compensation for everyone along the distribution network. Records indicate that agents discouraged price gouging -- which obtained the highest price the market would bear. Again, the relationship between Greene and Perkins demonstrates this attempt quite well. Greene repeatedly chided and corrected Perkins on the pricing structure of his inventory. Greene wrote that clothing, procured in Boston, "mostly for cash and at extremely low prices.... will bring 60 to 70 per cent profit, I think we can easily get 100." Yet for caps and hats, much more common stock, Greene later suggested that "we think about 50 or 75 per, not too much profit on this bill, especially the caps." Further, Greene's position in St. Louis provided him the ability to add the cost of transportation and the element of risk into the pricing of goods, making them more equitable to the fair market value of the items.²³

Finally, it is important to note that most agents did

not recklessly pursue greater sales volumes at the expense of business stability. Agents were intent on securing profitable turnover of stocked goods but not at the expense of extending too much credit, or of extending credit to those incapable of repayment. This was quite logical, for agents were demonstrably the most vulnerable to fiscal collapse when the network experienced a local failure of payments. This was especially evident after agents supplied store operators with large shipments of wares, when merchants were most likely to be rushed to sell their new assortments. Greene boldly stated that "we must caution you strictly in regard to the county you are in, not to credit one dollar unless you have property to move [i.e., cut logs] from the first put in your possession." Two weeks later, following another large consignment the agent reiterated, "be very careful and not let [the shipment] get scattered without first having the pay for them, you are in a county noted for grabbing." Greene advised Perkins he "had better give the goods away" rather than to sell on shaky credit.²⁴

Agents were key in the formation of true retail stores in place of the more authoritarian frontier outlets. By demanding rural retailers provide greater inventory control, more reasonable pricing, and safer credit practices, agents hoped to secure a sheltered environment in which they could expect a reasonable profit. In no way were these efforts intended to be for the direct benefit of the rural consumer

-- yet inevitably they acted to improve the economic position of this very population.²⁵ Their actions allowed for the more direct expression of the real consumer desires by rural patrons. By unleashing the governing forces of supply and demand into the relationship between retailers and rural consumers, agents unwittingly gave patrons a new and important economic role that had been absent in earlier country "stores." Still, the full effect of these changes in the market position of consumers could only be realized through the contributions of the entire distribution network.

Manufacturers and suppliers of finished goods also needed to recognize and respond to consumer demand in the hinterland. Many manufacturers during this period were only willing to reap the easiest sales from urban and local markets, thereby ignoring the rural consumer. Agents helped to turn manufacturers' attention toward this new and potent opportunity. They did so not by merely filling orders and dispensing products, but by actively pressing manufacturers to change their business practices in the hopes of increasing the profits for all involved. As one old hand stated, "[t]hese Chicago Jobbers are just as cunning as an old Red Fox, and whenever they find any manufacturers, whether east or west, hard up for 'material aids'... they always stand ready to lend them a helping hand, in a friendly & business way."²⁶

Chicago hardware agent Charles L. Harmon is the perfect example by which to see this process unfold. The Harmon family was among the original settlers of the city, and had been in the distribution business since 1832. Isaac D. Harmon operated a dry goods store at the southwest corner of South Water and Clark Streets as early as 1835. By the late 1840s, Charles operated a large agency offering commercial scales, stoves, pane glass, and miscellaneous manufactured goods for distribution across the Midwest.²⁷ Two attempts -- one failure and one success -- illustrate how agents hoped to transform their associated suppliers.

Early on, Harmon attempted to get the firm to realize the potential of extending their products to rural consumers. His sizable correspondence with the glass manufacturing firm of Smith & Wilkins, of Southport, Wisconsin, makes this clear. In a letter dated September 8, 1846, Harmon wrote that, "I have no doubt that your glass can be introduced in this market to almost the entire exclusion of other kinds, at an advance on the price that you name." Further, Harmon promised firm orders from rural towns along the most accessible trade routes. Hoping to entice the skeptical producer with a vast new hinterland market, Harmon believed that "I shall be able to send your glass through all the country between here and within 100 miles of St. Louis."²⁸

Despite Harmon's pleas, the Wisconsin firm failed to

act to supply this eager clientele. The agent's frustration was evident by their inability to "keep a full supply of glass here, and the more because I think you misapprehend the importance of the Market."²⁹ He concluded his correspondence with complaints about the lost sales due to their ineptitude in meeting the evident needs of the marketplace. In one of their last letters, Harmon chided his erstwhile partners for not meeting his promised delivery of glass to the interior, for "it is extremely unpleasant to endure the importunities I am subjected to" by their delays.³⁰

By contrast, A. J. Dunham & Company, makers of parlor stoves, was more receptive to Harmon's suggestions regarding the Midwestern marketplace. Correspondence between the two reveals that Harmon directed the manufacturer in response to specific consumer demands. For example, he suggested that the firm concentrate their production on the "copper & tin trimmings & stove pipes" rather than the stove itself, which were "sold in this market at very low rates, indeed without profit, and whatever is made in the trade is on the trimmings."³¹ In an effort to further the sale of these stoves, Harmon pressed the supplier to provide credit and terms available to other agents in markets "wholly given them." As with their relationship with Smith and Wilkins, Harmon's firm was primarily concerned with the profits earned by his business. But in the process Harmon aided the

rural patron's access to a wider variety of goods at the lowest delivery price. By pressing manufacturers to contend in more wide-ranging markets for consumer dollars, agents reduced the stifling effects of local manufacturing monopolies at an early time in the economic development of the Midwest.³²

The need for expansion in the face of constant competition was not lost on the agents themselves. In a telling exchange between Charles Harmon and his brother, the middleman confessed that he was in the process of underbidding a rival St. Louis agent for the business of a sugar refinery. Harmon noted that despite the fact that, "he & myself are on first rate terms, love each other like hll; nevertheless, feeling the most benevolent sentiments toward him; I would like to make [the] \$1,000 com[mission]... even if he was minus the am[oun]t.... You will understand that this is in the way of trade, and without the slightest disposition to do a dishonorable act to produce as desirable a result."³³

By pressing manufacturers to expand their services and reach into the countryside, agents helped expand the receptiveness of the distribution network toward rural consumer standards. As the easily accessible local markets were glutted, manufacturers, agents, and all suppliers faced stiffer competition in this distant, yet profitable market. Those who availed themselves by expanding and competing were

more likely to survive than those who ignored the needs of the rural consumer. As in their dealings with local merchants, agents reduced the manufacturers' insulation from the demands of the farm community.

A third, yet relatively minor role played by agents in the transformation of the rural consumer landscape was their impact on transportation facilities. Poor roads, rail, and water transport had become the peril of business operations in the Midwest throughout the antebellum era.³⁴ Still, agents negotiated the intricacies of rural shipment while earning a profit. In one letter to his brother, Chicago agent Edson Keith reported in December of 1855 how he traveled throughout Wisconsin in order to make sales of his millinery goods, using almost every Midwestern means of locomotion -- lumber wagon, carriage, rail, horseback. He related how once, "[g]oing up a steep hill," his traveling partners were "sitting in the back of the wagon leaning against the tail board ... [when] out bursts the board & down those fellows went heels overhead. It bruised them up some... we had a capital laugh and went on." In spite of his relative safe position in the fore of the wagon, Keith reported that he too had been shaken "to a pummis [sic] and I was never so lame in my life."³⁵

Personal pain notwithstanding, agents were able to identify and cite the business costs associated with poor transportation facilities. For example, representatives for

the Fairbanks Scales Company awaited the coming of rail transportation before moving their venture deeper into the rural marketplace outside of Chicago. The agent for Dixon, Illinois merchant P. M. Alexander gave his associate updates on the rates and insurance figures for seasonal travel on Lake Michigan. Merchant Milo Custer, in McLean County, Illinois received similar information regarding the prospects for commerce via the Illinois-Michigan Canal by agent John Mayers. Finally, Charles Harmon -- among many others -- regularly lamented the seasonal rains that made "the roads ... nearly impassable, and consequently, trade ... very dull & collections nothing."³⁶ Agents were keenly aware that when adequate transportation facilities existed trade did a booming business and their urban businesses prospered.³⁷

Agents not only called attention to the poor facilities *and* the potential benefits from internal improvements, but also demonstrated the real market advantages of surmounting these difficulties. Harmon frequently reported to his suppliers, such as the New York wholesaler Wood & Sheldon, that because the

Illinois river is very low, and has been for two months past ... the Interior dealers have been unable to procure supplies of any kind from St. Louis, and further, the price of Sugar and Molasses is very high in the market. These causes will compel the traders from a larger territory to come here for such articles, who usually go the other way.

Six months later Harmon related that while roads to the

interior were almost impassible "and business has entirely ceased," as soon as they cleared "I think I shall be able to make rapid sales of the consigned goods."³⁸

Undoubtedly, the transportation network in the Midwest would have developed apace without the pressures employed by the jobbing classes. Still, their voice was added at an early date and reached the ear of eastern investors who may not have noticed the immediate business consequences had improvements only been the pet project of western politicians. When aggressive agents overcame the obstacles of poor transportation facilities and turned a profit on their sales to the interior, they offered compelling evidence to others of the latent consumer demand. This, no doubt, emboldened others to press for internal improvements and fueled the grass roots drive for economical and physically easier access to these markets.

Finally, the single most important addition made by agents to the antebellum business condition was their ability to efficiently gather and disseminate credit and market information. This function was the mortar which held together the different branches of the distribution network. As described above, Midwestern agents bridged the gap between local merchants and eastern wholesalers. They also demonstrated to both the means by which profitable businesses must proceed under such conditions. These efforts resulted in an accumulation of credit and market experience

that was unique in the west. By disseminating this information, agents stabilized the region's distribution ties and paved the way for consumers to take advantage of the tremendous future growth in manufacturing output and rail delivery following the Civil War.

St. Croix again provides a vivid example of this essential role linking the day-to-day needs of all along the distribution line. Isaac Greene supplied local retailers with personnel, cash, and goods. In only one instance -- contained in a single letter -- Greene provided \$9,000 in credit by which the Boston wholesalers continued to outfit the mill town, forwarded \$2,000 and "a lot of goods" to Perkins at St. Croix, discussed the need for more lumber to be sent downstream, and even produced a source of labor -- "some carpenters & Dutchmen" -- to meet the construction needs of local boosters. In other letters, Greene supplied additional laborers as well as skilled river pilots in order to bring the lumber to market.³⁹ Greene's position in St. Louis gave him a complete view of the network, and allowed him to anticipate the needs of both local merchants and remote suppliers. Through the independent action of a host of agents, the staggering complexity of the pioneer market slowly became predictable. A typical transaction by an agent balanced a variety of credits, debits, interest, and consumer demands. For example, in a letter to Mssrs. Wood & Sheldon, Charles Harmon granted the firm credit for fifty

bags of coffee, advanced two checks for cash -- one for \$880, the other for \$974.68 -- and distributed the appropriate interest and profits to the various parties involved.⁴⁰

The source of the economic instability along the network was due largely to the regional variation in the nation's money supply. In the Midwest, a throng of small banks printed bills backed by little more than speculative fervor and unimproved land -- a risky and volatile asset at best. Illinois alone had dozens of these small operators circulating notes during these years. More secure eastern institutions made safer money available for the larger wholesalers. Yet even these bills were heavily discounted when transacted for goods or specie.⁴¹ The inevitable failure by many of the western outfits struck at the heart of the utility of these early greenbacks. The trust by the bearer -- in this case the merchant -- that they would be repaid for accepting this consumer convenience vanished.

Careless or uninformed agents who accepted the sundry currencies were also often left with worthless guarantees. The normally cautious Charles Harmon was left holding forty-five dollars in notes -- a relatively small sum in comparison to other failures -- from a bank in Sandusky, Ohio. In a letter to an associate Harmon bemoaned the fact that he was "unable to use any of it. Please advise me by return mail, what disposition you want made of it. The

reputation of the bank is growing worse every day in this place." William Blair, a Chicago agent for hardware supplies wryly noted that as experience with risky funds spread, "Merchants generally have a good deal more confidence in nails than in Illinois Bank Notes."⁴²

Logically, these merchants came to rely more on the use of gold or notes from the more reputable, eastern firms for their large business transactions. This fact led to a downward spiral in the value of local notes and the increased scarcity of specie. The inescapable outcome was to make purchases by rural consumers more difficult and more expensive.⁴³

Edson Keith's foray into rural Illinois, Missouri, Iowa, and Wisconsin in the summer of 1856 is typical of the stultifying effects that poor currency had on the consumer economy. Here, the agent for millinery goods found that most merchants refused to pay for his wares using gold or sound eastern currency. Keith recognized that without a change in local conditions, he didn't "think [he would] sell many more goods to the newest part of the wooden country as it [was] more than it [was] worth to collect it, unless they [were] uncommonly obliging men." Frustration over lost sales and delinquent accounts receivable was galling to a veteran like Keith. After being repeatedly refused sales by formerly good customers he confessed in a letter to his brother that "Collections are mighty hard. I feel almost discouraged in

trying, [soon] they will think the Border Ruffians are after them if they don't pay for I am getting desperate."⁴⁴

Agents of the heartland were obliged to respond to these nearly pervasive conditions in order to spur sales and guarantee their own survival. Faced with customers "troubled with the shorts worse than a man would be with the 7 year itch," agencies extended credit to merchants who they deemed most trustworthy. They usually based their evaluations on a merchant's ability to sell the products that were suggested by the jobber.⁴⁵ The means employed to balance the agents' personal accounts and provide this fiscal bridge to local merchants was often as trying as the physical access to the consumer markets. Agents were required to make long trips into the hinterland to constantly assess the state of their customers' credit. Keith believed that no "man ever worked, coaxed, pled & took old Job as a pattern I did" when he journeyed in 1856. At home, agencies were forced to rely on "some pretty sharp work financing" the various shortfalls, credits, risks, and benefits associated with providing goods to the rural marketplace.⁴⁶

The consequence of these efforts were profound for the rural consumer. As noted earlier, the historiography is plain in acknowledging the important role played by agents in spurring national sales through their efforts at extending credit. Surely this point can not be understated, as the region proved to be one of the most important in the

consumption of capital and consumer goods throughout the nineteenth century. But more directly, the selective use of credit by agents shifted the relative economic importance away from the supplier in favor of the consumer. Agents extended credit primarily to merchants who responded to the loans with increased sales. In this way the distribution network was further transformed from a supply to a demand driven footing.⁴⁷

A second and associated aid given to consumers was the agent's ability to distribute accurate information about current and future market conditions. As evidenced above, the general correspondence between agents, merchants and suppliers often gave vital information about each firm's honesty, credit worthiness, and volume of business transacted. But the letters also indicate that agents were atypical in their active pursuit of market stability through more accurate sales projecting and marketing techniques.⁴⁸

Forecasting the current and future sales volumes for a region was, in large measure, the economic niche that the middleman exploited for their profits. The greatest share of this correspondence preserved in agents' letter books reflected their need to inform local merchants and distant suppliers of new business opportunities. Harmon's firm was characteristic. Numerous examples survive of dispatches sent across the region calling attention to sales opportunities and possible liabilities. In one instance, the firm warned

that some goods, such as sugar and molasses were "entirely inadequate." They also listed other goods that could be expected to generate "considerable sales... not entirely depend on their scarcity." The timing of shipments was often the critical factor in gaining a profitable market advantage. In 1846, the clothing markets proved to be "overstocked at present, although there maybe a demand before winter sets in." One item happened to be ordered without this rule in mind -- black cashmere sweaters -- resulting in paltry sales because the "low prices of woolen goods in NY induced large purchases for this market & it is overtaken with every description of woolens." In a second letter, Harmon contemplated the bare essence of this vital exchange of information: "Would you inform me what it can be sold for, speedily, in your market. The charges and expenses of selling, and if you are doing a commission business. If not, please name a House to whom it would be advisable to consign."⁴⁹

Successful agents were ones who accurately aligned the distribution network to the needs and desires of consumer demand. Rarely were goods ordered or even accepted on consignment that did not meet the consumer's needs for quality or price. Further, their intimate contact with western economic conditions added veracity to their judgements regarding consumer tastes. In many instances, agents wrote to their suppliers that "[d]ealers have too

many old goods left from last fall and people I think will not feel able to indulge very extensively in anything that is not positively needed. I am afraid from accounts from the country that the wheat crop will be quite poor and the farmers will have to rely upon corn for their exports." In this instance, the delay in the farm cash cycle postponed consumer demand. The agent prevented merchants from assuming the economic hardship of owning excess inventory during such a momentarily dull season. Instead, the agent promised little "risk however in buying a fair fall stock as I have no doubt we shall be able to sell a larger extent of the trade [at that time] than we did last spring."⁵⁰

By supplying this critical market information, agents again acted to further their own economic interests. Harmon himself used his knowledge of the local Chicago markets to profit by two speculative ventures as a *retailer* of oysters and tallow candles.⁵¹ Yet, as with their use of credit, the combined action of these entrepreneurs led to profound changes in the timing of the development of the Midwestern consumer economy. Credit rating services and market analyses were eventually to become institutionalized into business ventures of their own. Tappan & Douglass and R. G. Dun were only two firms that provided such services for western merchants in the late antebellum era. Equally, regional newspapers such as the *Chicago Tribune* and independent wire services acted to provide comprehensive market data.⁵²

Undoubtedly, these aids were used by some retailers in the rural Midwest to further their ability to react to the changing market conditions. Yet it is probable that these formal institutions were more useful to national suppliers and speculators than in aiding the final consumer.

The effect of these labors for rural patrons was important, and often overlooked in the rush to place the middlemen's actions into a national context. Agents kept suppliers free from the stagnating effects of a glutted consumer market. As with the case of the New York woolens, Harmon warned one Gotham wholesaler that there were "several articles in the stock sent me [by them] on which a profit cannot be realized in the market over the invoice cost. To wit currants, peanuts, bitters, blanking, twine, & caps. Most of these articles are sold as low here as they are billed." In anticipation of their response, Harmon offered "a list of a few articles which will be wanted by the time they can be got here."⁵³ By creating a responsive network to supply consumer goods, agents freed rural customers to express their demands on a more pliable marketplace. Middlemen provided credit to local merchants who responded to their customers wishes. Finally, agents also provided wholesalers information on how well their products were being accepted in the rural marketplace, and where they might more profitably sell their merchandise.

Agents such as Harmon, Greene, and Keith were no more "determined" to expand consumer involvement in the acquisition of goods than any other economic participant of the era. For example, Charles Harmon refused to deal in the profitable trade of artillery. He implored his brother, who had arranged for the transport of a cannon, "not [to] consign the 'instrument of death' to me. I have [considerable*] scruples about having anything to do with it -- if I should pay the charges that will be the end of it."⁵⁴ Still, as a class of businessmen, agents employed common practices to meet their needs. They pressed merchants to adopt a new conception of their stores. Agents increased the involvement by manufacturers in the wider distribution of their goods. They related to others along the distribution network the transportation limitations of the region. Finally, as a group they circulated news of credit and market conditions. All of these were attempts to lower the risk which they assumed in order to get goods into the hands of rural consumers.

Agents largely succeeded in their task because they were able to change the behavior of those on the margins of the network. Supported by the agents' use of credit, merchants ordered a wider variety of goods, practiced inventory control, and sold their merchandise at fair market values. Many manufacturers expanded their commercial reach

* Writing is unclear in the document.

into the hinterland -- resulting in greater competitive forces. Agents demonstrated to eastern speculators the profits to be found in the west, in spite of its transportation woes. Finally, the distribution network itself became self-correcting. Through the advice of agents, markets were less likely to be glutted or empty of specific consumer goods. Equally, credit information stabilized the chain's economic solvency, as fewer firms were likely to be caught unaware by questionable rural merchants.

Combined, these changes cultivated the prominence of consumer demand in the region's economy. By 1861, escalating competitive pressures and the increased availability and awareness of goods ended the opportunity for rural merchants to maintain local monopolies. Supply gave way to demand as the governing force in the consumer economy. This was accomplished by agents who spread the risk of doing business to others along the supply line. Merchants, wholesalers, and manufacturers assumed this risk by becoming beholden to rural consumer preferences.⁵⁵

The significance of these changes cannot be disregarded. It is interesting to speculate on how the Midwestern consumer economy *might have developed* had these changes not taken place. With the cost of supplying the hinterland remaining high, fewer new and innovative goods would have been introduced. At a minimum, the rate of introduction would have been slowed. Commercial agriculture

relied on many of these products to increase their yields, so fewer farm surpluses would have been marketed in regional towns such as St. Louis and Chicago. Eastern manufacturers would have been less likely to gamble in this speculative economy. Faced with rare and expensive merchandise, rural consumers would have been less likely to participate in the market economy -- opting instead for homemade wares.

Finally, merchants would not have faced stiff competition for sales. As credit was extended to patrons, and as they inevitably would face at least one year of poor receipts from their cash crops, a debt-peonage system similar to that of the post-bellum south would not be unfathomable.

The success of agents in extending the consumer market into the hinterland, in fact, gave real economic power to rural Americans. By diluting and decentralizing the distribution network, agents democratized the control over mass consumption. Yet ironically, the systematization of consumer demand made agents less important to the maintenance of this relationship. With the integration of urban suppliers, the individual consumer, local retailers, and the developing transportation network, the role of the middleman became problematic. Firms, such as those run by Charles Harmon and Edson Keith, either transformed themselves into wholesalers of specific goods or, as with Greene and many others, faded from historians' view.⁵⁶ With their passing, the source of change in consumer practices

shifted from antebellum agents to the newly empowered rural patron.

ENDNOTES

List of abbreviations:

- CHS Chicago Historical Society, Chicago, Illinois.
 InHS Indiana Historical Society, Indianapolis, Indiana.
 ISHL Illinois State Historical Library, Springfield, Illinois
 InSL Indiana State Library, Indianapolis, Indiana.
 SHSW State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin.
 UI University of Illinois Library, Champaign-Urbana, Illinois.

1. For the early market economy of the region, see William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (Chicago: W. W. Norton & Co., 1991), 55-309. More pointedly, Timothy Mahoney shows how regional towns like St. Louis became economic hubs largely based on their agent activities. Mahoney writes: "To establish a role within the regional system of trade and to connect local progress to regional mechanisms of urban development became the agreed upon strategy for success. To survive and prosper, a town had to rise above the web of local trade." See Mahoney, *River Towns in the Great West: The Structure of Provincial Urbanization in the American Midwest, 1820-1870* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 210-215. Also useful is Lewis E. Atherton, *The Pioneer Merchant in Mid-America* (University of Missouri Studies, Vol. XIV, April 1, 1939, No. 2.; reprint, New York: DeCapo Press, 1969), Chapter 1.

2. Most agents had to order their wares a full year ahead of their expected liquidation in the hinterland. This timing was pivotal in the long-term success of a firm, see Mahoney, *River Towns*, 167-171. Letter from Greene to Perkins, 28 May 1849, in (General) Caleb Cushing, *Papers, 1849-1870*, SHSW. Greene was not the only regional agent to fail as a result of the St. Croix development plan. Mineralogist George W. Brownell, aided Cushing and others in securing two mineral permits. Yet in a letter to Cushing, dated 22 August 1848, he lamented the loss of over \$3,261 due him by Rantoul and Perkins. See letter in *Ibid.* For history of St. Croix region, see James Taylor Dunn, *The St. Croix: Midwest Border River*, Rivers of America Series (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965), 52. Most of the correspondence between Cheever and Co. and Hamlet Perkins is in Greene's characteristic handwriting. His letter to Perkins, cited above, is signed by Greene. Other letters, attributed in this chapter to Greene, are sometimes signed "Cheever & Co.," but remain distinctively comparable to those signed by Greene.

3. Timothy Spears, *100 Years on the Road: The Travelling Salesman in American Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), xi. Spears explores the cultural meaning of salesmanship in America. He sees agents as providing a "connecting link" between rural consumers and urban suppliers which ultimately was incorporated into mainstream American business. He argues that "the extensive and distributive role of commercial traveling brought an essentially urban-based market culture into small-town, rural America, threatening well-established notions of economic self-rule and domestic ideology. Relationships between antebellum wholesalers and storekeepers laid the foundation for the urban-rural thoroughfare but hardly prepared other Americans for the appearance -- some might say intrusion -- of whole armies of traveling salesmen." *Ibid.*, 54, 60-61. The more traditional and widely known works are also valuable, see Atherton, *Pioneer Merchant*, 11, 32, 82; Alfred D. Chandler, *The Visible Hand, The Managerial Revolution in American Business* (Cambridge Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1977), 27-28, Chapter 7, especially 208-223; and especially Glenn Porter and Harold C. Livesay, *Merchants and Manufacturers: Studies in the Changing Structure of Nineteenth-Century Marketing* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1971), 22-36.

4. Dunn, *The St. Croix*, 16-18, 37, 78-81.

5. All of these men were involved in a drawn out legal battle over the rights of the mill and an aligned copper mine, but this issue is secondary to that raised by their relationship to rural consumption. For more on the legal battles and citation, see Dunn, *The St. Croix*, 78-98; and Caleb Cushing, *Papers*, SHSW. Caleb Cushing served as U.S. Attorney General under Franklin Pierce and was eventually nominated to the Massachusetts State Supreme Court.

6. *Ibid.*, 78-81, 86-87. Investors were tied up in court from 1851 until 1857, providing little capital in the hands of locals by which they might fund expansion projects.

7. See note 3 for references. Contributions to the national economy by these types of agent activities are recorded in the historiography. Most of the major works agree that this class affected the region's economy in three main areas. First, that agents fueled local economic growth by providing access to relatively easy credit. Secondly, that middlemen highlighted the need for better shipping services. Finally, they were harbingers of new business concepts -- such as cost accounting and inventory management -- that revolutionized the American economy in the post-bellum years. See below for more complete explanation of each.

8. First citation from Atherton, *Pioneer Merchant*, 45. Second, from James Caird, *Prairie Farming in America, With Notes by the way on Canada and the United States* (London: Longman, Brown, Green, Longmans, & Roberts, 1859), 69; for "goods life," see Thomas Schlereth, *Victorian America: Transformations of Everyday Life, 1876-1915* (New York: Harper-Collins, 1991).
9. For bills of lading including "16 trunks merchandise," see Cheever & Co., St. Louis, to Perkins, 7 July 1847, in Cushing, Caleb, *Papers, 1849-1870*, SHSW; For letter from Perkins & Co, to Cheever, 19 March 1848, which included such essential items as "3 dozen red flannel shirts... 4 dozen hickory [shirts?] ... 2 doz. silk handkerchiefs; fine linen." in *Ibid.*
10. Greene to Perkins, 30 August 1847, Cushing, *Papers*, SHSW; second citation from Judith Keith, in Barre Vermont, to her brother Osborn Keith, in Chicago, on 21 March 1858, in Keith Family, *Papers, 1855-1863*, CHS. Other examples abound describing the stress related to maintaining liquidity in this difficult business environment. See letter from Ellen White to Sarah Tyner, 10 October 1871 in Tyner-White Family, *Papers, 1862-1881*, InSL or John Kirk, *Letter Books, 1852-1871*, CHS. For the effect of this stress on one agent's relations in his family, see Charles L. Harmon to his brother Edwin, 13 October 1848, in Harmon Family, *Papers, Volume 8, Letter Books, 1846-1848; 1848-1849*, CHS.
11. Jeffrey S. Adler, *Yankee Merchants and the Making of the Urban West: The Rise and Fall of Antebellum St. Louis* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 67, 71-82. Adler states that "Western capital shortages, for example, presented few problems for Yankee entrepreneurs." *Ibid.*, 77.
12. Mahoney, *River Towns*, 121-128.
13. 23 October 1857, cited in Mahoney, *River Towns*, 168.
14. Store in Petersburg, Menard County, near Springfield, Illinois. Recollection of store written in 1860 by John Bennett, in "Autobiography of John Bennett," Bennett-Carter Family, *Papers, 1836-1942*, ISHL.
15. See Spears, *100 Years on the Road*, 22-49.
16. Most early stores were merely depots for staple goods. In some instances, store operators looked to use their store for political gains or to create a "company store." For example, one early settler of Sheffield, Illinois realized that "it would be wise to keep in touch with the group that daily gathered around this store, for the builders of the

town were also there. [Store owner Albert] Boyden had large ideas for the village of Sheffield. His store was headquarters for the Sheffield Coal Company. The miners carried accounts there and came there for their monthly earnings. The trainmen had their pay accounts settled there. ... Although Sheffield could boast of no bank, Albert Boyden did a business that eventually developed into a local bank." In Willis Boughton, Mss, "Drover Days: Pioneer Life in Illinois, 1862-1876," ISHL.

17. Isaac Greene to Hamlet Perkins, 25 October 1847 in Cushing, *Papers*, SHSW. A second example shows how one Philadelphia supplier asked an agent to actually take over a retail shop that was unsuccessfully operated by the man's son, see S. L. Smith to Charles L. Harmon, 7 May 1841, in Harmon Family, *Papers*, Box 163, Folder: Harmon Papers, 1847 - 1851. Invoices, 1841-1848, CHS.

18. Harmon himself noted that his office in Chicago suffered from a lack of space, see letter from Harmon to his partner, Horatio Loomis, 21 August 1847 in Harmon Family, *Papers, Letter Books, Volume 8, 1846-1848, 1848-1849*, CHS.

19. Harmon probably took to using "trimmings" due to his relationship with hardware merchants, but letters -- such as this one -- indicate that he also used the phrase to mean dry goods, coffee, and other scarce goods. Letter of Charles L. Harmon to brother Edwin R. Harmon, 9 April 1847 in Harmon Family, *Papers, Letterbooks, Volume 8, 1846-1848, 1848-1849*, CHS. The list included paper, "blacking," two qualities of sugar and molasses, "java coffee," brandy, table condiments, and pickles.

20. Joseph Bowren to Hamlet Perkins, 10 January 1847; and B. H. Cheever & Co. to Perkins, 25 August 1847, Cushing, *Papers*, SHSW. Additional goods from Boston included 61 barrels of beans, 240 barrels of Pork, and a collar for a circular saw. See B. H. Cheever & Co. to Perkins & Co., 11 October 1847, *Ibid*. Second letter from Franklin Steel to Perkins, 3 December 1847, in *Ibid*.

21. In addition to the items mentioned in note 4, Greene forwarded other luxury goods -- such as brass clocks -- that were also in high demand in the interior. See letter from Isaac Greene to Hamlet Perkins, 25 October 1847, in Cushing, *Papers*, SHSW.

22. Thomas Bennet to his father, John Bennet, 2 September 1855 in Bennet-Carter Family, *Papers*, ISHL.

23. Isaac Greene to Hamlet Perkins, 8 October 1847 and 25 October 1847, in Cushing, *Papers*, SHSW; where Greene writes,

"one word about the prices of goods, our freight bills... are \$5,800! besides insurance, if so, then we must, we ought not let an article go out of the store [for] less than 50 pr ct sum from invoices, and much should bring 75 pr ct." For other comments on "fair" compensation, see Charles L. Harmon to Edwin Harmon, 9 April 1847, in Harmon Family, *Papers*, Volume 8, Letter Books, 1846-1848; 1848-1849, CHS.

24. Greene to Perkins, 6 September 1847 and 25 September 1847, in Cushing, *Papers*, SHSW.

25. Greene was also interested in getting the business of the best paid members of St. Croix society, the loggers, when he wrote to Perkins, 25 September 1847, to extend no credit "unless it is to loggers [who will need the mill] and then so bound that you control their logs above the mill..." in Cushing, *Papers*, SHSW.

26. Chicago Agent John Kirk to Youngstown Manufacturing Co, 18 March 1867, in John Kirk, *Letter Books*, 1852-1871, CHS.

27. For only one portion of his business -- commercial scales -- Harmon and his associates dealt with agents and retailers in Ottawa, Galesburg, Springfield, Peoria, Rock Island, Galena, and Peru, Illinois and Fon Du Lac, Portage City, Janesville, Kenosha, and Oshkosh, Wisconsin. Other lines of his business transacted with retailers in many additional towns. See Harmon Family, *Papers*, Box 164, Folder 17 "Scales accounts of agents, 1856," CHS.

28. Harmon to Smith & Wilkins, 8 September 1846, in Harmon Family, *Papers*, Volume 8, Letter Books 1846-1848; 1848-1849, CHS.

29. Harmon to Smith & Wilkins, 7 April 1847, in Harmon Family, *Papers*, Volume 8, Letter Books, 1846-1848; 1848-1849, CHS.

30. Harmon to Smith & Wilkins, 7 June 1848 in Harmon Family, *Papers*, Volume 8, Letter Books, 1846-1848; 1848-1849, CHS. For examples of Harmon's efforts to get the glass manufacturer to supply him with more product see letters dated 8 September 1847, 30 September 1847, and 6 October 1847, *Ibid.*

31. Harmon to A. J. Dunham & Co., 10 February 1847, in Harmon Family, *Papers*, Volume 8, Letter Books, 1846-1848; 1848-1849, CHS.

32. Harmon to A. J. Dunham & Co., dated 27 August 1846; and Harmon to his brother Edwin Harmon, 9 June 1847; in Harmon Family, *Papers*, Volume 8, Letter Books, 1846-1848; 1848-

1849, CHS.

33. Harmon to his Brother, J. D. Harmon, 8 November 1848, in Harmon Family, *Papers*, Volume 8, Letter Books, 1846-1848; 1848-1849, CHS. A second example, similar in style and tone can be found in the accounts of Chicago agent Osborn Keith, see Edson Keith to Osborn Keith, 18 August 1863 in Keith Family, *Papers*, CHS.

34. See Atherton, *Pioneer Merchants*, 82. For poor facilities, see H. Robert Grant, "Frontier and Western Transportation," In *American Frontier and Western Issues: A Historiographical Review*, ed. Roger L. Nichols (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), 89-109; and George Rogers Taylor, *The Transportation Revolution: 1815-1860* (New York: Rinehart & Co., 1951).

35. Edson Keith to Osborn Keith, 16 December 1855, in Keith Family, *Papers*, CHS.

36. For example dealing with the railroads, see Peter Wheelock, Jr. to Fairbanks [Scales] & Co., 16 June 1849 in E[rasmus] & T[haddeus] Fairbanks & Co., *Records, 1838-1853*, ISHL. See also the periodical, *The Cultivator and Country Gentleman*, 13 January 1869, Vol. 33, 54, which noted that in Illinois, "it is being demonstrated that while railroads greatly stimulate and increase production, they stimulate and increase consumption at a very greater rate." For lake transport, see Chicago agent William Blair to retailer Alexander, Howell & Co., 24 September 1855 in [P. M.] Alexander, [George] Howell & Co., *Business Correspondence, 1854-1876*, ISHL. For canals see agent John Mayers to Milo Custer, 20 June 1848, in Milo Custer, *Papers, 1830-1925*, ISHL; and Charles L. Harmon to Holton & Goodall, 29 April 1847, in Harmon Family, *Papers*, Volume 8, Letter Books, 1846-1848; 1848-1849, CHS. For roads see Charles L. Harmon to Smith & Wilkins, 15 December 1847 and Harmon to Wood & Sheldon, in *Ibid.*

37. Nowhere was this relationship between access to ready transportation and manufactured goods more apparent than with the boomtown of San Francisco. In a "Letter Sheet of Prices, Prepared Expressly for the Daily Alta California, San Francisco, June 14, 1851" is given a review of the general market conditions in a town regularly supplied by ocean transports. "The market is altogether overstocked. That has been shipped during the last year, more than equal to one case for every resident of California.... nothing but a very decided falling off in shipments will relieve the difficulty." In E. & T. Fairbanks & Co., *Records*, ISHL. See also discussion of early access (1852) to Wisconsin's hinterland in *Oshkosh City Times*, 28 March 1868; also later

references to the effects of good rail transportation in relation to Chicago in *Ibid.*, 17 November 1868.

38. Harmon to Wood & Sheldon, 23 September 1846 and 26 March 1847; in Harmon Family, *Papers*, Volume 8, Letter Books, 1846-1848; 1848-1849, CHS.

39. For his letter to Perkins regarding the various duties of an agent, see Cheever & Co. to Perkins & Co., 4 August 1847, in Cushing, *Papers*, SHSW. For his letter providing pilots, see 11 September 1847, *Ibid.*

40. Harmon to Wood & Sheldon, 18 January 1847 in Harmon Family, *Papers*, Volume 8, Letter Books, 1846-1848; 1848-1849, CHS.

41. See letters from Boston firm of Collander Rogers & Co. to Alexander, Howell & Co., 21 September 1855, and Troy, New York stove manufacturer Fuller Warren & Co. to Alexander, Howell & Co., 8 February 1860 in Alexander, Howell & Co., *Business Correspondence*, ISHL. See also letter from, Kensington Iron & Nail Works, Pittsburgh, Lloyd & Black, to Alexander, Howell & Co., 11 June 1861, in *Ibid.* For examples of evaluating and often discounting paper, see Charles L. Harmon to Wood & Sheldon, 9 June 1847, stating that "[t]here is a great scarcity of money here and exchange abundant at par on Buffalo & 1/2 to 1/4 on N.Y." in Harmon Family, *Papers*, Volume 8, Letter Books, 1846-1848; 1848-1849, CHS.

42. Harmon to D. O. Dickinson, 6 August 1848, in Harmon Family, *Papers*, Volume 8, Letter Books, 1846-1848; 1848-1849, CHS. William Blair to Alexander, Howell & Co., 4 May 1861, in Alexander, Howell & Co., *Business Correspondence*, ISHL.

43. Retailer Junior Ellis sounded a common warning to patrons. "Notice. From the unsettled state of currency, on and after this date, I will receive no money for any Goods, or Accounts due me, except such as will buy NEW YORK EXCHANGE OR GOLD." Dated 16 May 1861, in Alexander, Howell & Co., *Business Correspondence*, ISHL. See also Charles L. Harmon to Wood & Sheldon, 9 June 1847, in Harmon Family, *Papers*, Volume 8, Letter Books, 1846-1848; 1848-1849, CHS. Edson Keith, dealing with retailers, sums up the feeling of restricting sales nicely when he stated "stick to the cash system principally on Customers you don't know perfectly about the liabilities & assets & honesty." Edson Keith to brother Osborn Keith, 10 August 1858, in Keith Family, *Papers*, CHS.

44. First quotation from letter from Edson Keith to his mother, 19 June 1856 -- describing his travels throughout

Portage City, Kenosha, Racine, Milwaukee, Sheboygan, Manitowoc, Two Rivers, and Green Bay, Wisconsin -- the second from letter from Edson to Osborn Keith, 18 June 1856, in Keith Family, *Papers*, CHS.

45. For "shorts" citation, see Edson Keith to Osborn Keith, 7 December 1855, in Keith Family, *Papers*, CHS. See also Edson to Osborn Keith, 19 September 1858, where he writes "I think I drum[me]d them so [hard that] they will surely call... [therefore] I should not want you to rely upon [my efforts] to give credit, for you ought to ascertain from every customer their real responsibility. ... You want to attend to every person who come in [as] well, otherwise you may lose some who are well worthy of cr[edit] and would make profitable customers."

46. Edson Keith to Osborn Keith, 6 February 1859, in Keith Family, *Papers*, CHS. Isaac Harmon to Charles L. Harmon, 25 January 1848, in Harmon Family, *Papers*, Volume 8, Letter Books, 1846-1848; 1848-1849, CHS.

47. For a few examples of merchants who were not supplied with credit, see Charles Harmon to E. T. Fairbanks & Co., 30 March 1848 and 9 April 1848, in Harmon Family, *Papers*, Volume 8, Letter Books, 1846-48; 1848-1849, CHS.

48. Many letters served to merge both credit and market information, see for example Harmon to E. T. Fairbanks & Co., 30 March 1858 and 9 April 1858, in Harmon Family, *Papers*, Volume 8, Letter Books, 1846-48; 1848-1849, CHS. Also see general correspondence of Harmon in the summer of 1860, in Harmon Family, *Papers*, Volume 26, Letter Book, 1860. CHS

49. For citations and other examples, see Charles L. Harmon to Wood & Sheldon, 23 September 1846; to Smith & Wilkins, 10 November 1846 and 18 December 1846; to Holton & Goodhall, 29 August 1846; to E. & T. Fairbanks & Co., 9 April 1858; and to his brother Edwin, 9 June 1847, in Harmon Family, *Papers*, Volume 8, Letter Books, 1846-1848; 1848-1849, CHS.

50. Ellson Keith to Osborn Keith, 17 August 1858, in Keith Family, *Papers*, CHS.

51. For oysters see Charles L. Harmon to James A. Bennet, 28 October 1846; for candles see Harmon to his brother, 30 October 1846, in Harmon Family, *Papers*, Volume 8, Letter Books, 1846-1848; 1848-1849, CHS.

52. For credit reporting, see James D. Norris, *R. G. Dun & Co., 1841-1900: The Development of Credit-Reporting in the Nineteenth Century* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press,

1978). For the Chicago *Tribune's* effort in establishing market data, and the geographic rivalries between the Western News Company -- formed by the *Tribune* in 1865 -- and the New York based American News Company, see J. Seymour Curry, *Chicago: Its History and Its Builders: A Century of Marvelous Growth*, Vol. 2 (Chicago: The S. J. Clarke Publishing Company, 1912), 201-203.

53. These goods included mustard, ground pepper, ginger, raisins, starch, "java coffee," and quality tea. See Charles L. Harmon to Wood & Sheldon, 8 August 1847, in Harmon Family, *Papers*, Volume 8, Letter Books, 1846-1848; 1848-1849, CHS.

54. Harmon to his brother, 26 June 1847, in Harmon Family, *Papers*, Volume 8, Letter Books, 1846-1848; 1848-1849, CHS.

55. Along with other examples, given in this chapter, see the development of Hartford City, Indiana. Again, there is a progression from local monopoly to competitive retailer from 1857 to 1863. See William F. Jones, *Papers, 1827-1890*. InSL.

56. Harmon's transformation from a "traditional," multi-product agent to a "wholesale grocer and commission merchant" is typical of many urban middlemen. To see this transition, including the change to a cash only business, see letters beginning 1 May 1860, in Harmon Family, *Papers*, Volume 26, Letter Books, 1860, CHS.

CHAPTER 3

THE DEVELOPMENT OF MASS

CONSUMER PATTERNS, 1840 - 1873

William Clark and his family settled along the Bear Creek, near Bloomington, Illinois, establishing their farm in March of 1831. They arrived with only the most basic goods -- a gun, one yearling heifer, an ox and hoe -- and lacking any cultivating machinery or "team of any kind." His son recalled that in the earliest days they subsisted on a mere five acres of improved land. As a result, the farm rarely produced a surplus harvest. Clark was forced to travel "as much as 4 days to find where he could get corn to make bread" to supplement his relatives' diet. What little maize they could work from the soil was often ground at home, for the family was too poverty-stricken to pay for milling. Clark's neighbors, such as Rachel Durbin, struggled equally as hard to support their kin. In addition to the daily demand to "get up a meal out of almost nothing," Durbin trekked into the wilds to garner raw materials for food and crude clothing. One spring, she searched "creek bottoms [to] gather nettles... after they had rotted through the winter, [took] them home, [broke] them the same as flax, [to] spin and weave and make clothes for her children."¹

Such dramatic episodes of personal tenacity -- as settlers extracted their livelihoods from the Midwestern prairies -- only tell a portion of their common economic struggles. Relying on determined individual effort, family savings, and a knowledge of commercial agriculture, farmers doggedly pursued day-to-day improvements in an effort to increase the value and profitability of their claims. For example, Clark used the currency earned by his first cash crop -- twelve bushels of corn -- to purchase a modern rifle lock. Later, following more substantial yields, he invested in a team of oxen by which he could bring more of his land into cultivation. Durbin, too, sold her harvested sumac (for tanning) and wild hops to various Springfield merchants. These efforts were made not merely to bolster the family's discretionary income but as an essential ingredient to the success of a commercial farmer. Clark wrote that "a man in these times with a women who possessed anything like the saving qualities [Durbin] did would not nor could not fail to get rich."²

The aggressive market footing taken by these settlers has rarely been disputed by historians. Most Midwestern farmers rejected the notion of market isolation and plunged headlong into commercial agriculture. Carl Köhler, a German immigrant to St. Clair County, Illinois, surmised that this trait was widespread among the regions' agronomists. He believed that "when doing business [his native-born

neighbors] have no conscious at all, and follow implicitly the advice an Old Yankee once gave his son: 'Boy, make money; if you can make it honestly -- but make money!'" A recent study of farming patterns in the region bolsters Köhler's observations. It notes how farmers planned for the optimal commercial value of their produce, resulting in crop specialization in certain regions and mixed-crop farming elsewhere. This pattern was independent of farm size or family income. Midwestern corn and wheat matured into regional staples -- fueling the growth of secondary industries and urban markets -- primarily as a result of the sound economic judgement of each individual planter.³

By the dawn of the Civil War, some agricultural journals hinted that their subscribers were interested in exploring the attributes which made up the most efficient commercial farm. Several contributors were drawn to the largest and most flamboyant estates. For example, *The Wisconsin Farmer* delineated the properties of the 70,000 acre farm of Michael Sullivant of Champaign County, Illinois (of which 23,400 acres were improved). Others unveiled to the public the great estate of another Champaign County magnate, John T. Alexander, who reportedly sold parcels of his land to "a party of Chicago gentlemen - probably for a game reserve" for \$650,000. Alexander's 27,000 acre private estate in Morgan County -- so large that it "might almost be called a principality" -- was retained at a value of more

than \$1,500,000. While the innate fascination with the lives of the very rich may explain the focus on these tycoons, columns were given over to smaller, more typical operations. The common theme coursing through all of these accounts was the manifest devotion by farmers to commercial agriculture, a zeal that was most notable in the practice of farm and domestic improvements.⁴

A description of one such farm -- called *Prairie Farm* in Sheffield, Illinois -- suggests how Midwesterners' adherence to commercial agriculture acted as a tremendous catalyst for change. *Prairie Farm*, occupied by Myron and Jane Farnham Boughton in the late 1850s, consisted of sixty acres of wheat, eighty acres of oats, one hundred and twenty acres of corn, and two hundred acres of "tame hay." The resulting surplus produce required every measure of productivity that "up-to-date machinery" had to offer. One conservative estimate of the number of labor-hours needed to care for an estate sown with these four plants was placed at eighty-seven hours per acre. Neglecting seasonal fluctuations, it required eleven laborers working fifty-one weeks a year, six days a week, twelve hours a day to harvest the 460 acres of *Prairie Farm*. For no small reason then, mechanized reapers were considered indispensable by owners. Boughton believed his McCormick machine was "one of the wonders of the farming world. We had a latest model."⁵

In addition to the capital investments in machinery and

the animal teams to drive them -- reapers required the combined strength of at least "six husky horses" to drag the device over the loamy, Midwestern soil -- commercial farmers needed to manage a large number of laborers. In June and July, farmers required up to eleven men to bind and shock the wheat, thresh oats, and harvest and store the hay. Boughton recounted that, "when the harvester was in operation, it took six good binders to 'keep up with the machine.'" Interesting labor problems arose with such intense mechanization. For instance, a harvester made "rounds" of a forty-acre field that were nearly a mile in circumference. To maximize worker productivity, owners placed their laborers along "stations" on the machine's route. Much like a baseball batting order, the first station could expect to work sooner and take part in more "rounds" during the allotted work day. Boughton's men recognized this and obliged him to let them decide the order of the work schedule. The crew actually gambled for the last station, "for to wait might mean a long rest." Boughton was denied the ability to select those whom he deemed most competent for the job.⁶

Threshing oats created equally intriguing labor relations. In an effort to reduce their operating costs, local farmers pooled resources to buy and share a single threshing machine. As a result, Boughton was required to wait until the skilled workmen and machinery were prepared

to service *Prairie Farm*. Boughton related the forceful and disruptive nature that the arrival of this production line had on his farm operations.

One night about 10 o'clock, without warning, the thresher came. There were four men to be fed and lodged and four spans of horses to be stabled and cared for. To carry out the work properly we required a gang of thirty men or more. While most of those helpers were day workers from the village, they were given three meals at the farm.

In addition to the work in the fields, domestic chores such as preparing and cooking meals, and cleaning for so large an army of hands necessitated "extra helpers for the work of the house." These workers were present on *Prairie Farm* for more than two weeks. As with Rachel Durbin, Jane Boughton's experience connotes the integral role played by all family members in the commercial success of their farms.⁷

This uneasy transition from frontier to industrialized commercial agriculture greatly influenced the consumer behavior of rural Midwesterners. By 1860, one popular publisher remarked that "the intelligent western people who, having done with speculations and pioneer life, are prepared to devote themselves to the interests of their farms and homes." Much as mechanized threshing upset and changed the labor relations and domestic patterns of *Prairie Farm*, so too did this evolution have unintended and profound consequences on farmer's conception of the procurement of manufactured goods. Driven by the need for reapers, threshers, stoves, and sewing machines, farmers also came to

acquire parlor furniture, adorned carriages, ornamental shrubbery, and other non-essential consumer wares.⁸

Farmer's knowledge and experience in the acquisition of capital assets lent them a uniquely aggressive approach in seeking out and purchasing other consumer goods. Such products increasingly were coveted for reasons beyond their utilitarian appeal. Yet, the *American Agriculturalist* warned in July of 1862 that a Midwestern farmer's consumer needs "var[ied only] with the size of the family, and their propensity to gratify pride -- an expensive article in a new country." By 1873, Midwesterners' distinctive consumer tastes encountered increasingly volatile and intrusive economic and business conditions.⁹

Critical considerations emerge, therefore, about the effect of commercial agriculture upon the developing rural consumer ethos. For example, did farmers publicly debate the logic of acquisition in light of their unique market position, and if so, using what ideological constructs? How was this philosophy expressed, and were there distinctions made between capital goods -- such as field and domestic machinery -- and non-capital consumer goods? How did the commencement of the Civil War influence the perceptions and economic reality of those who survived? Finally, how did economic and policy changes after the war influence rural consumers?

"Scientific farming" was the expression commercial farmers employed to describe their pursuit of economic efficiency. The central tenets of this modernizing doctrine were the dissemination of practical information and a shared logic for industrialized agriculture by which farmers understood and discussed the rapid changes taking place on their land. One contemporary wrote that the "improvement of agriculture need[ed] the aid of the wider range of knowledge which the advancements of the age have placed within its reach. But the farm has neither the text books, apparatus nor teachers necessary to impart it."¹⁰ Information concerning soil conditions and conservation, better care and breeding of livestock and plants, crop rotation, and mechanization was sought. These educational improvements were sought by farmers so that they might make better choices when participating in the increasingly complex and competitive economy. Scientific farming, therefore, touched on all aspects of commercial agriculture, including consumption.

The substance of modernization manifested itself in the terminology and comparative descriptions used to popularize scientific farming. Prospective innovators were required to deliver the most cost efficient and desirable produce to trading areas where demand for goods was greatest. In short, they had to brave the challenge of economic competition as

no previous generation of husbandmen. The popular journal *Prairie Farmer* insisted that "the spirit of competition must be aroused" among enterprising farmers. Scientific farming "must be talked of, agitated." Conversely,

If the farmer in his quiet 'unconsciousness' is not aware that another man... [who] by a judicious system of management, produces better crops, grows better stock, and consequently makes more money than he does... [then he will merely] plod on in the footsteps of his father. In fact, in many instances there is a strong affection for the 'good old way' as the habits of the grandfather are termed, and what is still worse, a stronger prejudice against anything new -- a disposition to condemn it as such without a hearing....¹¹

Antiquated farming was seen as the surest route to financial disaster by adherents to this fashionable theory. Some "efficient mode of instruction" was needed that would "concentrate, increase and diffuse this knowledge ... and ultimately make itself felt upon every farm and through every industrial pursuit."¹²

Scientific farming found its most impassioned apostles in the agricultural journals and many regional periodicals of the era. The noted scholar Paul Wallace Gates remarked that, by 1840, farmers were singularly informed "by weekly and monthly journals, and by numerous 'experts' who wrote on its problems regularly for newspapers and periodicals." Agricultural presses quickly came to specialize by region in the antebellum U.S. For example, Edmund Ruffin circulated the *Farmer's Register* to southern planters, while the Northeast was represented by the *Country Gentleman*, *Moore's*

Rural New Yorker, and the *American Agriculturalist*, to name only a few. In the Midwest, the *Prairie Farmer*, *Wisconsin Farmer*, *Western Rural*, and *Iowa Homestead* led a long list of publications read by commercial farmers. Gates estimated that by the dawn of the Civil War, the nation claimed nearly sixty thriving journals who touched approximately 350,000 readers. One in ten of all U.S. farmers, therefore, were subscribers -- with numbers probably significantly higher for those who were actively involved in commercial farming. Such a wide distribution made the content of their editorials particularly meaningful to the rural community.¹³

Historians have paid close attention to these popular magazines. For the most part, they have found that editors were chiefly propagandists for their readers' economic causes and proponents of modernizing antiquated farming techniques. While many averred their disgust for "book farming," their columns were filled with practical advice on how to keep farm ledgers, conserve soil, use fertilizer, and the like. They advocated political activism to enact fencing laws in the Midwest, a national system of internal improvements, and mandatory primary education. By 1840, the concept of scientific farming was clearly ensconced in the popular mind of editors, contributors, and subscribers.¹⁴

Unfortunately, the torrent of promotion for scientific farming did not always profit the rural community. The combination of persuasive advice and rising competitive

pressures convinced many unsuspecting farmers to gamble their homesteads on untried technology and spurious "quick fixes." One historian noted that unprincipled salesmen were ready to "fleece unsuspecting farmers by offering a non-existent journal to the public, or, after one or two issues, escape with the subscription money." Periodicals were also guilty of political demagoguery that diluted their non-partisan, practical recommendations. Despite these and other pitfalls, agricultural journals made practical knowledge readily available to commercial farmers, providing substantiality to the philosophy of scientific farming.¹⁵

The central pillar of scientific farming, as popularized by the periodicals, was the judicious purchase and use of modern agricultural machinery. The emergence of a staple crop agriculture led to a standardization of the technology with which to process the crops. Propelled by the growing demand of wheat, corn, and hay, farmers turned to machinery that predictably and steadily increased yields. Yet commercial farmers were not encouraged by the market to innovate with untried technology. Those who attempted to change technologies gambled with their very livelihood in the event of failure. Farmers sought information in periodicals to temper this risk.¹⁶

The use of agricultural machinery was the most visible evidence that farmers conformed to the principle of market efficiency. The largest farms, such as Sullivant's, teemed

with mechanical apparatus. One reporter noted that most "of the work is done by machinery. He drives his posts by horse power, cultivates his corn by machinery, ditches, sows and plants by machinery, so that all his laborers can ride and perform their duties." Sullivant boasted that he employed two hundred farm hands, two hundred horses, "and a large number of children" to operate his works. Moderately sized operations such as *Prairie Farm*, were equally mechanized. Even the smallest holdings -- from forty to eighty acres -- believed that they benefitted by investing in capital improvements. One farmer from Christian County, Illinois opined that,

prairie breaking is something of a job and requires a good steel plow. Formerly, it was not deemed possible to break prairie with horses and small plows, but large plows and from four to eight yoke of oxen were thought requisite. It has been since found that 12-inch plows of peculiar construction, and two or three good horses can do the same work as a 24-inch plow and five yoke of oxen.

Clearly the use of agricultural machinery permeated the entire range of commercial farms.¹⁷

Midwesterners did not limit capital investments solely to machines used in the fields. Scientific farming was holistic, demanding economic efficiencies in the domestic sphere equal to that of the pasture. As suggested by the examples above, the sudden saturation by large numbers of laborers pressured women to keep these men housed and well fed. The *Chase Western Rural Handbook* noted,

Before the introduction of agricultural machinery,

farming operations were conducted upon a limited scale. ... But now, how changed! The western farmer's home is often converted into an Irishman's boarding-house, and the kitchen, contracted [in space] and illy furnished, becomes a sort of dutiful penitentiary.

The same article asked readers if their farm kitchens were "the latest and best, and equipped with a troupe of new-fangled contrivances for doing the baking, broiling, roasting, steaming and boiling? What special facilities do you [have] for washing, drying and ironing the clothes..?" While farm work had been revolutionized by new inventions, "farmers' kitchens seem to have withstood the insinuations of genius, and derided all attempts at material improvement." Household work was included in the scope of scientific farming -- indeed was seen by this publication as "the most pressing demands of a farm establishment" -- simply because it directly affected the bottom line of the commercial farm. Here again, publications pressed farmers to conform to the rigors of commercial agriculture through modernizing the domestic workplace.¹⁸

By embracing the importance of household duties, scientific farming reconstructed the economic role of women in the farm family. Some farm men were not comfortable with these changes, believing that "one employment after another is taken out of the hands of women folk by the innovations of machinery and associated labor." Nostalgic for the days when their grandmothers spun and wove (and in Rachel Durbin's case, collected nettles from creek bottoms!), they

groused that now "our wives barely recollect homespun; [and while] they can make up their own garments -- but nowadays, little is left for our daughters to do but wear them out."¹⁹

Yet the records of farm women indicate that they welcomed the autonomy associated with the automation of their drudgery. In a series of letters between Ellen White and her mother Sarah Tyner, White discussed the rationale for her desire to purchase a sewing machine. The "nostalgic" practice of hand sewing had mangled her fingers and racked her body with pain. She wrote that, as a result, "my side is so bad [that] I do all my sewing at the neighbors" who owned a machine. This proved to be only a temporary solution. Ellen admitted that she was too "ashamed to go anymore," and her thoughts turned to owning her own implement for she wanted "to have a little something to be independent." After finally refusing to sew at all, the family bought a seventy dollar Singer for her through which, in one season, she managed to complete "five full suits of little close [sic]."²⁰

The cost of acquiring capital goods was not insignificant. The average forty acre homestead in the Midwest expected to spend at least \$1,200 in start up costs. This price included land, housing, fencing, livestock -- which was significantly lower due to the regional focus on staple crop agriculture -- and finally the domestic and field machines and the teams needed to drive them. Larger

homesteads of 80 and 160 acres required even greater outlays of cash -- approximately \$2,000 and \$3,000 respectively. Capital goods, including domestic articles, often accounted for nearly a quarter of these totals! This fiscal criteria, one historian accurately surmised, was "more than was possessed by a good percentage of the population, and, although time could be substituted for some of this capital, the poorest households could still not enter Midwestern farming as farm operators." Using the logic of scientific farming, these entrepreneurs turned to ways in which they could easily evaluate and acquire their essential gear.²¹

Once established, however, commercial farms rarely faced the risk of total insolvency in the antebellum Midwest. Further, researchers have found that wealth distribution among installed farmers in the region was much more egalitarian than at almost any other time in the nation's history.²² As a result, farmers temporarily strapped to procure their capital goods found alternative methods by which to obtain them. As noted earlier, local and regional agents often extended liberal credit terms to farmers in an effort to secure sales. Further, an article of the period, titled "The Cost of Operating an Illinois Farm," observed that it was "customary for a number of farmers to join together in purchasing ... expensive implements, and to work them in common." Still, the specter of foreclosure on an article as integral as a reaper, or the frustration of

being last in line to use an oat thresher -- tantamount to a loss of economic control -- undoubtedly inspired many planters to seek methods by which to buy outright.²³

Like the devices themselves, these purchasing strategies were integrated within the educational doctrines of scientific farming. Independent and local farmers' clubs were the site of this fusion. These informal bodies comprised regional farmers who met to discuss current agricultural practices, coordinate political and economic activities, and most importantly, to organize local and county fairs.²⁴ Members believed that these democratic organizations "raised the standard of farming... and expanded, and liberalized, and in every way improved the minds of farmers." At their monthly meetings, experienced farmers tutored their neighbors on the utilitarian aspects of irrigation, fertilizers, and plant husbandry.²⁵

While clubs promulgated general agricultural information, their main focus quickly turned to the mechanical arts. In the 1856 edition of the *Transactions of the Illinois State Agricultural Society* -- a state body which coordinated the actions of local farmers' clubs -- Correspondence Secretary John A. Kennicott held that clubs could "hardly be called 'educational institutions,' though [a] great number of ignorant farmers and mechanics receive [their] first lessons in progressive agriculture and art through their agency." Kennicott saw that the clubs' "true

mission" was to "draw public attention to great improvements in the arts of production." The *Prairie Farmer* added that "the most effectual method of getting up an interest among farmers," was by holding county and town fairs to display new machinery.²⁶

The staging of local fairs was the single most important contribution made by farmers' clubs to the spirit of scientific farming. Agricultural fairs were the most popular method by which the average commercial farmer was enlightened on the purchase and availability of modern machinery. These expositions were routinely the most widely publicized and attended events by farmers from 1850 until 1870 -- a period once termed the "Golden Age" of agricultural fairs. At first, organizers were simply glad to see that their efforts were met with local participation. Herbert Blakely, Secretary of the Ridott (IL) Agricultural Society claimed he had the "honor" of organizing the first local fair in 1857. While it was "numerously attended... everyone was astonished that [the] town alone could produce such an exhibition." But Midwestern states soon became the most active in organizing and attending fairs during these years. Not even the Civil War interrupted the pattern of annual fairs in many locations. By 1867, the region was home to more than half of the 1,032 national agricultural societies hosting a fair.²⁷

An important element of these galas, not be lost in a

discussion of rural consumerism, was the social benefits of such a gathering. At their most lofty representation, fairs made rural Americans feel good about themselves and their neighbors. Farmers came to view the goods on display as a visible validation of their economic status when compared to the larger U.S. population. One editorial noted that the fair was "an occasion when the farmer's worth to the community is best appreciated; at fair time, if at no other, the farmer can regard himself as the equal of other men." Other narratives echoed these sentiments, stating that fairs "contribute[d] to social feelings and good neighborhood," and broke down class lines between owners and laborers.²⁸

Fairs also lent communities a spirit of carnival. Schools often proclaimed Friday or the entire "Fair Week" a holiday, so that teachers as well as pupils had "no excuse for not attending." While one farmer duly noted in his diary his attendance at the implement expositions and cattle judging, he spent much of his remaining time engrossed in the "very fast trotting" horses being raced at the event. While some attendees were comfortable with these pursuits -- including those who spent their days playing baseball -- others called for restrictions to be placed on the rise of such unrefined pursuits, and for the removal of the "vagabond showmen who infest its fairs." These positive and negative social perceptions only enhanced the significance of the event in the lives of rural Americans. If for no

other reason, these views confirm the fact that fairs were serious public forums for expression and debate among the farm community.²⁹

Social attractions aside, these expositions generally concentrated on the display of agricultural machinery. Editors at the *Prairie Farmer* observed that "no part of an exhibition is more thoroughly studied by those who visit it, than the machinery for the farm." One fair, held in Springfield County, was typical for the "various novel agricultural implements exhibited in the show yard," including plows, "seed-planters of ingenious construction," and "little hand machines for washing clothes upon, which are said to economize labour 100 per cent." Many devices drew praise if they were "simple, cheap, and efficient." Sewing machines and other household appliances exhibited at the 1868 Illinois State Fair led to "a greater willingness to adopt for the wife every machine which can lighten the burden of household toil." More often than not, fairs were deemed exceptional only when the display of implements was not "abundant."³⁰

Manufacturers were quick to come to the aid of these farmers' clubs by making their wares easily available for public trial. Ostensibly, suppliers provided their goods in order to compete for the cash premiums awarded for the best device in a particular category -- reaper, thresher, etc. Typically, machines would be publicly operated by

manufacturer's agents and then evaluated for their relative strengths by an independent panel of farmers. While backers of the fairs professed that the premiums alone were effective at drawing a wide range of competitors, manufacturers such as plowwright William B. Young simply wanted to openly best their rivals. Young issued a circular titled "The Farmer's Friend" claiming that at,

the Illinois State Fair for 1865, no field trials of Plows were held. The first Premium, for Best Plow for general use, was awarded *without trial*, to Deere & Co..... *The same identical plows* were taken to the Iowa State Fair, the following week, where a field trial was held in which the superiority of the plows exhibited and tested.

Needless to say Young's circular was an effort to inform Illinois farmers that his plow had routed Deere's, not an effort to recapture the trifling premium.³¹

Often, merely the visibility of their goods at the fairs was sufficient grounds to attract suppliers. Once given access, manufacturers such as grain-drill maker D. E. McSherry of Dayton, Ohio, intended to populate their exhibits with territorial agents who could extoll the virtues of their product to passers-by. Writing to an associate, McSherry explained that he "hope[d] to find a good fair at Quincy [Illinois] and trust[ed] to find there our crowd in full force -- and to get from them all the assistance & pressure needed" for sales. Other manufacturers and agents planned similar campaigns. John Deere & Co. brought over sixty plows to a single fair, both right-handed

and left, including all of the "implement[s] for every variety of work for which the plow is adapted." Not all of these displayed goods participated in performance tests. These men clearly were not motivated by the relatively small premiums being offered but rather the revenues to be extracted from the farmers' strongbox.³²

Along these lines, manufacturers went to great lengths to publicize their participation at the county and state fairs. As early as 1853, John Kennicott informed local farmers' clubs that suppliers were pressing him to render the dates and locations of upcoming fairs. Many firms helped to underwrite the fairs by advertising in the published guides and premium lists. By so doing, merchants presented their goods with the institutional blessing of, and hopefully the philosophical connotations associated with, the popular farmers' clubs. One officer of the Illinois State Agricultural Society wrote that,

The very act of advertising shows a liberality of spirit at variance with all penuriousness, and a confidence in the intrinsic value of his goods and articles to which he had invited public investigation. Such men with their names before the world will rarely attempt to deceive it; for they know that one single act of dishonor, with their names so prominently displayed before the public, will blast them forever.

By allying themselves with the clubs, manufacturers were accorded the respect given to other forums for scientific farming. Their efforts were not seen as opportunistic huckstering, but as a further contribution to the functional education of consuming farmers.³³

The tremendous success of the fairs -- both socially as well as materially -- coupled with the assertive participation of manufacturers blurred the distinction between consumption as practiced by "scientific farmers" and the pursuit of less essential goods. Non-capital merchandise such as stylish boots and shoes, cloth, clothing, millinery goods, books, and an assortment of other products were displayed adjacent to the sanctioned reapers, sewing machines, and stoves. Advertisers of the 1861 Illinois State Fair included outfitters of "fine watches," furs, musical instruments, sporting goods, wigs, and perfumes. Even the Chicago Mercantile Bakery advertised its bread as a product of a "monster labor saving machine," thereby cloaking their loaves in efficiency and modernity. Remarkably, the image of legitimate agricultural machinery was often refracted by these more luxurious goods! A description of the display offered by the John Deere Co., cited above, succinctly blended the effect that "scientific," non-capital goods had on the consumer perceptions of farmers. It was reported that "embraced in [their] display were two extra finished plows for exhibition, that far surpassed anything ever yet brought out at a fair in this country for elegance of workmanship and finish. [The correspondents] heard farmers remark that they were fine enough for parlor ornaments."³⁴ The resulting association of capital and non-capital goods lent farmers an expansive understanding of "scientific farming." Not only

were goods justified for their utility in maximizing profits on the farm, but also for their aesthetic appeal. One McCormick agent wrote in 1868, "Say what you will in favor of plain machines for work, in nine cases out of ten if you find a piano in a farmers house and a silverplated carriage in his barn -- just so often does a farmer buy a mower because it is polished, burnished and painted fancifully."³⁵

Rural Americans developed a unique brand of consumerism that was based on their shared experience as commercial farmers. The idea of scientific farming -- which aimed for efficient, market oriented homesteads -- focused on the modernizing function of domestic and field machinery. Farmers' Clubs sponsored agricultural fairs largely to evaluate and purchase these goods. Allied with these conventional market beliefs, farmers prospered in relation to the demands of the national economy. The outbreak of civil war, however, greatly transformed these traditional perceptions and experiences.

The tragic effects of the war need not be recounted here. The anguish over the thousands killed and wounded, the physical destruction, and the missed opportunities of Reconstruction for millions of African-Americans drives home the pain of the period even to the most callous observer. Contemporaries such as Henry Adams noted the severe psychological confusion suffered by his generation. "Society," Adams wrote, "from top to bottom, broke down."

With this tableau as a backdrop, the economic dislocation of the war and the resulting, unintended consequences for rural consumers seems picayune by comparison. Still, these changes were as real and long-lasting as the more painful incidents.³⁶

The economic influence of national (i.e., Federal) policies can appear deterministic. For example, the Union Pacific Railroad Act, the Morrill Land Grant College Act, the Homestead Act, and the formation of the Department of Agriculture all displayed a new utilitarian leaning by Washington with regard to the West. Many of these actions, while aiding in the war effort, were aimed at placating an increasingly vocal body of Western Representatives in the Union Congress. While the direct beneficiaries of much of this legislation lived in the Great Plains and Far West, Midwesterners also profited from the economic subsidization that Federal laws provided.³⁷

But for many, the fiscal repercussions of the war were more subtle and personal, and led to new perceptions and economic conditions which changed the traditional rural perspective toward consumption. Attitudes were most directly affected by the visible increase in the volume of goods made available for the prosecution of the war. Economic shifts -- most notably the inflation of currency -- were more silent harbingers of transforming purchasing patterns. Together, these forces magnified the general tendencies of

Midwesterners to rely on methods of scientific farming: a greater access to, knowledge of, and desire for manufactured goods. Just as the isolated farmer, upon enlistment, was first exposed to the viruses that caused measles and chicken pox, so too was this a "contact period" for millions of rural Americans with the powerful force of mass consumption.

The primary stimulus which transformed consumer opinion was the immediate need for vast amounts of manufactured goods in order to furnish the Union Army. Records from quartermasters, attempting to provide for the rapid surge in enlistments at the outset of the conflict, suggest that even experienced merchants had no preparation for such an undertaking. Indianapolis hardware merchant and manufacturer J. H. Vajen, made Quartermaster General of his State's efforts, was nearly overwhelmed by the need for everything from tents, haversacks, canteens, and infantry equipment to clothing, food, and animal fodder.³⁸

Massive orders were the norm. On May 24, 1861, an inauspiciously named Quartermaster from Indiana, Major Jefferson Davis procured, from the Bowen Stewart Co., 270 boxes of paper, 3,000 envelopes, 99 dozen steel pens, and enough sealing wax and ink to stock them. In addition, that same month he was responsible for the purchase and dissemination of 24,803 pounds of fresh beef, 29,241 pounds of bacon, 17,383 pounds of ham, 60,000 pounds of flour, 5,291 pounds of rice, 7,661 pounds of coffee, 11,400 pounds

of sugar, 754 gallons of vinegar, and 3,344 pounds of soap! While orders such as these may have been placed by a handful of antebellum urban wholesalers, nothing before had reached this level for breadth and duration of procurement.³⁹

The vast scale of the conflict made the Army's previous experience in the Mexican War inconsequential. General Vajen confided to his superiors that "it was impossible to do business strictly according to the 'Army Regulations' [for to] have been any more stringent with our officers and troops would have retarded volunteering." In order to move a single regiment through the city and onto Camp Morton, Vajen and Davis were required to negotiate and coordinate the efforts of scores of local merchants, various railroads, and numerous wholesalers.⁴⁰

Such a vast quantity of goods created new perceptions about the range of possibilities for the average consumer. At one time, a farmer was forced to choose from a limited stock of goods at the local depot. Now, as enlistees, they saw a variety of goods passing them in freight cars and commissary wagons. Most noticeable to many of these men was the relative stylishness of their various state and regimental uniforms. In light of the severity of the war to come, the early disputes over swank uniforms took on a darkly comical air. One Indiana private wrote to his mother that "we have had a big battle at last, not with the Rebels but with our Colonel about our uniforms. We have got them at

last, [and they] are the very best kind." Illinois servicemen were equally concerned with the fashion of their vestments. The visible presence of new and lavish apparel literally paraded by them. Private Andrew Bush, writing to his sister noted that "it looks nice when we go on battalion drill. Everyone has to have his best clothes on and his shoes blacked." While wartime *machismo* may explain the perceived need for smart battle-fatigues, other goods were equally reviewed by members of the Grand Army of the Republic.⁴¹

Unremarkable items such as food and undergarments became objects of great interest when made so readily available. One soldier wrote to his family that he and his brother were "getting quite fat" on the liberal army provisions. Enlisting at a lanky 148 pounds, the private gleefully observed that he had since gained thirty pounds, "and I think if I stay my three years out I will weigh eight hundred pounds if nothing happens. don't fret about me or your brothers, for we will live well." Clothing was seen as cheap and bounteous. Unlike earlier wars, infantrymen rarely requested garments from home for they could get them more easily and cheaper in the service than their relatives could get these at home. Noted one infantryman, "Uncle Sam will sell us good boots... socks... flannel drawers... and everything else in proportion" to the low costs for other consumer goods. Much as with the fancy uniforms, the war

forced these men to view common items such as food and clothing in a new light. What was once merely a basic item was transformed into an object of consumer desire.⁴²

Less essential consumer goods were also described by servicemen in their letters home. Whether it was the cookware of the camp, the personal utensils used by the men, or the actual implements of warfare, Midwestern veterans relayed to their kin the measureless volume of unusual merchandise. After taking inventory, Private James Vanderbilt related this wartime consumer knowledge to his previous experience as mechanized prairie farmer: "We have got all our riggings... and I never was harnessed before I got them on but I was surely harnessed then." Just as Vanderbilt once trained his teams at home to utilize new agricultural machine, so too was he being conditioned by the army to this material abundance.⁴³

Rural consumers were undoubtedly tethered to their goods in a new and potentially revolutionary way. Patrons were able to relate these new and abundant goods to their unique antebellum consumer experiences -- with scientific farming, clubs, and fairs. This new knowledge, provided through their ordeals in the war, merely expanded the potential for acquisition of more goods by using these established antebellum patterns. Just as farmers had once worked to evaluate and purchase farm implements, so too would rural veterans be determined to acquire all their

goods through such a "scientific" fashion.

One example of this practice serves as a microcosm of this trend. William Pankhurst, the Commissary Sergeant for the 75th Illinois Volunteer Regiment, wrote from Whiteside, Tennessee to his hometown retailer in order to procure penknives which he could sell to his compatriots. He asked of his supplier to "sell them as low as you can as I want to sell them again and do not want to run the risk for nothing." Such opportunism forced the Army to require servicemen to avouch to their quartermaster that commissary stores were bought solely for personal use. Such a sweeping proclamation hints at the widespread nature of this new activity among Federal troops.⁴⁴

Non-combatants were not sheltered from these changing perceptions. The Federal cornucopia instructed many in the modern ways of mass consumption. At the most basic level, advertisers took to invoking the war as a justification for the purchase of their products. Common were pitches such as one by the Cornell Sewing Machine Company, in the premium list of the Illinois State Agricultural Society of 1861, which avowed to readers that "the soldier is speedily uniformed" through the use of their device. Other examples abound of how the war was used by advertisers to shift rural consumer preferences.⁴⁵

The economic actuality stemming from the war was equally meaningful to rural consumers. Augmenting the

effects from urbanization in the U.S. and the recent opening of foreign markets, the Civil War further boosted the demand for all forms of agricultural surplus. Commercial farmers, among many others, found that war brought with it economic prosperity. At the ninth annual exhibition of the Illinois State Agricultural Society, regional farmers were asked to plant "every productive acre of your soil. Let no excitement, no interest in the stirring events of the day interrupt your operations of the farm. ... Your market is certain, and all History is a lie if it shall not be remunerating. We urge you, then, to strain every nerve; your interest financially cannot fail to be promoted by it." This prediction was aided by an unexpected boost from the Federal Government.⁴⁶

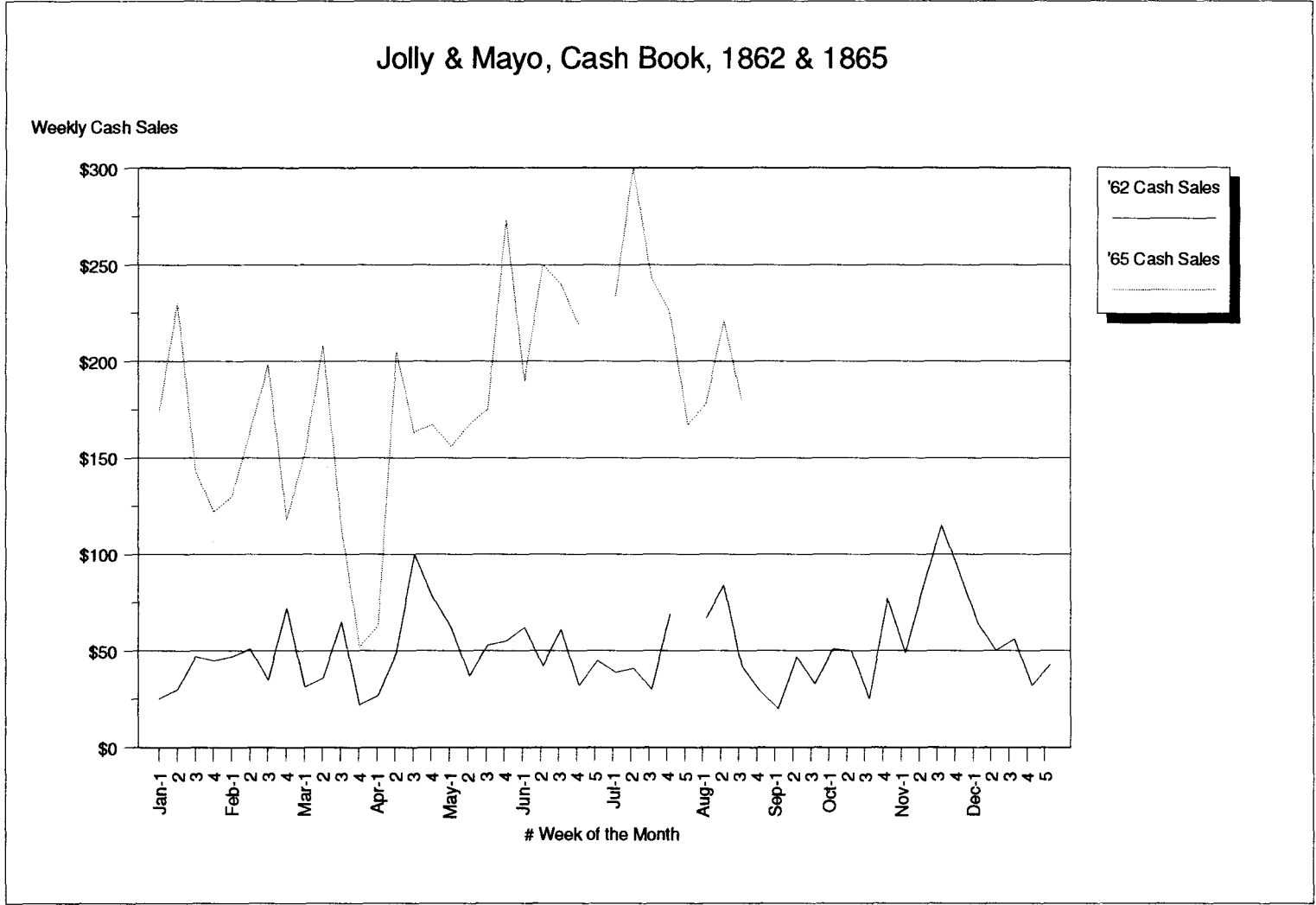
In an effort to pay for the provisions and wages needed to prosecute the war, the government turned to printing legal tender. Historians have noted the immense expansion of "greenbacks" in the war-time economy and its' inflationary repercussions. The speed with which money was suddenly brought into circulation was in some cases startling. In one month, Indiana Governor O. P. Morton made \$500,000 in federal notes available for use by Quartermaster General Vajen. Letters from servicemen attest to the rising costs for many goods later in the war. Indiana volunteer Cyrus Jackson McCole, who wrote to his sister from the battlefield of Murfreesboro (1862), reported that a "five cent loaf of

bread at [home] is worth twenty cents here." McCole dourly added that most provisions that were available were of poor quality -- such as butter "so strong that it can hold itself out at arms length" -- or scrawny in size -- such as pies "about as thick as a very thin knife."⁴⁷

Farmers, as debtors, were able to utilize this inflated currency. Flush with cash, farmers liquidated debts incurred by their pursuit of scientific farming. Benjamin Gates, of the 33rd Illinois Volunteers Regiment, was typical when he sent much of his pay home to square debts incurred for machinery and goods. Further, as the *Prairie Farmer* noted four years after the war's end, using these opportunities "to obtain the ready cash, farmers were not only able to wipe out the old scores set against their names, but to pay the money for everything they bought. And so it came round that the war that found so many farmers in debt, left them with no store accounts to settle and with money in banks or in their pockets."⁴⁸

The cash books of rural merchants substantiate these claims. One retailing firm, J. B. Jolly & Lewis Mayo of Mt. Erie, Illinois, exhibited patterns that were consistent with purchases inflated due to the easy availability of federal notes (see FIGURE 1). At the start of the war, Jolly & Mayo had average weekly cash sales of approximately \$40 per week. By 1865 this average had sky-rocketed to over \$200 a week, and in one transaction alone a patron paid \$2,000 in cash!

FIGURE 1.



The cycle of purchases appears to have been sustained -- with pauses in early spring of both years -- despite inflation.⁴⁹

Much as today, inflation pressured consumers to spend their money or see it devalued over time. Again, the *Prairie Farmer* reported that farmers supported a new and "expensive habit of living" during the war. Rural patrons dressed in "imported clothes.... [t]hey set a better table and rode in finer carriages than they were wont; while pianos and melodeons found their way into thousands of farmers' houses than had ever heard other music than simple songs and hymns." Clearly the rush of currency had a profound effect on the economics of consumption.⁵⁰

For the perceptions and economics of rural consumers, the Civil War was certainly an important and rousing event. It generated and sustained a high level of demand for both consumer goods and the agricultural produce that would eventually pay for them. The war effort provided a rationale for consumption and the experience of a wide range of consumer options. The application of federal notes to pay for the conflict fueled rural consumer demand while it liquidated much of the debt incurred from the practice of commercial agriculture. But the merger of wartime consumer experiences with the logic of scientific farming led farmers to expect these patterns to continue. Farmers hoped that the public evaluation of goods, their liberal access, and low

costs might endure into the post-war era.

Unfortunately for these aspirations, the Civil War bequeathed a profoundly different legacy. The focus of Federal legislators turned away from the West and toward Reconstruction in the South. Further, the artificial demand generated by the war effort ceased, and with it went the need for huge amounts of farm yields to maintain the Army. Servicemen returned to their antebellum farm livelihoods only to see their contributions add to a glutted agricultural market. Many young single men chose to set out for opportunities in the Far West. This caused a depletion of the hired labor force, and increased the expense to many commercial farmers of merely harvesting their crops. One correspondent stationed in Champaign County, Illinois, noted that the "demand for labor and farm hands is at the present time as strong as it has ever been known to be. Were our small grain harvest as large as it has previously been here it would be impossible to secure it in a satisfactory way."⁵¹

Finally, just as the introduction of Federal notes elevated the rural economy, their withdrawal from circulation resulted in a host of negative consequences for regional farmers. Led by President Johnson's Secretary of Treasury, Hugh McCulloch, the department quickly retired greenbacks in favor of coins and bullion notes. While Congress lackadaisically resisted full retraction, the deed

was a *fait accompli* by 1869 with the passage of the Public Credit Act, which redeemed Federal notes and war bonds with specie. As one economic historian noted, currency reform in Washington was the single most important source of "external disturbance" to the nation's economy from 1865 to 1873.⁵²

As most historians are aware, the years subsequent to the war inaugurated a thirty-year period of intense rural unrest. The debate over the causes of this strife is wide-ranging and far from settled. Most historians agree that economic motives -- extending from high interest rates, and low commodity prices, to increased tenancy and over-specialization -- predominate. The Midwest led in the political struggle from the outset. The region was prominent for its many Farmers' Clubs and, later, Granges which pressed for reforms to ease the economic burdens which farmers perceived.⁵³

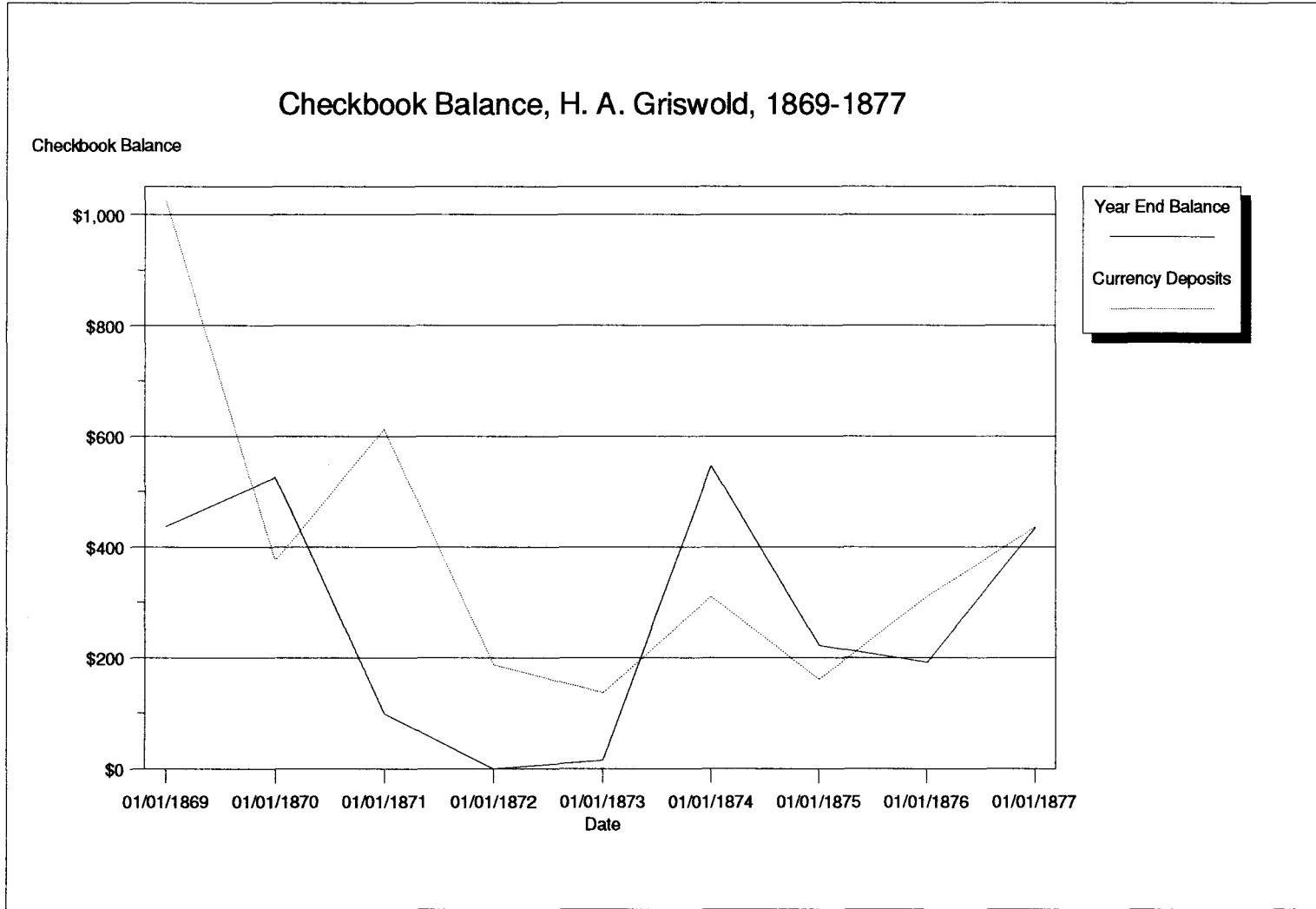
Yet, oddly, the immediate post-war years, from 1865 to 1873, were ones of relative prosperity. Why then did Midwesterners feel that they had to turn to such associations in order to express their discontent? The affiliation between independent Farmers' Clubs and the established rural consumer patterns holds the answer to this question. Through their progressive purchasing practices -- ensconced for decades in the doctrine of scientific farming -- agronomists first expressed their discontent not as producers but consumers. As the *Chicago Tribune* wrote, in

1873, "if [a farmer] cannot sell dear, he can certainly, when he wills to do it, buy cheap. Herein lies the whole kernel of that nut." Farmers understood the changes in the nation's economy, and their relative status in that continuum, through the teachings of their unique consumer ideology.⁵⁴

From 1865 to 1873, Midwesterners clearly recognized that the leading source of their fiscal troubles was currency retraction. Wartime prices endured while the government failed to keep its hand to the pump which primed this fledgling consumer economy. Regional newspapers, such as the *Oshkosh City Times*, ran articles which foreshadowed the fertile use of the currency issue in future political campaigns. More importantly, rural consumers saw that the scarcity of money made consumption of all goods more difficult.⁵⁵

One farmer, Henry A. Griswold, left forceful evidence of this rural perceptivity. Living in White Hall, Illinois, Griswold began farming and raising hogs in 1850. Like any conscientious businessman, he kept records of his yearly savings and annual currency deposits. Luckily, the records from 1869 to 1877 survive (see FIGURE 2). Clearly, Griswold experienced a steady decline in his ability to obtain cash to deposit in his local bank. While he had speculative land in Nebraska, there is no indication from the records that these investments -- or any other on the farm -- were the

FIGURE 2.



cause of his near insolvency. Griswold's record keeping -- a trait espoused by many agricultural periodicals, and crudely practiced by most commercial farmers -- could not fail to have informed him that his operation was imperiled by the restriction of currency. Most notably, his annual savings fell in harmony with this shortage of cash. By January, 1872, Griswold had barely enough reserves to pay for the capital expenses of his farm.⁵⁶

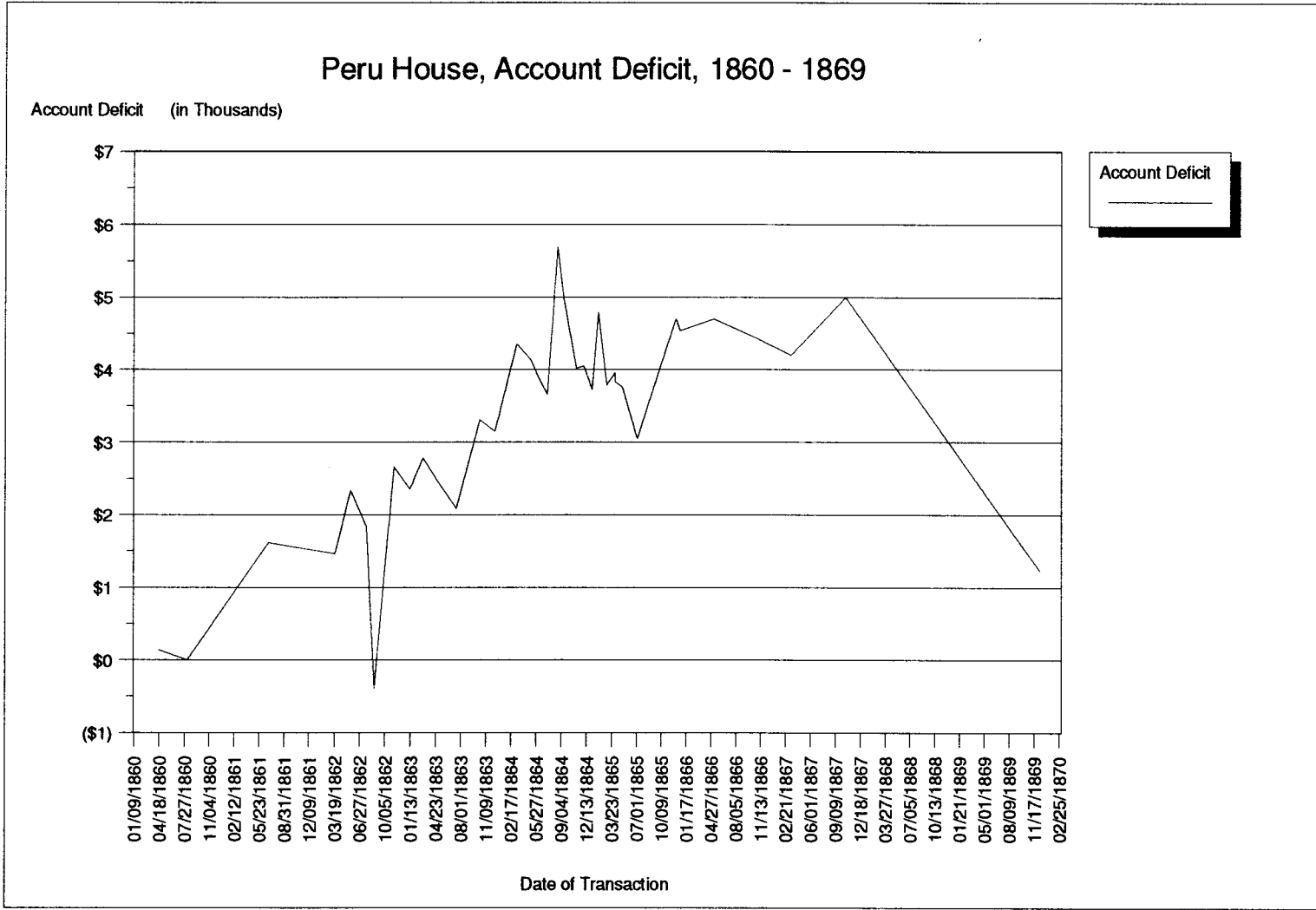
Farmers, such as Griswold, were not the only witnesses to the profound effects on consumerism from the withdrawal of greenbacks. Manufacturers' agents also suffered from the want for cash. These middlemen, unlike the jobbers discussed above, were often assigned specific territories and sold specialty goods. Hardware drummer John Kirk complained that "I have scarcely ever in the eight years that I have sojourned in this New York Jr. City [i.e., Chicago] had so universal a complaint of... [a] scarcity of money." Further, Kirk noted that merchants were in dire need for cash, more so than "since before the war. All complain of scarcity of money & poor collections from the country. ... I think my trip this far has been one of the most unsuccessful I have ever made." As a result, he predicted that "there seemed to be very little demand for goods of any description" until the issue was resolved.⁵⁷

Rural merchants were hit with both supply and demand concerns as a result of the national policy. On the one

hand, they found it difficult to maintain their cash payments to territorial agents, such as Kirk, and manufacturers. Numerous examples attest to the fact that "country merchants" were falling behind in paying their bills following the war. The ledger of one general store, headed by William Schneider and George Naas in St. Wendel, Indiana, gives a graphic example of the rapidly shifting cash flows between 1864 and 1866. In 1864, the firm transacted over four thousand dollars in sales. The following year, this figure ballooned to \$9,185. Yet in 1866, Schneider and Naas again posted only \$4,191 in annual receipts, and only \$119 in profits. Unquestionably, such enormous fluctuations made paying one's suppliers in a timely fashion extremely difficult.⁵⁸

Conversely, merchants also suffered for the want of cash by their customers. As one farm woman wrote, "the merchants are receiving their fall goods but I do not think there can be any great demand for large stocks of goods unless money was more plenty." Even the best customers experienced strained relations with their suppliers. One such patron, the "Peru House," a hotel in Miami County, Indiana, regularly transacted large volume purchases with mill owner and general store operator Charles Stowman. Throughout the war, Stowman allowed the Peru House to rack up huge credits for the use of his milling services and for various sundries (see FIGURE 3). At its peak in August,

FIGURE 3.



1864, the clients owed Stowman \$7,749.29 while carrying a credit of only \$2,062.72 -- or a real debt of more than \$5,600! This deficit was not considered a loan in Stowman's ledgers, for throughout the war, no interest was charged to the Peru House account.⁵⁹

Beginning in 1865, however, Stowman's permissiveness changed markedly. In December of that year, Stowman began demanding payments from the Peru House managers for each individual purchase. Their deficit remained around \$4,700 until late in 1867. At this point the retailer began charging seven per cent interest on the balance of the account. By 1869, the last entry in Stowman's log, the account was down to around \$1,200. There is no indication that the Peru House had suffered a severe economic setback that might have frightened Stowman into demanding payment. The only conclusion that remains is that the post-war retraction of currency forced the retailer to restrict purchases that were not secured by guaranteed loans.⁶⁰

The direct effect of currency restrictions was a change in the purchasing patterns by rural consumers. Where once farmers were free to indulge themselves in more luxurious goods, they now were increasingly restricted in their purchases. For example by 1867, rural resident Adeline Clark spent as much as \$400 for "incidental" wares such as gloves, hats, stereoscopes, and perfume -- including a "Chicago spree" which netted nearly \$200 in goods. But by 1871, these

nonessential expenses were roughly halved. Significantly, by 1878 her spending had surpassed her earliest levels, suggesting that the 1871 experience was caused by a sharp recession in family expenses which she, in turn, responded to.⁶¹

With such a pervasive lack of capital, rural consumers began fearing that consumption might lead to ruinous debt. Further, unlike our post-Keynsian economics, the specter of consumer debt was not seen as an investment in manufacturing jobs and future growth, but rather as a loss of economic stability. One newspaper described a typical farmer's reaction to inflation and currency constriction this way: "If I have to pay these prices, where am I to get my balance to meet other expenses? -- Where does the money go to, and why the necessity for these prices?" Farm families took pride in their avoidance of these expenses, as with Ellen White who wrote to her mother saying, "I cannot boast of broad acres and money but can boast of a good name, credit, and many friends." Editors of the *Prairie Farmer* echoed the lofty place that debt avoidance had in the farm community. They wrote that it was better to "live poorly, to dress plainer, better in short to deny one's self most the luxuries and pleasures of life, than to get in debt, live in debt, and die in debt."⁶²

Farmers such as Henry Griswold were left with few alternatives, however, if they were to maintain the

productivity required by commercial agriculture. As noted earlier, the intensive use of capital goods, ranging from reapers to sewing machines, had become a necessity to their economic viability. Examples abound of farmers, such as Bartholomew Applegate, of Johnson County, Indiana, who, despite operating profitably for years, suddenly found themselves facing high deficits simply by meeting the basic requirements of their trade. In one year, Applegate incurred nearly \$2,000 in loans in order to bring his crops and pigs to market. The were sold for only slightly more than \$900. When fashioning a simple balance sheet of assets and debits, Applegate found that his net worth was less than \$60. In an era of commercial farming and inadequate currency circulation, the average farmer simply could not avoid debt.⁶³

The retailing firm of Schneider and Naas provides convincing evidence that rural Americans took on consumer debt at an astounding rate (see FIGURE 4 and TABLE 1). Steadily from 1867 to 1872, the firm extended credit to an ever-widening pool of consumers. By 1872, the merchants had proffered nearly \$5,000 for both basic and luxury goods. In their most active lending period -- 1870 to 1872 -- the average loan amount nearly doubled annually. The relatively high standard deviation in 1872 shows that these advances ranged the spectrum (from a low of \$8 to a high of \$338). This suggests that the need for assistance was wide-spread

Wm. Schneider and Geo. Naas, Loans Extended, 1866-1872

Annual Loans

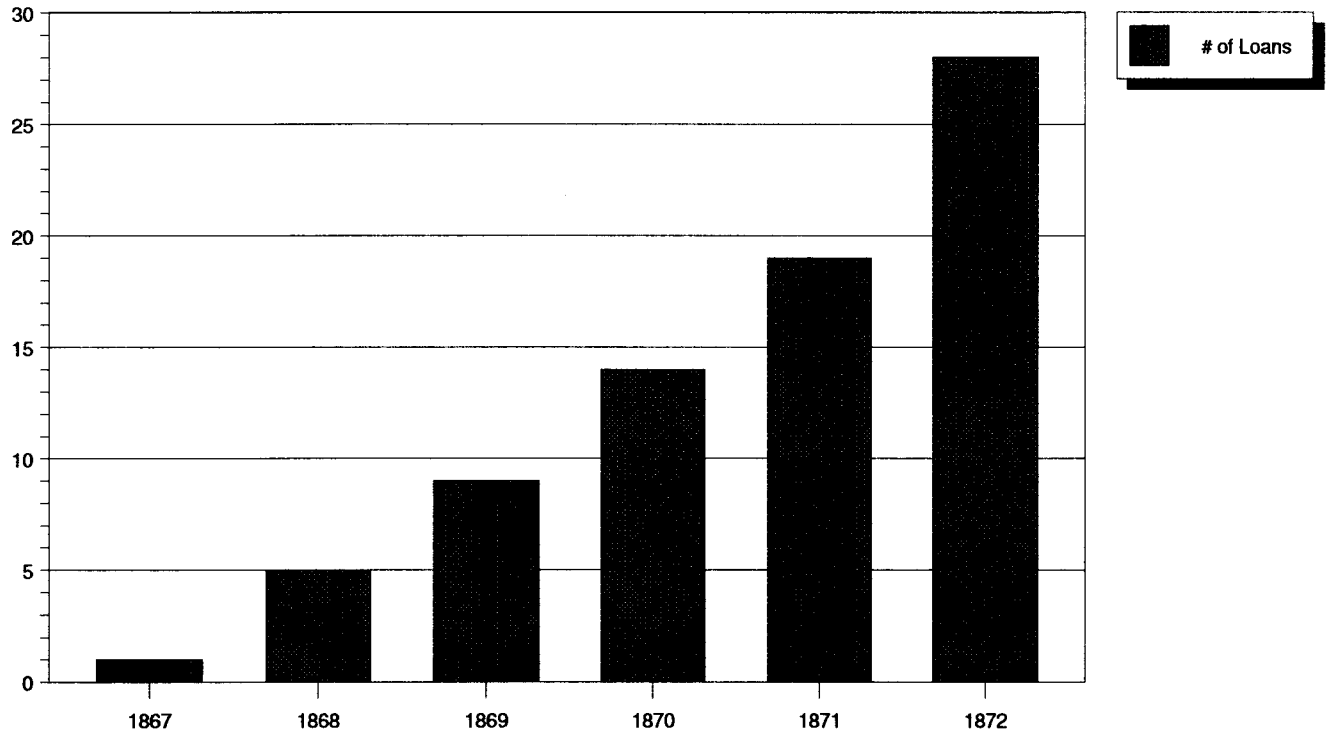


FIGURE 4.

among these assorted husbandmen. Trends at other retail establishments support these findings.⁶⁴

TABLE 1.
SCHNEIDER & NAAS, LOANS EXTENDED, 1866-1872.

Year	# of Loans	Sum of All Notes	Avg. per Note	Median	Std. Dev.
1867	1	\$44.39	\$44.39	\$44.39	\$0.00
1868	5	\$290.30	\$58.06	\$70.90	\$33.71
1869	9	\$852.70	\$94.74	\$29.70	\$163.03
1870	14	\$538.83	\$38.49	\$40.95	\$16.04
1871	19	\$1,102.93	\$58.05	\$40.00	\$49.53
1872	28	\$1,900.91	\$67.89	\$46.18	\$71.16

For a variety of reasons, rural patrons directed their anguish over this trend not at the merchants themselves, but rather at the territorial agents of major firms who supplied them. Most tellingly, agents were noticeable intruders into the consumer decisions made by farmers for products ranging from agricultural machinery to the most basic personal goods. This role was not seen as entirely unsatisfactory. Olivier Zunz noted that many "enduring contacts" were established between the agents of the McCormick Reaper Company and Midwestern wheat growers. Agent F. G. Welch, who represented the Champion "Self-Raker" and reaper, displayed his empathy to rural problems by hosting an extravagant party for his clients in July, 1868. Welch's fete was applauded by the *Prairie Farmer* because "farmers need more such opportunities for cultivating the social graces and

enlarging the circle of their acquaintances." Others praised the role of agents bringing goods to the region in a timely manner.⁶⁵

But familiarity did indeed breed contempt for these roving peddlers when farmers were forced to incur debt in order to acquire their wares. Beginning in 1865 and increasing thereafter, periodicals related negative rural experiences with agents. Papers such as the *Oshkosh City Times* communicated examples of jobbers' chicanery to serve as a warning to farmers. They believed their narrative was only "one of the many plans pursued" by corrupt agents whereby "many thousands of dollars have been taken from farmers." Others suggested that drummers were taking unethical profits from their advantageous place along the distribution network. Wrote the *Chicago Tribune*, "Nothing [the farmer] needs escapes [agents'] greedy claws, whether quinine for a sick wife or child, or iron and steel and lumber and paint for a wagon or plow." Suffering from these attacks, the image of the travelling salesman began to tarnish in the eyes of many farmers.⁶⁶

The combined effect of consumer debt and conspicuous representatives who controlled the access to desired goods led to other reasons for farmers' distrust. Most notably, many suspected that agents used "smooth-tongued" sales pitches to get farmers to over-consume. Thwarting the central tenet of scientific farming -- control over

purchasing decisions -- these persuasive jobbers were seen as a direct challenge to a farmers' autonomy. Men such as James Creighton of Wayne, Illinois, held that the agents' "fancy rig and handsome salary are rung from our hard earnings. The manufacturer does not pay a cent of this expense." An observant farmer once tallied over 168 agricultural implements that were left unused in the fields only "a short day's drive" from his Illinois homestead. One woman contributed a poem to the *Prairie Farmer* that recounted her experiences with a seemingly unending string of territorial agents. Her account reveals the underlying concern of many consumers: that they would be overrun by salesmen and rack up ruinous debt if they surrendered to their appeals. She concluded her ode to the commercial traveler,

So if we sometimes turn away
 Abruptly, Sirs, you must remember,
 That we have heard your tale each day
 From Early Spring to late December.
 Why! If we listen to you at all,
 And give you the required attention,
 I think 'ere long each one would call
 The "country house" the best invention.

The agents' place in the distribution network made them the flashpoint for conflict.⁶⁷

In many ways, this rancor was simply the accumulation of frustrations which farmers had incurred since the close of the war. The withdrawal of greenbacks undercut what was a prosperous period for many farmers. Further, commercial farmers were well aware of this capital retraction and

attempted to change their purchasing patterns accordingly. Unfortunately, they found it impossible to avoid debt when practicing market-oriented agriculture. The obvious frustrations generated by these developments found their vent in the conspicuous territorial agent.

From 1840 to 1873, rural Americans expressed and codified a set of consumer patterns which were to provide for them a unifying ideology in the coming years. Based on their desire to expand as capitalists, farmers developed a doctrine of scientific farming which was expressed in agricultural periodicals and discussed in Farmers' Clubs. These clubs fostered fairs which featured the required capital goods along with less essential consumer wares. The acquisition of these goods was aided by the advantageous market conditions afforded by the war effort. The collapse of this support in 1865 led to an awareness of the limits placed on farmers in achieving their consumer goals.

ENDNOTES

List of abbreviations:

- CHS Chicago Historical Society, Chicago, Illinois.
 InHS Indiana Historical Society, Indianapolis, Indiana.
 ISHL Illinois State Historical Library, Springfield, Illinois.
 InSL Indiana State Library, Indianapolis, Indiana.
 SHSW State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin.
 UI University of Illinois Library, Champaign-Urbana, Illinois.

1. Letters of William Clark [Bloomington, Illinois] to Calvin Goudy [Taylorville, Illinois], recollecting life in early Bear Creek, Illinois, dated 10 August 1874, in William Clark, *Letters*, ISHL. For other hardships, see also Thomas Church, Mms. "Autobiography," 76-78, ISHL. and reminiscence of Mrs. Matthew Maze, n.d., in Tipton County, Indiana, *Miscellaneous Records*, InSL.

2. Letters of William Clark [Bloomington, Illinois] to Calvin Goudy [Taylorville, Illinois], recollecting life in early Bear Creek, Illinois, dated 10 August 1874, in William Clark, *Letters*, ISHL.

3. Unlike studies that expound urban and technical determinism in the development of the region's crop structure, these new efforts suggest that, for example, the effects from railroads, the Board of Trade, and expanding cities all worked in conjunction with the rational choices made by farmers -- much as the historiography of the southern cotton economy has changed in recent years. For the study cited and ancillary supporting information, see Mary Eschelbach Gregson, "Rural Response to Increased Demand: Crop Choice in the Midwest, 1860 - 1880," *Journal of Economic History* Volume 53, No. 2 (June 1993): 332-345; and Jeremy Atack and Fred Bateman, "Self-Sufficiency and the Marketable Surplus in the Rural North, 1860," *Agricultural History* 58 (July 1984): 296-313. Köhler's quote in Frederick Troutman, ed. and trans. "Eight Weeks on a St. Clair County Farm," *Journal of Illinois State Historical Society* (1982): 176-177.

4. *The Wisconsin Farmer*, March, 1866, Page 93; *Chicago Evening Post*, 11 January 1871, p.2; and the *Chicago Evening Post*, 2 November 1870. For smaller farms, see *Prairie Farmer*, 14 February 1856; and *The Country Gentleman* [Albany NY], 25 December 1856, Vol. 8 No. 6.

5. Willis Boughton, Mss "Drover Days: Pioneer Life in Illinois, 1862-1876." ISHL, 110. For estimates of work loads, see Robert M. Finley, "A Budgeting Approach to the Question of Homestead Size on the Plains," *Agricultural History* XLII, no. No. 2 (April 1968): 109-114.
6. Willis Boughton, Mss "Drover Days," ISHL, 110-112. For an additional perspective on these travelling gangs of laborers, see Peter H. and Jo Ann Argersinger, "The Machine Breakers: Farmworkers and Social Change in the Rural Midwest of the 1870s" *Agricultural History* 58 (July 1984): 393-410. Laborers were also a rare commodity in many rural communities. One traveler to Illinois in 1851 noted that "Help is hard to find and costly at harvest, when every farmer has plenty [to reap]. . . . Here, unlike Germany, there are no professional farm laborers." In Troutman, "Eight Weeks on a St. Clair County Farm," 172.
7. Willis Boughton, Mss "Drover Days," ISHL, 110-112. An important book dealing with the changing perceptions of the role of "productive" work by women -- in this case seen through vernacular housing designs -- is in Sally Ann McMurray, *Families and Farmhouses in Nineteenth Century America: Vernacular Design and Social Change* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).
8. C. Thurston Chase, *Chase Western Rural Handbooks, No. 2. The Useful and the Ornamental: Western Manual of Practical Rural Affairs, for the Farm and Home. About Hedges, Evergreens, Forest Planting and Flowers* (Chicago: S.C. Griggs & Co. Publishers, 1860), vi.
9. *The American Agriculturalist*, Vol. 21, July 1862, 203.
10. Chase, *Chase Western Rural Handbooks, No. 2.*, vii.
11. *Prairie Farmer*, August 1852, 352.
12. C. Thurston Chase, *Chase Western Rural Handbooks, No. 2. The Useful and the Ornamental: Western Manual of Practical Rural Affairs, for the Farm and Home. About Hedges, Evergreens, Forest Planting and Flowers* (Thurston Chase. Chicago: S.C. Griggs & Co. Publishers, 1860), vii.
13. Paul Wallace Gates, *The Farmer's Age: Agriculture 1815 - 1860*, Volume III, *The Economic History of the United States* (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), 338; see also pages 339-358. For regional specialization, taking place largely after 1825, see George F. Lemmer, "Early Agricultural Editors and Their Farm Philosophies," *Agricultural History* XXXI No.4 (October 1957): 3-22. For numbers, see Gates, *The Farmers' Age*, 343. For other leading accounts, see Richard

T. Farrell, "Advice to Farmers: The Content of Agricultural Newspapers, 1860-1910," *Agricultural History* 51 (January 1977): 209-216; Richard W. Abbott, "The Agricultural Press Views the Yeoman: 1819-1859," *Agricultural History* 42 (January 1968): 35-48; and Jack W. Van Derhoof, "Eastern and Mid-Western Agricultural Journalism, 1860-1900." Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, June, 1951.

14. See note 13, also Van Derhoof, "Eastern and Mid-Western Agricultural Journalism," 172.

15. For quote, see Van Derhoof, "Eastern and Mid-Western Agricultural Journalism, 1860-1900," 35. For demagoguery and the rise of the "yeoman" myth, see Abbott, "The Agricultural Press Views the Yeoman: 1819-1859," 35-48.

16. The literature regarding crop specialization is vast and not of central importance here. For an introduction into the topic, see Allan G. Bogue, *From Prairie to Corn Belt: Farming on the Illinois and Iowa Prairies in the 19th Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 148-168; Gates, *The Farmer's Age*; and Douglass C. North, *The Economic Growth of the United States, 1790-1860* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1961), 135-155. The literature on technological specialization and innovation is equally immense, see for example, Gould Colman, "Innovation and Diffusion in Agriculture," *Agricultural History* 42 (July 1968): 173-187; Jeremy Atack, "Farm and Farm-Making Costs Revisited," *Agricultural History* 56 (October 1956): 663-676; and Atack and Fred Bateman, "Self-Sufficiency and the Marketable Surplus," 296-313.

17. For Sullivant, see *The Wisconsin Farmer*, March 1866, 93. For reference to small farms in Illinois, see *American Agriculturalist*, Vol. 16, November 1857, 252.

18. Chase, *Chase Western Rural Handbooks*, No. 2., 42-43. See also Ruth Schwartz Cowan, *More Work For Mother: The Ironies of Household Technology From the Open Hearth to the Microwave* (New York: Basic Books, 1983); and McMurray, *Families and Farmhouses in Nineteenth Century America*.

19. *The American Agriculturalist*, Vol. 23, January 1864, 5. One farm women's diary included a newspaper clipping titled "Too much extravagance. Why Men are afraid to marry the girls of to-day," [not cited] in which is described a wife who fails to be frugal in the purchase of consumer goods such as ribbons and such, but makes no mention of capital goods. In Tyner-White Family, *Papers, 1862-1881*, InSL.

20. For White's letters, dated 25 September, 12 November 1871, and 7 January 1872, see Tyner-White Family, *Papers*,

1862-1881, InSL. Such accounts are common to farm women's records, see also Davidson-Springer Family, *Papers, 1846-1934*, ISHL, especially letter to Sarah Springer Davidson, 29 January 1865.

21. For quote and costs, see Atack, "Farm and Farm-Making Costs," 676, and 663-676. For additional works on start-up expenses, see Clarence Danhof, "Farm-Making Costs and the Safety Valve: 1850-1860," *Journal of Political Economy* 49 (June, 1941): 317-359; Danhof, *Change in Agriculture: The Northern United States, 1820-1870* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969); Atack and Bateman, "Self-Sufficiency and the Marketable Surplus," 296-313; Robert E. Ankli, "Horses vs. Tractors of the Corn Belt," *Agricultural History* 54 (January 1980): 134-148; and Homer E. Socolofsky, "Success and Failure in Nebraska Homesteading," *Agricultural History* XLII, No.2 (April 1968): 103-109.

22. Generally, only total crop failure or the death of the sole adult male could "wipe out" most commercial farmers. Robert Higgs, *The Transformation of the American Economy, 1865-1914: An Essay in Interpretation* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1971), 99; Olivier Zunz, *Making America Corporate, 1870-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 156. For economic equality, see also Jeremy Atack and Fred Bateman, "The 'Egalitarian Ideal' and the Distribution of Wealth in the Northern Agricultural Community: A Backward Look," *Review of Economics and Statistics* 63 (February, 1981): 124-129; and Atack and Bateman, "Egalitarianism, Inequality, and Age: The Rural North in 1860." *Journal of Economic History* 41 (March, 1981): 85-93.

23. For agents, see Chapter 1, also Zunz, *Making America Corporate*, 157-163. For quote, see *The Chicago Evening Journal*, 26 February 1856. See also *Prairie Farmer*, Vol. 40, No. 44, 30 October 1869.

24. See Lowell K. Dyson, *Farmers' Organizations*. The Greenwood Encyclopedia of American Institutions (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), 99-100, 145-146, 347-348; and John A. Oostendorp, "The Cooperative Movement in the Patrons of Husbandry in Iowa, 1870-1878," M.A. Thesis, University of Iowa, 1949, 5-35.

25. Robert J. Woodruff, M.D., *An Address Delivered Before the Agricultural Society of Bureau County, on the Day of the Spring Meeting, March 27, 1856, By Robert J. Woodruff, M.D., President of the Society* (Printed for the Society, By Pine & Lemar, Princeton, IL: 1856), 3. For Wisconsin, see *Oshkosh City Times*, 6 April 1870 and 11 January 1871. In Champaign Co., Illinois, the first agricultural society was formed in

1852, four years later there were at least 55 on record, see *Transactions of the Illinois State Agricultural Society*, 1856, Vol. 2; and *Emery's Journal of Agriculture*, Vol. 1, 7 January 1858, 18.

26. Report by John A. Kennicott in *Transactions of the Illinois State Agricultural Society*, 1856-7, Vol.2. (Chicago: 1858); *Prairie Farmer*, August 1852, 352.

27. Wayne Caldwell Neely, *The Agricultural Fair* (New York: AMS Press, Inc., 1967), 83-85. For Blakely's letter, see *Emery's Journal of Agriculture*, Vol. 1, 7 January 1858, 18. For attendance during the war, see *Transactions of the Illinois State Agricultural Society*, 1861-4, Vol. 5, 34-5.

28. For self worth quotation, see *Prairie Farmer*, 2 September 1871, 274; see also Neely, *Agricultural Fair*, 89, 168-169. Also cited, *Emery's Journal of Agriculture*, Vol. 1, 7 January 1858, 18. For class relations, see Boughton, "Drover Days," ISHL, 257-264. He notes that, in the late 1860s, "We always had a season family ticket [to the state fair], which would admit a Democrat wagon load, including our hired men [as well as family]... On the promise to attend the Fair our hired men were given a holiday."

29. For holidays, see Boughton, "Drover Days," ISHL, 257-264. For recollections of Henry A. Griswold as he attended the Illinois State Fair in Jacksonville from 10 September to 13 September 1868, see *Griswold Family, Papers, 1814-1943, Box 1: Diaries*, ISHL. For baseball, see *Oshkosh City Times*, 14 September 1869. Reformers were wholly unsuccessful, as the races remained one of the most popular elements of the State Fairs. For the indictment against the non-agrarian activities, see *Prairie Farmer*, 19 September 1868, 89.

30. *Prairie Farmer*, Vol. 39, No. 16, 17 October 1868, 122. For Springfield, James Caird, *Prairie Farming in America, With Notes by the way on Canada and the United States* (London: Longman, Brown, Green, Longmans, & Roberts, 1859), 56. For Illinois State Fair, *Prairie Farmer*, 3 October 1868, 106. For the lack of "abundant" goods, see letter of Dr. John A. Kennicott, Secretary for the Illinois State Agricultural Society, who attended Lake County (IL) Fair, in *The Genesee Farmer*, Vol. 13, No. 11, November 1852, 350.

31. Circular issued by William B. Young Plows, c. 1866, *The Farmer's Friend*, CHS. For perceived role of premiums, see Opening Address of William H. Van Epps, *Illinois State Agricultural Society at the Illinois State Fair* (Decatur IL: 1864), 3; CHS.

32. McSherry to agents Drury, Hayner & Co., 17 September 1867, see Drury, Hayner & Co., *Correspondence, 1867-1868*, ISHL. For Deere, see *Prairie Farmer*, 3 October 1868, 106.
33. For two examples of this request, see the *Prairie Farmer*, Vol. 13, June 1853, 242; and *Ibid.*, Vol. 39, 4 July 1868. For advertisers, see, for example, the *Illinois State Agricultural Society, Premium List, 1861*, CHS; and the Indiana State Board of Agriculture, *Indiana State Trial of Agricultural Implements, Indianapolis, Indiana, June 10, 1872*, ISL. Editorial by R. H. Holder, Bloomington Officer of ISAS, in *Illinois State Agricultural Society, Premium List, 1861*, 183, CHS. For similar discussions, see *Prairie Farmer*, Vol. 39, No.14, 3 October 1868, 105.
34. See the *Illinois State Agricultural Society, Premium List, 1861*, 193, CHS. For Deere, see the *Prairie Farmer*, 3 October 1868, 106.
35. McCormick agent E. C. Beardsley cited in Zunz, *Making America Corporate*, 157.
36. Henry Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams: An Autobiography*, The American Heritage Library (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1971), 106.
37. For economic policy during the war, see Philip Shaw Paludan, "*A People's Contest: The Union and Civil War, 1861-1865*" (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 127-150. See also Ralph L. Andreano, ed. *Economic Impact of the American Civil War*, 2nd Ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Schenkman, 1967); and Harold M. Hyman, *A More Perfect Union: The Impact of the Civil War and Reconstruction on the Constitution* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1975).
38. See General J. H. Vajen, *Civil War Manuscripts*, InSL.
39. For Davis records, see letters dated 22, 23, 24, and 31 May 1861, in Jefferson Columbus Davis, *Papers 1826-1873*, InSL.
40. For Vajen's quote, see letter to H. S. Holman, Congressional Investigating Committee, dated 17 March 1862, in Vajen, *Civil War Manuscripts*, InSL. For his work in relation to the region, see the *Daily Sentinel* [Marion Co. IN], 3 September 1862.
41. See letter dated 7 November 1861, from James Vanderbilt to his mother in Paducah, KY in James Cornelius Vanderbilt, *Civil War Letters, 1861-1864*, InSL. For Illinois see letter dated 10 July 1861, from A. S. Hatch in camp at Macon City, MO to Cousin Madison Hatch, Griggsville, Pike County,

Illinois, in Hatch and Fessenden Families, *Papers, 1844-1882*, ISHL. For the "parade" of goods, see letter dated 28 September 1862 from Bush from Camp Morton, IN, to Molly Bush in Andrew Bush, *Papers, 1862-1865*, InSL.

42. For nourishment, see letters dated 17 November 1861, 22 October 1862, and 20 January 1863; for clothing and other goods -- including, pants, woolen shirts, shoes, socks, "drawers," plug tobacco, jackets, butter, flour, and ham, all bought at the army commissary -- see Account of Commissary Store, October, 1864 and letter dated 3 January 1864 in Bush, *Papers, 1862-1865*, InSL. For second example, see letter dated 7 November 1861, in Vanderbilt, *Civil War Letters, 1861-1864*, InSL.

43. For quote, see letter dated 10 July 1861, in Vanderbilt, *Civil War Letters, 1861-1864*, InSL.

44. For Pankhurst letter, dated 3 December 1863, see Alexander, Howell, & Company, *Business Correspondence, 1865-1876*, ISHL. For commissary pledge, see accounts, dated October, 1864, in Bush, *Papers, 1862-1865*, InSL.

45. For Cornell Sewing Machines and other examples, see *Illinois State Agricultural Society, Premium List, 1861*, 191, 193, 195 CHS.

46. For quote, see Ninth Annual Exhibition of the Illinois State Agricultural Society to be held at Chicago, on the 9 10 11 12 13 and 14 days of September, 1861 (Springfield: Steam Press of Chas. A. Lamphier, 1861), 37-38. As noted above, the country and state fairs did not stop promoting commercial agriculture during the war, see *Transactions of the Illinois State Agricultural Society, 1861-4*, Vol. 5 (Springfield: 1865), 34-5.

47. See letter from O. P. Morton to Vajen, 15 July 1861, in Vajen, *Civil War Manuscripts*, InSL. Vajen noted that most goods were bought for using cash, thereby further inflating local and national markets. McCole letter dated 12 January 1862, in George M. McCole, *Papers*. InSL. For greenbacks, see Walter T. K. Nugent, *Money and American Society, 1865-1880* (New York: Free Press, 1968), *passim*.

48. For Gates letter, dated 9 June 1862, see Alexander, Howell, & Co., *Business Correspondence, 1854-1876*, ISHL. See also Chicago merchant and landlord, Thomas Church Jr., *Autobiography, 1834-1868*, 58, ISHL. *Prairie Farmer*, Vol. 40, No. 48; 27 November 1869, 385.

49. For cash accounts and \$2,000 purchase by V. R. Price, 28 August 1865, see J. B. Jolly and Lewis Mayo, *Cash Book*,

1860-1870, ISHL. The use of account books as representative source material could prove vexing to some. After all, it is difficult to argue that local conditions, type of consumer, regional influences, and other contingencies do not make each ledger unique to its time and place. I defend their usage in this paper on two grounds. First, that such business information has been used in the past by historians using similar materials, for example see Winifred Barr Rothenberg, *From Market-Place to Market Economy: The Transformation of Rural Massachusetts, 1750-1850* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), Chapter Three. Secondly, the fact that merchants kept these documents suggests that they too were looking for ways to better understand their businesses and their customer's consumer practices. While it is impossible to argue that this and later business sources definitively describe rural consumer practices, their evidence lends significant credence to the full weight of the other data presented here.

50. *Prairie Farmer*, Vol. 40, No. 48, 27 November 1869, 385.

51. For western migration, see article in *The Cultivator and Country Gentleman*, 11 February 1869, Vol. 33, 114. For quote, see *Ibid.*, 7 July 1870, Vol. 35, 420.

52. For reference, see Rendigs Fels, *American Business Cycles, 1865-1897* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1959), 221. For excellent overview of the process of monetary constriction in this era, see Walter T. K. Nugent, *Money and American Society*, Chapter Nine.

53. Even a lengthy list of sources dealing with rural unrest would be incomplete. For the most important works for this region and period, see Allan G. Bogue, *Money and Interest: The Farm Mortgage on the Middle Border* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1955); Bogue, *From Prairie to Corn Belt: Farming on the Illinois and Iowa Prairies in the 19th Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963); Paul Wallace Gates, "Land Policy and Tenancy in the Prairie States" *Journal of Economic History* I (May, 1941): 60-82; Gates, *The Farmer's Age: Agriculture 1815 - 1860*. Volume III, *The Economic History of the United States* (New York: Harper & Row, 1960); Gates, *Landlords and Tenants on the Prairie Frontier* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1973); Fred A. Shannon, *The Farmer's Last Frontier* (New York: Farrar & Reinhart, Inc., 1945); Shannon, *American Farmers' Movement* (Princeton, NJ: Van Nostrand Press, 1957); Jeffrey Ostler, *Prairie Populism and the Fate of Agrarian Radicalism* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1993); and Robert C. McMath, *American Populism: A Social History, 1877-1898* (New York: Wang & Hill, 1993).

54. For the development of producer rhetoric and the currency issue, see Nugent, *Money and American Society*, Chapter Three, Chapter Eleven, especially 15, 28, 139. Nugent notes that up until 1873, farmers lacked a clear group awareness. It was this issue, therefore, which most directly aided in the expression of rural unrest throughout the remainder of the century. *Chicago Tribune*, 23 August 1873, 8.
55. See *Oshkosh City Times*, 22 September 1869, 1; which hoped to unite all farmers and laborers in the west under the currency issue. For an example of rural consumers and money scarcity, see Maria Bennett letter dated 19 December 1869, in Bennett-Carter Family, *Papers, 1836-1942*, Folder "Robert S. Carter," ISHL.
56. Data taken from Griswold's account books, see Griswold Family, *Papers, 1814 - 1943*, Box 4: Account Books, Bank Books, Etc., ISHL. For a second example of the stifling effects that limited currency had on farming see, Joseph W. Dalrymple, *Papers, 1858-1891*, InSL.
57. See letters dated 8 January 1867, 7 February 1867, and 3 September 1868, in John Kirk, *Letterbooks, 1852-1871*, CHS. For a second example, see letter from agent J. M. Wilcox, dated 8 April 1868 in Drury, Hayner & Co., *Correspondence, 1867-1868*, ISHL.
58. William Schneider, *Papers, 1850-1902*, "Account Books, 1866-1871", InSL.
59. Letter dated 4 October 1869, in Bennett-Carter, *Papers*, InSL. For Stowman's accounts, see Charles W. Stowman, *Account Books, 1851-1907*, InSL.
60. In 1867, as noted by Stowman, the Peru House came under the control of D. J. Nicoles. Whether their relationship may have been the source of the change in the fiscal relationship is unknown. However, the fact that Nicoles appears in other accounts, both before and after this date, suggests that this relationship was strong and experienced no major shifts throughout the years in question.
61. Clark's spending can be found in Adeline Clark, *Diaries, 1851-1911*, ISHL. In 1867 she recorded \$136.49 in "table" expenses, \$406.63 in "incidentals." By 1871, while no records were kept on table receipts, she spent \$198.47 for "incidentals," including the \$147.80 "Chicago Spree." By 1878 this number had returned to its earlier amount, roughly \$876.26 in "incidentals."

62. Oshkosh *City Times*, 22 September 1868. White letter dated 16 March 1870 in Tyner-White Family, *Papers*, InSL. *Prairie Farmer*, Vol. 40, No. 48, 27 November 1869.

63. For Applegate, see Bartholomew Applegate, *Daybook, 1874-1877*, InSL. This example is from July to November, 1875. Another example of farmers entering into debt to avoid losing capital investments, see letter dated 8 May 1868 from farmer Thomas B. Richardson, Chesterfield, Macoupin Co., Illinois to Walter A. Wood, in Drury, Hayner, *Business Correspondence*, ISHL.

64. See William Schneider, *Papers*, InSL. For additional information, see Charles W. Stowman, *Account Books, 1851-1907*, InSL. Stowman's accounts show that his firm extended 6 loans in 1869 for \$2,107.80, 7 loans in 1870 for \$3,600.00, and 12 loans in 1872 [1871 was unavailable] for \$5,030.

65. See Olivier Zunz, *Making America Corporate*, 154-6. For Welch account, see *Prairie Farmer*, 1 August 1868, 36. For timeliness, see *The Cultivator and Country Gentleman*, Vol. 33, 20 May 1869, 394.

66. Oshkosh *City Times*, 23 March 1869; *Chicago Tribune*, 23 August 1873, 8. See also Timothy B. Spears, *100 Years on the Road: The Travelling Salesman in American Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).

67. Creighton quoted in Illinois State Farmers' Association, *Proceedings of the Second Annual Meeting of the Illinois State Farmers' Convention, Held at Decatur, Dec. 16, 17 & 18, 1873, with Addresses, Reports, Papers and Letters Received* (Chicago: C. E. Southard, Book and Job Printer, 1874), 68. For the account of over-consumption in Jo Daviess Co. (IL), see *Prairie Farmer*, 19 December 1868, 193. For Wheeler poem, see *Ibid.*, 25 September 1869, 309.

CHAPTER 4

AN ALL CONSUMING VISION : THE EXPRESSION OF RURAL CONSUMER IDEOLOGY, 1865 - 1875

The Illinois farmer Henry Griswold wrote in his diary, in his distinctively terse style, "March 4, 1874: Clear hauled some hay and straw out, went to the church to organize a Grange." His actions on this early spring day reveal the clarity with which the formation of grass-roots rural institutions reflected the life experiences of most Midwestern farmers. Like many of his neighbors, Griswold spent his day pursuing the independent, market-based agriculture which secured his family an income. He and his brethren chose to gather, however, not at a convenient worksite, or at an influential farmer's residence, but at the community's church. Here they set about forming one of the most dynamic institutions for consumer activism, a Grange purchasing agency.¹

A year earlier, Grangers from Oshkosh braved the harsh Wisconsin winter to attend a meeting in neighboring Ripon. Their guests met them at the train depot "with a capacious sleigh, in which all were soon snugly packed; and dashing off at a lively rate," reaching the meeting place some four miles south of the terminal "in short order." The session

was attended by more than 300 men, women, and children, who ate their dinners in shifts, for "as only about thirty could be seated at once, the table had to be set ten times, so great the jam indeed that it was after midnight before the last served could obtain a mouthful." Their feast was enlivened by the addresses of the visiting Oshkosh Patrons. First, J. W. Sanders spoke of the expenses incurred by commercial farming and the advantages of cooperative purchasing. Joseph Osborn followed with an oration on the methods of ensuring profitable transportation, based on the shared experiences of most commercial farmers. Both were received "with unbounded applause by all present." The gathering dispersed around three o'clock in the morning, after "many pleasant interchanges of social feeling... all heartily entertained, and enthusiastic over the prospect and advantages of the Order." As with Griswold, these Wisconsin farmers had combined their individual commercial interests with the social benefits derived from such a mass meeting. This pattern of the communal dispersal of individual economic benefits was at the core of the Midwestern Grange movement, the first body to conceive of a comprehensive agrarian ideology in the post-war years.²

The debate over the economic and social causes of conflict from 1865 to 1900 is almost as old as the profession of American history. In recent years, these two motives took on decidedly conflicting postures following the

publication of E. P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working-Class*. Thompson popularized the belief that a "moral economy" regulated economic exchange in the premodern world. Social mores rather than market pressures such as supply and demand determined economic behavior. Yet -- even before Thompson introduced the nomenclature -- historians had already bifurcated the understanding of the causes of unrest between economic and social factors.³

This dichotomous interpretation -- while useful in the construction of historical experiments that test the extreme positions -- has led to some conflicting impressions about the general source of farmers' frustrations. For example, one misrepresentation held that from 1865 to 1875 Midwestern farmers labored under the burden of unfair railroad and granary rates. The promulgation of the various "Granger Laws" regulating these businesses was judged as the proof justifying this cause.⁴ Alternately, falling prices for agricultural surplus, increased tenancy, and decreasing average farm earnings were forwarded as the leading cause of strife.⁵ Further, the rhetoric of producerism, and later the "silver issue," had also been justified by many as a potent source of rural consternation. Yet, none of these postulates aided historians in evaluating the motivations of Grange members during this period.⁶

The rhetoric used by institutional leaders has, in large part, led to the dissension that exists in the

historiography. As has been repeatedly shown, membership in rural institutions such as the Grange was volatile, altering rapidly with economic conditions and other, more local factors. At any given time, state and national leaders worked for the honest interests of their assemblies. Yet rarely could these labors represent -- much less consolidate -- the wishes of a large share of their shifting constituency. For this very reason their efforts to forge a unified institutional objective often proved fatal to the very bodies for which these counselors toiled.

Additionally, the agricultural journals which popularized the mass movements often did so in ways which were arranged solely for the propagation of controversy, and hence the continued purchase of their publications. The rhetoric of producerism and yeomanry, common to this time, has been shown to resonate mainly with the ideologies of the individual journal editors, and not the broader farm population.⁷

Finally, the period was one of rapid flux in the state of the nation's Democratic Party. Looming like an albatross, the dishonor of "rebellion" damned the party to permanent minority status in the Midwest. As such, "enterprising" leaders used provocative issues such as currency, transportation, and banking reform to foster fusion movements between the Democrats and their own, temporarily aligned factions. All told, the era was awash with over-

ambitious promoters and provocateurs who offered the rural faithful panaceas guaranteed to cure every economic or social ill.⁸

The early historiography of the Grange suffered from this institutional myopia. By focusing on Patron leaders and their efforts to maintain the body, initial researchers missed much of the more relevant aspects of what grass-roots members actually attempted to do through their local chapters. The greatest misconception was the notion, promulgated by Solon Buck, that the national body actually provided farmers with their first direct experience with the distribution of goods and an awareness of the various consumer options open to them. As shown in Chapters Two and Three, this was far from the case. While other claims pertaining to the National Grange were often valid, the focus on the institutional success and failure shrouded the genuine revolutionary character that was expressed by farmers and their local associations from 1865 to 1875.⁹

Even non-specialists have treated the Patrons of Husbandry during its infancy as nothing more than a "hopeful monster." The term, coined by Richard Goldschmidt, a twentieth-century German geneticist, describes an organism that attempts to evolve by bridging the genetic span from one species to the next (hence, hopeful). Goldschmidt reasoned that only one in a million of these mutations ("monstrous" to its peers) might actually lead to a new

breed. This unusual term -- discredited as a scientific concept -- describes the manner in which some Grange historians have interpreted agrarian unrest: a hopeful but ungainly creation that failed to achieve the eminence of the Populists. Such an interpretation does a disservice to the millions of active Grangers from 1867 to 1875 who indeed held and expressed a unique and insurgent economic doctrine.¹⁰

Rural consumer ideology was expressed in four distinct ways. The first, and most important was the drive to obtain for farmers a dominant position in the post-war consumer economy. As this study stresses, the actions by independent agents and the experiences of commercial farmers created an advantageous economic posture by which farmers traditionally expressed their consumer demands. In an effort to safeguard their established, demand-based orientation, agronomists sought to tighten their control over the access to, and acquisition of merchandise. The retraction of currency, coupled with the expansion of all forms of consumer demand after the war threatened this hegemony. One farmer wrote that the "fact that [we] should have a say in the matter, or have any rights that manufacturers were bound to respect, [was] entirely ignored" in the post-war years.¹¹

As a result, farmers reacted bitterly to the leverage used by railroads and other suppliers who hoped to snatch this fiscal power for themselves. One Illinois activist

lamented that, by 1874, farmers were tired of incurring "the expenses both ways."

A manufacturer in one of our cities, for instance of reapers or sewing machines, in order to reach his customers, employs a general agent to take charge of his business in a given territory, under him a state agent in each state, and under him a county agent for each county. And instead of buying of the manufacturer, we buy of the county agent, who gets from 20 to 50 per cent; the state agent, say 10 per cent; and the general agent, 5 per cent. ... [the huge markup] goes to pay a host of useless and expensive servants, whom men of any other calling would have had the economy and good sense to have discharged long ago.

Greater consumer control over the access to these goods was one sure way in which these efficiencies could be established.¹²

Yet, rather than simply whining about their fate, Midwestern planters expressed their ideas in concrete actions. The homespun purchasing agencies collected orders and payments, and then arranged for the transport of all manner of goods to meet local requirements. They boycotted disagreeable firms and formed their own depots in order to recapture their lost consumer prerogatives. One activist humorously noted that "[i]t was tauntingly said [that farmers] raised too much produce and so reduced the price. Now, suppose we turn in and use the old corn planters for a few years, won't there be a surplus of corn planters?" Other members agreed that their personal consumption was the answer toward attaining greater market controls. One wrote that "there can be no doubt of the disposition of the

farmers to go without new machinery to a great extent unless the manufacturers will ...deal with them on the same terms as they now do with their regular agents."¹³

Despite collective behavior, farmers were clear that their efforts to regain consumer control were rooted in classical, free market economics. As its heart, communal strategies required individuals to make the fiscal compromises necessary to successfully manipulate the supply and demand curve to their common advantage. One rural contributor to the *Western Farmer* noted that there was "no good reason why the simple fact that a farmer belongs to any organization -- agricultural, political or religious -- should secure him anything at a less price than that for which any one else can obtain the same article. If reduced prices be secured it must be, in all ordinary cases, because something is given in return." An editor at the *Prairie Farmer* echoed this sentiment when he wrote that through collective action, individual "farmers and manufacturers will be brought directly together and occupy that relation that they should -- a relation that would insure a better article for farmers and better profits to the manufacturers." Grange solidarity could not mask the fact that their place as commercial farmers was at the core of their economic influence.¹⁴

Nor were the farmers' complaints directed at the conventional supplier of goods -- whether they were

independent agents, local merchants, or grange officials -- but rather at those who were assigned exclusive territorial rights for the distribution and control for desired or necessary goods. In the words of one husbandman, "the worst thing that has come of the [exclusive, territorial] system is that many manufacturers depend upon their 'oily' agent to sell their goods instead of the goods selling themselves." Such an arrangement circumvented the corrective powers of consumer demand by fostering local monopolies which harkened back to the earliest pioneer stores -- who were free from the pressures of consumer demand. In the end, the bottom line to their efforts was the bottom line. Communal solidarity was structured so to create individual economic advantage. This, in turn, justified the association to the larger group of commercial farmers. As one author noted, demand based consumer tactics practiced in the countryside "lessened the cost of living" to members "and to some extent [everyone] in the county."¹⁵

Secondly, the commonality of rural experiences made communal equality a fundamental ideological element of their purchasing efforts. The collective nature of their cultivating, the stability of the families that remained in the region, and the closeness of the community -- as seen through the important visiting patterns of rural women -- all contributed to the feelings of solidarity. As a result, consumer activism was not seen as driven by the various

rural organizations, but rather the result of shared and "deep-felt feeling[s] that the times demand a change." Farmers came to agree that "this change must be brought about by concerted action."¹⁶

Closely linked to this ideological support was a third significant principle of the rural consumer ethos. The movement was reform minded and, in a word, progressive in its efforts to improve the efficiency of meeting consumer demand.¹⁷ Based on the teachings of scientific farming, rural Midwesterners hoped to refine their existing relationships to agents and new corporate suppliers with an eye toward making their farm operations more efficient. Through collective actions, farmers could exert pressures to reform these individuals and industries that were once "far beyond his reach," and which prohibited him from "increasing the price of his produce." While providing economic benefits to the entirety of farm operations, these reforms were first and foremost geared to enhance the open expression of rural consumerism.¹⁸

Finally, rural consumerism relied heavily on notions of republican virtue and democracy. Farmers expressed their morality in a manner that was much less radical than many antebellum republican movements. Significantly, it was the equal availability of manufactured goods which drew the most focus from farmers. Grangers were most concerned with the apparent unfair economic advantages held by many territorial

agents and local retailers. It was due to the fear of market abuses that individual farmers turned to collective protection.¹⁹

The fabric of rural consumer ideology was woven with the threads of all four of these beliefs: a demand-driven access to goods, a communal justification of purchasing activities, a progressive reform of the distribution system, and a democratic and virtuous application of the economic benefits derived by their efforts. These convictions of control, community, reform, and virtue can best be summarized as a "rural consumer ethos." Rather than being bifurcated into elements of moral or market economics, agronomists experienced both: the individual market-based practices of consumption and the communal hopes and fears that their unique need for purchased goods would over-run their traditional social customs. Relying on their shared experiences and expectations, they developed a new ideology that placed consumerism at the center of the thoughts and actions of Midwestern farmers throughout this formative period.²⁰

The dominant role of consumption in the ideological stance taken by farmers was problematic. As the differing elements of rural consumerism attest, the balance between communal and individual benefits was often paradoxical and full of tension. For example, fair and equitable treatment does not follow from the determined efforts to remain within

the boundaries of industrial capitalism. Further, demand based control and democratic reforms often run counter to established communal norms. As such, the preeminent position of consumerism in rural ideology led to a tremendously fluid, and rapidly changing interpretation by many members of farm organizations. Every purchase entailed a constant re-evaluation -- whether consciously or not -- of individual and communal sacrifices demanded of participants. Institutional control was even more difficult, as leaders were forced to maintain the foundations of their organization while farmers evaluated these goals upon a changing set of social and economic criteria.²¹

As their consumer views evolved, farmers demonstrated the captivating nature of modern materialism. Historians investigating consumerism in America have noted that by the 1920s the culture was dominated by individualism and hedonistic acquisition. By contrast, Midwestern farmers believed that their traditional communal and ethic values had a legitimate place within modern materialism. The friction between these antagonistic factors began almost immediately. For example, purchasing cooperatives not only provided basic goods, but individual luxury items as well. Further, these early efforts were quickly divorced from the political conceptions that naturally flow from republicanism. Agrarian consumerism, then, struggled both as an operational strategy -- as farmers sought greater control

over the distribution of goods -- and as an alternative doctrine to that posed by growing cadre of professional retailers and advertisers.²²

Perhaps more vexing is the similarity between the expression of consumerism by nineteenth-century farmers and our own times. The comparison begs the question: is it possible to create a unifying communal ideology around the concept of individual consumption? The conflict between economic power and individual liberty, balanced by reasoned virtue is, of course, universal in the liberal political tradition. Rural consumers addressed the controversies surrounding their consumer needs along similar lines. Through the Grange, farmers did briefly succeed in formulating a policy that balanced market individualism with community service. Our understanding of the materialism expressed in contemporary times begins with these earlier efforts.

The questions surrounding this process were complex. How did farmers institutionalize this grass-roots ideology, and why were they successful at this delicate equilibrium? Who were the members in such a body, and what problems did they experience? The Patrons' solution to their consumer ills was, in fact, a "hopeful monster," a rare mutation that embodied the social, political, and economic aspirations of a generation of Midwestern farmers through a set of unified purchasing practices - the Grange purchasing agency.

In its most simple form rural purchasing agencies banded consumers together in order to create a more cost efficient link between manufacturers and the patrons of their goods or services. The agency obtained discounted prices for their efforts in collecting orders and distributing shipments. Manufacturers benefitted through large orders and by the reduction in commissions paid to their sales force. Some providers also slashed prices if the agency paid using cash, thereby avoiding the liability and expense associated with extending credit. Any profits accrued by the agency were dispensed to the consumer in the form of savings at the time of the transaction. Rarely were profits funneled back into the agency system.

This loose structure allowed members to interpret the role of the agency in their own fashion. Those who hoped to "eliminate the middleman" or nurture an "agrarian union" were equally able to utilize the purchasing agency as those who merely wanted to improve their personal bottom line through discounted purchases. For example, cooperative stores were often little more than locations for farmers to order and pick up their goods, or to purchase supplies that had been bulked by special request of the grange, free from the glare of the local merchant. The term "cooperation" was frequently given to these nebulous associations by rural consumers in the middle of the nineteenth century.

This generic concept of communal consumption was not a new one. Entire antebellum communities -- Hopedale and Brook Farm in Massachusetts, or New Harmony in Indiana -- were based on communitarian principles popularized by Robert Owen and Charles Fourier. Similarly, independent "Union Stores" were stationed even in the most remote districts of the rural Midwest. However, these stores and communes differed from later purchasing agencies in that they relied on provincial solidarity for their economic viability. Cooperation was based on like-mindedness, not on the desire for economic efficiency. Cooperatives of this kind hinged on three aspects of community fellowship: religion, ethnicity, and the desire to form a perfected society.²³

Yet agencies based on these shared social creeds suffered most severely from the demographic changes sweeping the U.S. in the nineteenth century. The fact that many of these groups channeled the profits of their operation back into the society demanded a homogeneity and stability that was at odds with the market values and mobility of many Midwesterners. If consumers could only profit through the collective then the unity of the members had to be absolute. Studies have shown that ideological cooperatives often succeeded when populations remained static and market pressures were minimal. The absence of these conditions in the Midwest doomed most ideological cooperatives.²⁴

However, farmers' posture toward commercial agriculture

did offer a stable ideological soul. The earliest agrarian leagues in the Midwest were formed at the most grass-roots level through the purveyors of the concept of scientific farming: independent Farmers' Clubs. Often forming around conventional community functions -- such as the organization of Independence Day celebrations -- the clubs quickly grew into a formidable social and political force by 1860. On the eve of the Civil War, Illinois alone claimed more than seventy-five clubs totalling over 2,000 members, a pattern which well represented her sister states. Regarding this eminence, officials at the Illinois State Agricultural Society opined in 1862 that local "Farmers' Clubs are to county, state and national agricultural associations what families are to the more extended social organizations -- the church, the state and the nation."²⁵

The purchasing activities of these clubs resulted in some significant discounts, if only for a limited number of local consumers. Savings from thirty to fifty percent on "domestic and farm implements, household supplies, etc." were not unusual. One leader of the Illinois State Farmers Association (ISFA), a body formed in 1872 to represent the state's most active clubs, claimed that individual members over the years had each economized "over \$2,000 by buying directly from the manufacturers.... about \$10 on ploughs, \$30 on reapers, \$13 on corn-planters, \$20 on sowing machines," and so on. The *Prairie Farmer* cited these savings

as the driving force behind the formation of the ISFA. The slogan of the institution spoke to the single-minded economic purpose that fueled the growth of these clubs: "We mean business."²⁶

A typical farmers' club was formed in Elkhart, Illinois on March 11, 1873. The Elk Prairie Farmers' Club based its existence on pecuniary benefits. Major H. P. Burroughs, a prominent member of the club, asserted that the farmers of his association "resolved to combine and cooperate not for the purpose, as it claimed by some, to infringe upon the rights of others, but to protect themselves and their own rights." Similarly, at the first state meeting of the ISFA, club members noted how they were favorable to the growth of purchasing agencies, "to effect for our class what organization has done for others." The association published the purchasing activities of farmers' clubs in Fulton County, Bureau County, and those of "a large number of other delegates, [who gave] their experience in the advantages gained by co-operation in the purchasing of their supplies and in disposing of their products."²⁷

The implacable drive by clubs for greater individual market advantages was a reflection of the farmers' commitment to scientific farming. As such, it represents only one portion of the influences which were to make up the consumer anxieties expressed through the Grange. For example, clubs were tutored not to spend time meeting or

discussing non-economic issues. Further, they showed less interest in reforming the distribution system that supplied their rural colleagues than in securing personal savings. The ideology of the Farmers' Clubs was limited to their focus on the economic aspects of consumption. They demonstrated a lack of regard for the common concerns, raised by farmers, for the current bias against rural purchasing and the need for global reforms that would benefit all members of the agrarian society. Just as utopian societies failed to provide a doctrine pliable enough for the general conditions of the prairies, so too did Farmers' Clubs over-compensate in favor of the individual commercial operator.

As a result, the various clubs found it difficult to conceive and coordinate more effective purchasing strategies. Autonomous action meant that each club attempted to negotiate discounts based only on the aggregation of a small number of orders. Exasperated manufacturers were inundated by a chaotic *mélange* of requests, all demanding recognition based on rural solidarity! One Midwestern businessman, generally sympathetic to the farmers efforts, wrote that he was "flooded with [farmers'] letters, [but] have got no business from them. They don't amount to anything. We make machines to sell. We have had too much of their correspondence. They can't do anything in this way of writing for machinery. They must have a system of doing

business, and then we will trade with them when we know who we are dealing with." Still, the club forum proved extremely popular. The *Chicago Times* noted that, until 1873, "Farmers' Clubs [were] forming everywhere."²⁸

By comparison, the activities of the Patrons of Husbandry in the region were phlegmatic. Grange founder Oliver Kelley's plan for a national, fraternal organization dedicated to the "knights of the plow" had its roots in his experiences as a frontier farmer and Washington bureaucrat. Born in Boston, Kelley migrated west to Itasca, Minnesota in 1849. There, as farmer, speculator, and newspaper editor, Kelley experienced first-hand the vicissitudes of commercial agriculture. He demonstrated his original beliefs in fraternalism and commercial farming by founding a local chapter of the Freemasons as well as a club. In 1864, discouraged by his lack of prosperity at home, Kelley accepted an appointment to Washington as clerk in the new Agricultural Department. Two years later, after touring the war-ravaged south to collect economic data, Kelley formed the Patrons of Husbandry upon his return to the nation's capital.²⁹

In structure and style, the new institution was based on the Masonic principles that were familiar to Kelley. Members were conferred seven highly ritualized degrees at three hierarchical nodes in the organization: the Subordinate Grange (first to fourth degrees), the State

Grange (fifth and sixth degrees), the National Grange (seventh degree). Subordinates could be chartered only through the participation of at least nine men, and four women, making it relatively liberal-minded for its day. State Granges were formed following the successful establishment of fifteen Subordinates. The states were to be led by the National Grange, which acted to institute protocols, prioritize the agenda, and collect and distribute money. At its origin, therefore, the National Grange was founded upon the principle of a social union.

The high hopes of Kelley and his colleagues notwithstanding, the institution failed to act as a clarion call to the farm community until it was joined with the rural consumer ethos of many Midwesterners. "Paper" granges in Washington and Chicago simply were not sustainable because they were unable to establish a dialog with rural Americans. As the *Chicago Tribune* later wrote, the local chapter -- housed in the offices of the *Prairie Farmer* -- "was puny from the first, and city air and habits soon stifled it to death." Not until the summer of 1868, after Kelley had resigned from his position at the Post Office and travelled back to Minnesota, were the National Grange principles aligned to meet the needs of regional farmers.³⁰

Kelley was met in Minnesota by Farmers' Clubs determined to pursue their provincial agenda. In a letter to his Washington associates, Kelley noted that farmers asked

"what pecuniary benefit are we to gain by supporting the organization?" In response, "protection" and "pecuniary benefits" became the watchwords for Grange organization. Still, farmers were intent on establishing a centralized purchasing agency with or without Grange leadership. Kelley directed the Minnesota leaders on March 10, 1869 that "it will be premature to make any appointments for Minnesota until you are further advised [by the National Grange]. It is looked upon as a movement of vital interest to the Order, and involves its success or ruin; hence we must be cautious." As soon as the local farmers learned that the National Grange had tabled the plan, they moved to form an independent state agency.³¹

The correspondence between Kelley and National Grange officer F. M. McDowell indicates that local members clearly articulated their demand for a purchasing agency. Kelley wrote that the farmers believed that the "State Grange has a right to appoint such an agent, and the National has no right to interfere." More importantly, Minnesotans claimed that "if they can't do as they please... they will withdraw from the organization in a body, and run it on their own hook." With mutiny looming, which would undoubtedly have dealt a deathblow to his last ditch efforts in the state, Kelley supported the purchasing agency concept within the Order. As he noted, the effort was wholly local, and could therefore be denied by the National body if it failed, while

at the same time it would generate enormous free publicity. Kelley finally reasoned that "[i]f it proves a good thing, then, (if we like) we can pass some law hitching the system on the [National] Order." With their fraternity firmly yoked to the purchasing agency system, coupled with aggressive recruiting campaigns at the local level, Grange activity exploded across the Midwest.³²

This expansion came at the expense of the independent Farmers' Clubs. Given that both practiced the same general purchasing strategies, it can only be concluded that the unique blend of social and economic convictions in the Grange was the driving force behind their success. Evidence supporting this ideological rift can be found in the increasing conflict between members of granges and clubs. The clubs' unmistakable economic posture led them naturally into the general political forums of the day. In comparison, the Patrons avoided an undue focus on economic issues by including social elements such as picnics, general subject lectures, and Masonic ritual. Further, the Grange consciously avoided the tendency to become politicized, and thereby lose the distinctive rural spirit which was found in the principles of their collective actions.

For their part, the independent Farmers' Clubs found that political fusion was a constructive endeavor. Editors exhorted farmers to recognize that answers to their economic woes were to be found only by removing the offending

legislators who "clos[ed] our ports to commerce, [and gave] to manufacturers and speculators the control of the markets, and that, so long as the Radicals are in power, so long will labor be taxed to support monopolies and a horde of speculators and operators, who live upon the industry of the country." Illinois club leaders echoed this sentiment when they demanded that their members "put your votes where they will do the most good."³³

Illinois and Indiana club members formed the backbone of their state's independent parties throughout this era. In 1875, many switched their affiliations to the newly formed Greenback Party, losing considerable votes for their own candidates. Still, the fusion party held the balance in the Illinois Assembly between the old parties, and led to the election of Judge David Davis as U.S. Senator. Similarly, Wisconsin clubs, relying on the Milwaukee business community and the inept campaign of the competition, helped to elect reform candidate William R. Taylor for Governor.³⁴

But these political successes were often achieved by sacrificing the formative rural mission of the clubs: consumer savings. Secretary S. M. Smith of the ISFA claimed that his body sought "blood and anarchy" through their political attacks on the railroads! Further, the mass meetings arranged by these proxies rarely served the communal needs of most farmers. In one extreme case, a meeting commissioned by Smith and J. A. Noonan, the editor

of *The Industrial Age*, broke down into a Hamiltonian nightmare of mob ascendancy over the democratic process. One witness wryly noted that,

They must have had a nice time, the masses took possession of the chair by force, lifting [one speaker] out bodily. The door keeper was taken up bodily and put down quietly in one corner of the room and told to stay there. The most kindly expressions were used by each to the other -- Damn Sirs, Infernal Thieves, and Sons of Bitches -- were among the most polite of the crowd assembled common to disgust [sic]. I should think that any man possessing only common decency must have felt disgusted with the whole thing.³⁵

Observers to these actions could not help but note the divergence of the Farmers' Clubs from their original goals. Even the once sacrosanct agricultural fair was becoming politicized. Farmers opined in their local papers that "[t]hese political blood-suckers are not satisfied with running all the caucuses, conventions, [etc.] ... but now propose to take possession of the agricultural societies. Let the honest farmer step to the front and head off these greedy candidates for political preferment." Such overt politicization, coupled with their determined pursuit of individual market advantages, led many farmers to question the very essence of these independent clubs. As one man wrote, in the clubs "there are no bonds of union except that of buying cheap."³⁶

The Grange specifically appealed to this need for a more faithful embodiment of rural ideology in their assemblies. As early as 1873, in Illinois, planters

chastised clubs for the "danger [caused by their] diversion from the true objects of the organization. If allowed to do so, politicians will rend it to fragments before next fall's election." Later that same year, the *Chicago Evening Journal* reported that the "majority of our farmers are displeased with the sell-out Democratic resolution adopted at the State convention of Farmers at Decatur last week, and openly declare that if the clubs are to be used solely for the purpose of helping broken-down demagogues into office, they will have nothing more to do with them."³⁷

This fundamental fracture between clubs and granges over the political participation of their institutions made cooperation in pursuit of purchasing strategies extremely difficult. Only at the local level did they succeed in achieving discounts from regional suppliers from their merged efforts. In Ford County, Illinois, 108 grangers and 30 club members purchased nearly \$1,000 worth of family supplies, saving 30 per cent over "what the same class of goods formerly cost." Members were "so well satisfied with [their] purchases that [they] concluded to order a small stock of staple articles to be kept constantly on hand for the benefit of the members of both." Communities in Rockford, Kewanee, and elsewhere paralleled these activities.³⁸

Yet State Grange leaders found little common ground with the bellicose clubs. Many saw them as anachronisms,

leading a "forced existence," and dependent upon "being resurrected once a fortnight" by political demagoguery. Most damning, to the sensibility of the Patron, was the negative consequences of firebrands like S. M. Smith, who drew partisan condemnation for all rural programs, including the purchasing agency. Quite often, the Patrons of Husbandry were falsely held responsible. National Executive Committee member and past Grand Master of the Grange, D. Wyatt Aiken in 1883 targeted the Midwest in particular for the unfavorable repercussions to his institution:

their existed in Illinois and Wisconsin or other sections of the North-West at sundry times, agricultural clubs, composed of men who could not or would not join the grange, whose province seemed to be to wage war against transportation companies. Anathemas thick and heavy were hurled upon the Grange for making this attack, whereas every Patron of Husbandry knew that the Grange, as such, was not a participant in the fight from beginning to end.³⁹

The Grange clearly offered farmers an institution which expressed fidelity to their consumer ethos. From the perspective of the market economy, the purchasing agency system was geared to provide demand-based controls while also remaining well within the boundaries of the established capitalist order. Yet their efforts were also designed to meet the needs of their "moral economy." Relying on group notions of virtue, Grangers expanded their struggle to benefit all members of the rural community. Agrarian consumerism was fully communicated for the first time through the purchasing agency of the Patrons of Husbandry.

The rapid development of the purchasing agency at the state level provides compelling evidence of the amalgamation of farmers' elementary market beliefs and group solidarity. The purchasing agency of the state bodies did booming business, beginning in 1873. Many manufacturers, in fact, actively pursued business with grangers who reported a "large trade." Granger E. V. Lapham of Illinois called on firms to "[f]orward your bids, gentlemen, and thereby let us know whether you are for us or against us." Other suppliers were less pliant. G. L. Waterman of the Highland Grange in Seneca, Illinois, noted that the right of grangers to form state purchasing agencies was often "entirely ignored" by regional businesses. Waterman believed that only the unified power of a state or regional body would shift these recalcitrants; "I find that the greatest difficulty I have is to find the right party to buy from. A correspondence with other agents in this matter is solicited."⁴⁰

The State Grange responded to these local demands. In Indiana, the State Executive Committee, the assembly that wielded the most power within the Grange, provided State Agent Alpheus Tyner with regulations that were to coordinate local efforts. County agents were requested to combine and forward their orders to the state agent "promptly on the first of each month." In kind, the state agent furnished "printed price lists to the county agents who are requested to place one copy... on file in each Subordinate Grange...

so that orders can be filled up from them." Payments for goods were to accompany the order in cash or post office order. The State Agency was pledged "not to give any special preference to any particular manufactured article... [and] not purchase for outside parties." A Chicago daily reported, that all grangers would "hereafter make their purchases... through an agent selected by the Grange."⁴¹

The day-to-day operations of the regional state agents were relatively uniform. Paid by either a salary or a commission on sales, the agents were requested to be bonded (up to \$25,000 in the case of Tyner), to establish a centralized depot accessible to both mail and rail traffic, and to hire a minimal amount of clerks to process the orders. The agents readied informal agreements with manufacturers from both local and remote locations. They focused on agricultural implements, but also arranged for the purchase of dry goods and other foodstuffs. Bulk supplies, like "agricultural plaster," binder twine, and even coal were often acquired through the state agency.⁴²

The cooperative stores established by these agents were representative of their patrons' wishes. While some farmers questioned the need for anything more than capital goods, in actuality the stores provided a wide selection of merchandise from basic wares to more eccentric, luxury goods. In one instance, grange sales of musical instruments were "so great... that many machines, not patronized by the

order, are being run out of the rural markets." Still, members indicated that they intended to utilize the existing providers who responded to demand-based consumer needs. *The Patron's Hand-Book* wrote that in many cases, "it is the practice of [granges], where they can effect it, to make contracts with the other merchants, to supply their members with goods for cash, and return to the co-operative society a percentage (usually ranging from 7 1/2 to 15 per cent.) of what they receive from these society purchasers." One outside observer, writing to Joseph Osborn, the Wisconsin State Purchasing Agent, questioned the need for "doing away with the merchants as a class." After examining Osborn's system, the *New Yorker* observed that many other articles obtained through existing suppliers "at your own village... may be on the whole as cheap as to get in large quantities and divide up as freight, labor of handling, waste, have to be borne unavoidably by the consumers."⁴³

Communal values were present as well. If for no other reason, the hierarchical structure of the Order ensured it. "County Councils" were formed, first in Wisconsin and then regionally, which conveyed local desires up through the agency's management. *The Prairie Farmer* noted that this neighborhood emphasis was the basis for a "strong and efficient system." Officials of the National Order could only sit and watch as locals, "so much in earnest in this matter of cooperative stores," inaugurated their own

agencies through the county council format "without waiting for the [National] plan to be completed."⁴⁴

In a telling exchange, grangers noted the indispensable role of all members of the community -- including women -- in the success of these ventures. While still proscribed in their thinking by their generations' ubiquitous sexism, male grangers expressed their movement in terms intended to attract both genders. Again, citing *The Patron's Hand-Book*,

selling may be conducted to advantage by women. They have usually more tact in waiting upon customers, more taste in the arrangement of their goods, are quicker in filling the orders, and often are disposed to perform the duties of the position at a lower salary than men. We believe that the same labor should receive the same compensation, if equally well performed, whether done by one sex or the other, but the laws of supply and demand at present regulate this question of salaries.

More constructively, grangers harkened back to the concepts found in scientific farming when they noted that few farmers "will question that the advice of an intellectual and frugal wife upon business matters is worthy of consideration, and we do not share in the prejudice against their taking part in the discussions through the public press."⁴⁵

The combination of market and moral economies, of individual savings and communal ethics, in short, the fusion and expression of Midwestern farmers' distinctive construct of consumerism made the Grange a raging success. An Indiana farmer likened the movement to a "tidal wave," as he saw locals "springing up with great enthusiasm." *The Prairie Farmer* began a column in their periodical titled "The

Business Feature of It" that briefly reported the local consequences of the movement. Before the series was discontinued, the editors reported that "[w]e have before us more than one hundred reports from Granges and clubs in response to our call, which form conclusive proof of the general interest that exists throughout the country in the business success of organized effort." By January of 1873, the institution claimed 1,362 Subordinate chapters that were concentrated in Illinois, Indiana, Wisconsin, Iowa, and Minnesota. By December, Subordinates numbered over 10,000, a six hundred per cent increase. From 1874 until 1875, the Grange was at its peak in membership and political influence with over 858,000 members belonging to over 21,000 regional chapters.⁴⁶

For good reasons, then, Midwestern grangers were optimistic about their institutions' destiny. Fiscally, leaders deduced that every one of the more than 700,000 families in the Order, "[a]llowing \$1,000 worth of necessary articles for home consumption for each family" would net "a saving of \$175 to each would be made, or a total of \$122,500,000!" The authors dutifully reported that "owing to imperfect organization, this estimate is excessive; but that an annual saving of \$25,000,000 cannot be considered a high estimate." Socially, scores of grangers publicly attested to the benefits accrued through local solidarity and increased opportunity for all.⁴⁷

The only problem identified by grangers was the need for more constructive coordination of local, state, and national efforts. John Samuel of the Missouri Grange wrote to Wisconsin Purchasing Agent Joseph Osborn that such a consolidation would provide "the magic touch of systemic business organization... [and] give the farmers movement the right direction." Indiana's Alpheus Tyner called for a meeting of the State Agents of Ohio, Illinois, Missouri, Michigan, Kentucky, Kansas, and Wisconsin to join him in Indianapolis to accomplish this goal. These meetings were expected to give the Order greater leverage with manufacturers through higher volumes and more powerful boycotts.⁴⁸

But less obvious problems suggested that there were cracks in the foundation of the Grange consumer policy. At a practical level, State Agents' business procedures often led to confusion and frustrations. Complaints about mundane issues such as the inept handling of mailed inquiries were common. The volume of mail often reached 125 letters per day, overwhelming the poorly staffed agents, who had to process the orders and respond to queries about prices in time to suit the needs of rural consumers. More vexing was the fact that the state and local agents often kept very poor records of their transactions. While frequently audited by their members, a familiar lament by agents was heard from Benjamin Beeson, agent for the Nettle Creek Grange that his

"foregoing statement is only approximate. The bills for most of the goods are by some means mislaid.... I kept no accurate account I cannot tell whether goods have held out weight and measure or not. (I commenced but lost some accounts and Geo. Chamness dealt a good deal of it out so it was utterly impossible to keep it correct)." Cheating and mail fraud were typical for many suppliers of the era, and grangers came to view the prospect of sending away for goods with more caution than they once held. At a meeting for the local purchasing agents of Illinois, on September 15, 1875, the State Agent noted that his clients now "wished to see the goods before buying and put their hands on them before paying their cash." The lack of serviceable retailing experience was harming the Grange effort, as it competed in the open market.⁴⁹

As implied by these examples, grangers were having difficulties maintaining their competitive position *vis-à-vis* the commercial marketplace. Both the Illinois and Indiana chapters expressed their need for greater commercial controls to be implemented at the national level. Most importantly, these agencies needed a sustained and adequate level of funding to successfully vie in the free market. Much as independent agents battled for liquidity during the antebellum years, so too did the Grange need to establish funding systems by which they could predictably meet their customers needs.⁵⁰

The ideological moorings of the movement were also challenged by 1875. The most obvious element of the Order, its Masonic secrecy, rankled farmers who desired more open and direct access to goods. It seemed to many that the Granges were seeking "private terms." In defense of their institution's confidentiality, members argued "that the mere matter of making a few dollars by special terms with dealers is but a trifling matter as compared with the higher objects of the Order." But still, the criticism dealt a blow to the foundation's claim that their efforts represented the broader interests of farmers as a class.⁵¹

To make matters worse, rumors spread that the Illinois State Grange had clandestine plans to absorb the ISFA, further alienating the public. One club member wrote to the *Prairie Farmer* condemning Grange secrecy, adding in a frustrated tone that the "whole country is alive to their interests, they can openly convene together, nominate, vote for and elect men, and take action against all that oppresses them without loosing their freedom as American citizens, by being [secretly] pledged to do so and so" behind the closed doors of the grange hall. Crude, bipartisan gambits such as these in Illinois threatened to re-ignite fears of conspiracy in the general populace, and undermine the many valuable aspect of the Patrons of Husbandry.⁵²

This interpretation of the ritual secrecy of the Order

directly undermined the ideological crusade for the fair and open access to consumer goods. In a telling episode, Minnesota grangers came down upon their State's Purchasing Agent, "like a huge swarm of angry wasps," for, what one grange advocate termed "the dangerous policy of allowing all farmers equal rights in the advantages obtained by the Order, after years of patient toil and the expenditures of thousands in money, a theory most fallacious on its face." A contributor to the *Prairie Farmer*, who took the pen name of "Open Terms," decried the fact that such actions proved the purchasing agency to be insensitive to the "extortiant (sic) prices to outsiders."⁵³

Popular publications, such as M. E. Gustin's *An Expose of the Grangers* in 1875, saw even more insidious consequences from this monopoly over the access to affordable consumer goods. He saw in the movement simple class warfare. "The Order has no respect for business men, mechanics, or the laboring poor. It has in view only its own aggrandizement and prosperity. We must see and feel the broad distinction drawn between the Patrons and all other classes of mankind." Gustin held that farmers were "determined to drive out business men of every order, and take full possession of every branch of business." Calling for the dissolution of the Patrons of Husbandry, the author admonished its members and suggested they seek "forgiveness from God and humanity, through sincere repentance and a

devoted exertion to atone for the many grievous wrongs that they have inflicted upon the people."⁵⁴

With memories of the Paris Commune fresh in the minds of many Americans, Grange efforts to centralize and publicly manage the purchasing agency, railroads, and granaries met with many angry critics. These appraisals stung the membership deeply. When solidarity was offered by a meeting in Chicago of prominent Socialists, the *Prairie Farmer* quickly denounced the association, asking farmers "How do[es] this sort of talk sound to the ears of the working farmers of the Northwest? Are they desirous to 'join hands' with such deluded advocates of such doctrines? We think we can answer for them, that they are not." Even the nationally eminent Charles Francis Adams weighed in, calling the Order's ventures a "wanton assault upon property." Leaders actively sought to repudiate the insinuation of socialism in the Order. Farm advocates responded strongly to Adams' public indictments. S. M. Smith of the Illinois State Farmer's Association wrote to Wisconsin's Joseph Osborn that "even a descendant of John Adams can lie when it will answer his purpose to do so. I wish it were possible for me to hear him and take notes... I would like to skin him as I did" other critics of the movement.⁵⁵

Nor were local farmers mute to the charge that their agency challenged the established economic structure. Most preferred to call attention to the more pragmatic aims of

their movement. For example, Wisconsin State Agent L. G. Kniffen reassured his suppliers in 1875 that "It is not our object to disturb existing relations in business, [only] to bring the Manufacturer and Consumer as near together as possible." A member of the Savoy Farmers' Club of Champaign, Illinois insisted that it was "not a question whether or not we dispense with this class of middle-men... but rather a division of profits, and to what extent they may be the arbiters of our financial operations.... This is the issue, and not that we propose to dispense with their services altogether." As one man succinctly stated the case, "We are not unwilling to support a sufficient number of middle men to do the business, but we do not want such a host of barnacles sticking to our ship."⁵⁶

By 1875, the Grange had codified the four main tenets of a rural consumer ethos into their purchasing agency system. Unlike the efforts of the Farmers's Clubs, local granges went beyond the need for demand-based controls and respect for established economic conventions. Through the Masonic rites of the institution, local granges incorporated the communal characteristics which many Midwesterners valued. In so doing, they created an institution loaded with the very paradoxes and promises which led to this rural consumer ideology in the first place.

The rapid growth of the Order illustrates their success in expressing this unique agrarian ideology. Goods were made available to local Patrons at significant savings which fostered local solidarity. Yet unexpected problems -- such as the perceived exclusivity of their union, their aversion to politics, and the fear of secret monopolies -- threatened the continued prosperity of the institution. A public position on the agency system was needed from the National Grange to clarify the movement's goals, properly fund the purchasing agency, and press for greater reforms as visible evidence of the power of their unified beliefs. In the words of Illinois State Agent S. J. Frew, by 1875 the Grange was "not in a situation to experiment with untried theories. We see discouragement pictured in the Granges all over the state, and the serious question presents itself ... will we enter upon another year with no better plans than we now have?"⁵⁷

Significantly, urban merchants and agents which comprised the existing distribution network certainly were not blind to the movement, and its attacks on the ascendancy of their rural colleagues. Many firms, in fact, welcomed the potential for a newly consolidated agrarian consumer market. As early as 1873, the *Prairie Farmer* noted that "[s]carcely a day has passed that this office is not the recipient of requests for a list of the Granges and Clubs in the Northwest" from companies "who desire to send letters,

circulars, pamphlets and the like, and we presume that the offices of the different secretaries are full of all manner of printed schemes, whereby members may save money, or make money, without limit." Their mention of the newly christened firm of Montgomery Ward and Company suggests that these efforts often proved lucrative.⁵⁸

Yet not all urban merchants and agents were as perceptive as Aaron Montgomery Ward. The "democratic coordination" of the rural purchasing agencies was at odds with the unfolding "administrative coordination" of the urban marketplace. As with M. E. Gustin's work, editorials dealing with the Grange in leading urban periodicals often turned acrid. For example, the *Chicago Times*, playing off the Masonic ritual of crossing the "gate of mystery," wrote that the previous week, "thirty [farmers] rode the 'goat of mystery' and took the oath to 'ditch' all roads that charge over three cents per mile, and hang all implement dealers that refuse to sell below cost." Before examining the success and failure of the rural consumer ethos, it is beneficial to delve into the source of this conflict between urban suppliers and farmers from 1865 to 1875.⁵⁹

ENDNOTES

List of abbreviations:

CHS Chicago Historical Society, Chicago, Illinois.
 InHS Indiana Historical Society, Indianapolis, Indiana.
 ISHL Illinois State Historical Library, Springfield, Illinois.
 InSL Indiana State Library, Indianapolis, Indiana.
 SHSW State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin.
 UI University of Illinois Library, Champaign-Urbana, Illinois.

1. Entry dated 4 March 1874, in Griswold Family, *Papers*, ISHL.
2. For account, see *Oskosh City Times*, 12 February 1873.
3. See E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Gollancz, 1980); and Thompson, "The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century," *Past and Present* 50 (1971): 76-136. For predominantly economic explanations, such as the role played by debt and market restrictions, see Walter T. K. Nugent, *Money and American Society, 1865-1880* (New York: Free Press, 1968); Stanley B. Parsons, *The Populist Context: Rural Versus Urban Power on a Great Plains Frontier* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1973); Fred A. Shannon, *American Farmers' Movement* (Princeton, N. J.: Van Nostrand Press, 1957); Robert P. Sharkey, *Money, Class, and Party* (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1959); Robert Klepper, "The Economic Basis for Agrarian Protest Movements in the United States, 1870-1900" (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1973); Robert A. McGuire, "Economic Causes of Late Nineteenth-Century Agrarian Unrest: New Evidence," *Journal of Economic History* (December 1981): 835-852; and especially John D. Hicks, *The Populist Revolt: A History of the Farmers' Alliance and the People's Party* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1961). For social causes of changes, such as anxiety over change and the communal fear of economic effects, see Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R.* (New York: Knopf, 1955); Steven Hahn, *The Roots of Southern Populism: Yeoman Farmers and the Transformation of the Georgia Upcountry, 1850-1890* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983); and Bruce Palmer, "Man Over Money" : *The Southern Populist Critique of Northern Capitalism* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina, 1980).
4. For an analysis of how rail and granary rates were not unfair, and recognized as such by many farmers, see Gabriel Kolko, *Railroads and Regulation, 1877-1916* (New York: W. W.

Norton & Co., 1965); Lee Benson, *Merchants, Farmers and Railroads: Railroad Regulation and New York Politics, 1850 - 1887* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1955); and Robert Higgs, "Railroad Rates and the Populist Uprising" *Agricultural History* 44 (July 1970): 291-297. For revision of "Granger Laws," see George H. Miller, *Railroads and the Granger Laws* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1971); and Harold D. Woodman, "Chicago Businessmen and the 'Granger' Laws," *Agricultural History* XXXVI, No. 1 (January 1962): 16-24.

5. For prices and tenancy, see John Dibbern, "Who Were The Populists? A Study of Grassroots Alliancemen in Dakota," *Agricultural History* 56 (October 1982): 677-691; James Turner, et. al., "Understanding the Populists," *Journal of American History* 67 (September 1980): 354-373; Donald L. Winters, "Tenancy as an Economic Institution: The Growth and Distribution of Agricultural Tenancy in Iowa, 1850- 1900," *Journal of Economic History* 37 (July 1977): 382-408; Winters, "Tenant Farming in Iowa, 1860-1900: A Study of the Terms of Rental Leases," *Agricultural History* 48 (1974): 130-150; and Allan G. Bogue, *From Prairie to Corn Belt: Farming on the Illinois and Iowa Prairies in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1963), 56-66. For the general prosperity of the region, see James H. Stock, "Real Estate Mortgages, Foreclosures, and Midwestern Agrarian Unrest, 1865-1920," *Journal of Economic History* 44 (March 1984): 89-105; and Ann Mayhew, "A Reappraisal of the Causes of Farm Protest in the United States, 1870-1900," *Journal of Economic History* 32 (June 1972): 465-475.

6. For producerism, see Robert C. McMath, *American Populism: A Social History, 1877 - 1898* (New York: Wang & Hill, 1993); and Steven J. Keillor, "Democratic Coordination in the Marketplace: Minnesota's Rural Cooperatives, 1865-1917" (Ph.D. diss., University of Minnesota, December 1992). See also the use of the "silver issue," Richard Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition* (New York: Vintage Books, 1948); Nugent, *Money and American Society*; and Lawrence Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise: The Populist Movement in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976).

7. See Richard W. Abbott, "The Agricultural Press Views the Yeoman: 1819-1859," *Agricultural History* 42 (January 1968): 35-48. For more on journals and their editors' views, see Paul Wallace Gates, *The Farmer's Age: Agriculture 1815 - 1860*, Volume III, *The Economic History of the United States* (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), 338-358; George F. Lemmer, "Early Agricultural Editors and Their Farm Philosophies," *Agricultural History* XXXI No.4 (October 1957): 3-22; Richard

T. Farrell, "Advice to Farmers: The Content of Agricultural Newspapers, 1860-1910," *Agricultural History* 51 (January 1977): 209-216; and Jack W. Van Derhoof, "Eastern and Mid-Western Agricultural Journalism, 1860-1900" (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, June, 1951).

8. For fusion parties, see Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise*, 430-432; for earlier efforts such as the Illinois Independent Party, see John H. Keiser, *Building For the Centuries: Illinois, 1865-1898*. The Sesquicentennial History of Illinois, Volume Four (Urbana: University of Illinois Press), 72-115; in Wisconsin, see Miller, *Railroads and the Granger Laws*, 140-160. For a contemporary, northern view of the Democratic Party, see letter dated 3 September 1868, from John Kirk to James A. Parsons, where he wished that "Rebellion and the Devil Democratic Party & Slavery and Traitors and Rebels will all go to hell together," see John Kirk, *Letterbooks, 1852-1871*, CHS.

9. For this rigorous institutional focus, see Solon J. Buck, *The Agrarian Crusade: A Chronicle of the Farmer in Politics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1920), 71; see also Buck, *The Granger Movement: A Study of Agriculture Organization and Its Political, Economic, and Social Manifestations, 1870-1880* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1913), Chapter 2. Even more recent works that have gone a long way towards reclaiming the Grange as a social institution, have shown the effects of Buck's earlier thesis. In an otherwise excellent article, Roy Scott wrote that the National body which "roused" farmers from their "apathy", rather than the body being an expression derived from it; Roy V. Scott, "Grangerism in Champaign County, Illinois, 1873 - 1877," *Mid-America* 43 (July 1961): 139. The best works on the Grange remain the most recent, Dennis S. Nordin, *Rich Harvest: A History of the Grange, 1867 - 1900* (Jackson: The University Press of Mississippi, 1974); William D. Barns, "Oliver Hudson Kelley and the Genesis of the Grange: A Reappraisal," *Agricultural History* 41 (July 1967): 229-242; Thomas Allan Woods, *Knights of the Plow: Oliver H. Kelley and the Republican Origins of the Grange* (Ames: University of Iowa Press, 1992); and Margaret K. Andersen, "Agrarian Union: The Grange in the Midwest, 1870-1900," Ph.D. diss., Northwestern University, December 1989.

10. Of course, these interpretations also vary on which of the two words they chose to highlight. For a concise treatment of Goldschmidt, see Stephen Jay Gould, *The Flamingo's Smile, Reflections in Natural History* (New York, W. W. Norton, 1985), 371-373.

11. Ann Mayhew makes the point that farmers reacted against the roads only *after* they found themselves in a vulnerable market position -- i. e., had to pay precious cash or credit. This need for money was the critical factor that led most farmers to cite railroads for their heavy-handedness. See Mayhew, "A Reappraisal of the Causes of Farm Protest in the United States, 1870-1900," 469. For lost respect by manufacturers, see *Prairie Farmer*, 25 October 1873, 339. For an additional discussion about rural consumer ethos, see the Introduction.

12. Quote by James Creighton, see *Proceedings of the Second Annual Meeting of the Illinois State Farmers' Convention, Held at Decatur, Dec. 16, 17 & 18, 1873, with Addresses, Reports, Papers and Letters Received* (Chicago: C. E. Southard, Book and Job Printer, 1874), 5. See also *Oshkosh City Times*, 14 January 1874.

13. For boycott by planters, see comments made at 1872 Farmers' Convention, Kewanee, Illinois recorded in the *Prairie Farmer*, 25 January 1873, 25. See also *Ibid.*, 8 March 1873, 73, 75. Citation regarding DeKalb Grange in *The Chicago Times*, 28 May 1873, 3. For other boycotting practices, see F. L. Sibthorp, "The History of the Illinois Grange," *The Illinois Granger* (1956); and Lowell K. Dyson, *Farmers' Organizations*, *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of American Institutions* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), 145-146, 285.

14. Citation from the *Western Farmer*, 14 June 1873, in the *Oshkosh City Times*, 18 June 18 1873. For second quote, see *Prairie Farmer*, 25 October 1873, 339.

15. For "oily" agents, see *Prairie Farmer*, 25 October 1873, 339. For other comments on exclusive territorial agencies, see *Oshkosh City Times*, 23 July 1873. For effects of lowered prices, see letter from J. Andrews of Rockford, Illinois in *Prairie Farmer*, 25 February 1871, 57. For communal cost savings, citing a store in Sedalia, Missouri, see John G. Wells, *The Grange Illustrated; or Patron's Hand-Book in the Interests of the Patrons of Husbandry* (New York: Grange Publishing Co., 1874), 172.

16. For family stability in the prairie, see John Mack Faragher, "Open Country Community: Sugar Creek, Illinois, 1820-1850" in Steven Hahn and Jonathan Prude, eds., *The Countryside in the Age of Capitalist Transformation: Essays in the Social History of Rural America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 233-258; for visiting patterns, see Jane Marie Pedersen, "The Country Visitor: Patterns of Hospitality in Rural Wisconsin, 1880-1925," *Agricultural History* 58 (July 1984): 347-364.

For quote of Mercer County (IL) farmer, see *Chicago Tribune*, 15 September 1873, 4.

17. For a skillful overview of "progressivism," see David P. Thelan, *The New Citizenship: Origins of Progressivism in Wisconsin, 1885-1900* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1972), Introduction. Remarkably, grange efforts involved in all three of the historiographical "camps" defined by Thelan: progressivism rooted in the class and status of a social group, that based on national interest groups by professional associations, and the progressivism of national elites hoping to suppress competing groups.

18. *Chicago Tribune*, 23 August 1873, 8. For consumer focus, see Thelan, *The New Citizen*, 2; Mayhew, "A Reappraisal of the Causes of Farm Protest," 467-469.

19. For antebellum agrarian radicalism, see Ronald P. Formisano and William G. Shade, "The Concept of Agrarian Radicalism," *Mid-America* 52, No. 1 (January, 1970): 3-30; and Woods, *Knights of the Plow*, Introduction. For a good example of this ethos expressed, see Isaac Beeson in Introduction, in Isaac and Benjamin B., *Papers, 1870-1897*, Box XI, Folder 9, InSL. For a similar stance, see *The Chicago Times*, 28 May 1873, 3.

20. Two other useful terms, "democratic coordination" of the marketplace and the "republican origins" of the Grange are incorporated within "rural consumer ethos." Keillor's use of the term "democratic coordination" was operated in opposition to Alfred Chandler's description of "administrative coordination." Thomas Woods' use of republicanism ably describes the communal ideology of the Grange. Other popular terms, such as Daniel Boorstin's "community of consumers," fail to develop the conflicting nature of the underlying themes of community and individualism, as described in this chapter.

21. The central role of consumption in the ideology of large groups is not a new concept. This subtle yet powerful organizing force makes up the core of several very important works in U.S. urban history. See Roy Rosenzweig, *Eight Hours For What We Will: Workers and Leisure in an Industrial City, 1870-1920* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Dana Frank, *Purchasing Power: Consumer Organizing, Gender, and the Seattle Labor Movement, 1919-1929* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994); and Andrew Heinze, *Adapting to Abundance: Jewish Immigrants, Mass Consumption, and the Search for American Identity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990).

22. For a discussion of modern consumerism, see the Introduction. See also Leach, *Land of Desire*; Atherton, *Main Street on the Middle Border*; Strasser, *Satisfaction Guaranteed*; and Tedlow, *New and Improved*.

23. For an analysis of utopian societies, see Ronald Walters, *American Reformers, 1815-1860* (New York: Wang and Hill, 1978), 39-75. For contemporary discussions of the movement in the mid-nineteenth century, see E. B. Bassett, *The Model Town; or, The Right and Progressive Organization of Industry for the Production of Material and Moral Wealth* (Cambridge: Printed for the author, 1869).

24. For example see, C. R. Hoffer, "Co-operation as a Culture Pattern," 153-158; Hoffer, "Services of Rural Trade Centers," *Social Forces* 10 (October 1931): 66-75; and Steven James Keillor, "Democratic Coordination in the Marketplace," Chapter 6, 526.

25. For Fourth of July example, in 1844, Clinton County, Illinois, see the *Prairie Farmer*, 4 July 1844, 181. For first quote, see *Transactions of the Illinois State Agricultural Society*, January 1862, Vol. 1, 21. For Club membership, see Buck, *The Granger Movement*, 74; and *The Country Gentleman*, 19 January 1860, 49.

26. For example of discounts, see *The Chicago Times*, 17 September 1873, 7. For \$2,000 figure and ISFA slogan, see Mr. Gorham, of Fulton, Illinois in ISFA, *Proceedings*, (1873), 18. For formation of the ISFA, see Dyson, *Farmers' Organizations*, 145-146; *The Joliet Signal*, 20 January 1874, 4; *The Prairie Farmer*, 30 October 1869, 353.

27. See May 3, 1873, May 13, 1873, and December 13, 1873, in Elk Prairie Farmers' Club (Elkville, Illinois), *Minutes, 1873-1874*, ISHL. For Association members, see ISFA, *Proceedings*, (1873), 1-2, 18.

28. For the utilitarian nature of the clubs, see *Prairie Farmer*, 4 March 1871, 65. For personal improvements, see remarks of M. L. Dunlap of the Savoy Farmers' Club, Champaign County, Illinois in ISFA, *Proceedings*, (1873), 19. For manufacturer's quote, see *The Prairie Farmer*, 9 November 1873, 355; and *The Chicago Times*, 29 March 1872, 7.

29. For information on Kelley, see Oliver H. Kelley, *Origins and Progress of the Order of the Patrons of Husbandry in the United States: A History from 1866 to 1873* (Philadelphia: J. A. Wagnseller, Publisher, 1875); and Woods, *Knights of the Plow*.

30. For citation, see *The Chicago Tribune*, 13 October 1873, 7.
31. For letter, dated July 12, 1868, written from Itasca, Minnesota, see Kelley, *Origins and Progress*, 112-113. For protection, see *Ibid.*, 113-114; and *Prairie Farmer*, 18 July 1868, 20.
32. For Minnesota experience, see Kelley, *Origins and Progress*, 183-186.
33. For first quote, see *Oshkosh City Times*, 22 September 1868. For second, see ISFA, *Proceedings*, (1874), 5.
34. For Wisconsin efforts, see Gerald LeRoy Prescott, "Yeoman, Entrepreneurs, and Gentry: A Comparative Study of Three Wisconsin Agricultural Organizations, 1873-1893," Ph. D. diss. University of Wisconsin, 1968, 58-78, 107-154; and Miller, *Railroads and the Granger Laws*, 91, 140-160, 166. For Illinois and Indiana, see Buck, *The Granger Movement*, Chapter 3, 98; Dyson, *Farmers' Organizations*, 145-146; *Chicago Evening Journal*, 24 December 1873, 1. For a critical, contemporary review of this fusion, see *The Chicago Tribune*, 30 January 1877, 4.
35. For Smith citation, see *The Prairie Farmer*, 1 November 1873, 346. For meeting, related to Wisconsin granger Joseph Osborn by his friend William Orlidge, in a letter dated 16 September 1875, see Joseph H. Osborn, *Papers, 1873-1877*, Owned by Oshkosh Public Museum, copy at SHSW.
36. For first quote, see the *Ripon Free Press*, 1 September 1875. For second quote, see Wells, *Patrons' Hand-Book*, 163
37. For dangers, see *The Prairie Farmer*, 5 March 1873, 105. Similar warnings were issued from Wisconsin farmers, see *Oshkosh City Times*, 30 April 1873. For second quote, see *The Chicago Evening Journal*, 24 December 1873, 1. In Wisconsin, Patrons feared that such active politics would affect the very newspapers which they chose to publicize their movement, see *Oshkosh City Times*, 23 July 1873, and 30 July 1873.
38. For quote, see *The Prairie Farmer*, 13 December 1873, 395. For other examples, see *Ibid.*, 6 January 1872, 4; 26 October 1872, 337; 22 February 1873, 59; *The Chicago Times*, 22 May 1873, 3 ; and March 2, 1875 in Winnebago County, *Minutes*, ISHL.
39. For first quote, see *The Prairie Farmer*, 24 February 1872, 60. See also *Ibid.*, 12 October 1872, 326. D. Wyatt Aiken, *The Grange; Its Origins, Progress, and Educational*

Purposes (Philadelphia: J. A. Wagenseller. 1884), 26-27. For examples of Smiths' effect on local grangers, see *Prairie Farmer*, 5 March 1873, 105; 19 March 1873, 123; 30 August 1873, 275-276.

40. For Lapham quote, see *The Prairie Farmer*, 26 April 1873, 131. For second citation, see *Ibid.*, 25 October 1873, 339.

41. For Indiana citation, dated January 26, 1875, see *Indiana State Grange, Minutes of the Executive Committee, Indiana State, Patrons of Husbandry, 1874-1893*, InSL. For second quote, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 7 March 1874, 5.

42. For bond contract and clerks, see *Minutes of the Executive Committee, Indiana State Grange*, 28 January 1875, InSL; for establishment of a depot, see "Report of Special Committee on establishing a depot for the distribution of merchandise," *Wisconsin State Grange, Patrons of Husbandry, Proceedings of the State Grange of Wisconsin at its Second Annual Session Held in Meyer's Hall, City of Janesville, January 20, 1874; Together with the Constitution and By-Laws of the State Grange, forms for Sub. Granges, and County Councils, etc* (Oshkosh, Wisconsin: Times Printing House, 1874), 15-18. See also the Champaign Grange No. 621, *Records, 1873-1877*, 7 October 1873, UI; and *Ibid.*, 19 August 1874; *Oshkosh Free Press*, 13 March 1872, 4; and grange minutes dated 5 March 1874 in Beeson, *Papers*, Box XI, Folder 1: 1870-1875, InSL.

43. For questioning of the need for a variety, see *Oshkosh City Times*, 12 March 1873; for success at musical instruments, see *Ibid.*, 28 January 1874, 1. For Grange author, see Wells, *Patrons' Hand-Book*, 171. For Osborn letter from James Cassidy, 19 March 1873, see Osborn, *Papers, 1873-1877*, Ownership by Oshkosh Public Museum, copy at SHSW.

44. See *The Prairie Farmer*, 25 October 1873, 339. For National Grange perspective, see Wells, *Patrons' Hand-Book*, 172, 175.

45. For women's roles, see Wells, *Patrons' Hand-Book*, 163; for their participation in the debates, see *Oshkosh City Times*, 2 July 1873.

46. For "tidal wave," see letter to J. G. Kingbury & Co., 8 March 1874, in Beeson, *Papers*, Box XI, Folder 1: 1870-1875, InSL. For role of purchasing agency, see *The Prairie Farmer*, 6 December 1873, 388; 12 December 1873, 395-396; and 3 January 1874, 4. For the figures on the rise of the Grange, see Dyson, *Farmers' Organizations*, 239; Buck, *The Granger*

Movement, 60-73.

47. For national figures, see *Ripon Free Press*, 25 November 1875. For social advantages to the larger community, see *The Prairie Farmer*, 11 January 1873, 11; 1 February 1873, 35; 25 February 1873, 57; and 29 November 1873, 377. See also ISFA, *Proceedings* (1874), 70; and Executive Committee of the Wisconsin State Grange, *Bulletin*, July 1877, SHSW.

48. See letter of John Samuel, Grange No. 222, St. Louis, MO. to Joseph Osborn, January 23, 1874 in Osborn, *Papers*, Box 1, Folder: 1855-1874, SHSW. For second citation, see Tyner letter to L. G. Kniffen, July 29, 1875, in Joseph H. Osborn, *Papers, 1873-1877*, Ownership by Oshkosh Public Museum, copy at SHSW. See also Jeannette E. Yates, *History of Fifty Years in Illinois State Grange, Prepared for the Golden Jubilee of the State Grange, held in Peoria, December 13-15, 1921*, SHSW.

49. For examples of inept mail handling, see Erastus Brown to Joseph Osborn, July 14, 1875, in Osborn, *Papers*, Owned by Oshkosh Public Museum, copy at SHSW; and letters from Alpheus Tyner to Isaac Beeson, April 27, 1876 and May 2, 1876, in Beeson, *Papers*, InSL. For examples of the overloaded agency, see April, 1875, and March, 1877 in the Executive Committee of the Wisconsin State Grange, *Bulletin*, SHSW. For record-keeping, see the "Account of the transactions of the agent of the Nettle Creek Grange No. 735 during the year 1876," in Beeson, *Papers*, InSL. In another account, December 10, 1876, when auditing the books of the Indiana State Grange, State Secretary C. C. Post noted that while the ledgers balanced the agent's books were "in the form of notes of the value of which I will not now express an opinion." In Indiana State Grange, *Minutes of the Executive Committee*, InSL. For examination of goods, see the Winnebago Pamona Grange, *Minutes*, ISHL.

50. See *Ripon Free Press*, 23 December 1875. For one state implement fund, see Wisconsin State Grange, *Proceedings* (1874), 5-8. For requests for funding to National Grange, see National Grange, *Patrons of Husbandry, Proceeding of the Ninth Session of the National Grange of the Patrons of Husbandry* (Louisville: John P. Morton & Co., 1875), 20. While most loans were made in order to provide for the manufacture of agricultural implements, many states used the funds for their purchasing activities, see Wisconsin State Grange, *Proceedings* (1876), 9. Steven Keillor makes this argument, the battle between the "democratic coordination" of Minnesota cooperatives and Chandler styled "administrative coordination" of the modern distribution system. See Keillor, "Democratic Coordination," Introduction.

51. For "private terms" see *The Prairie Farmer*, 21 June 1873, 195. For "trifling matter," offered by a farmer from Lovington, Illinois, see *Ibid.*, 26 July 1873, 235.
52. *Prairie Farmer*, 6 September 1873, 283. See also *Ibid.*, 21 June, 1873, 195; 26 July, 1873, 235; and 9 November, 1873, 355. The secrecy surrounding Grange purchasing activities often was at the behest of the manufacturers who granted them discounts, who feared the loss of business by non-members who were not eligible for the savings, see Osborn circular dated June 20, 1873 in Osborn, *Papers*, SHSW; and Wisconsin State Grange, *Confidential Price List, 1874* (Oshkosh, Wisconsin: Fernandez & O'Bryan, Printers, 1874), SHSW. For traditional fears of conspiracy and group secrecy, see David H. Bennett, *The Party of Fear: From Nativist Movements to the New Right in American History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988).
53. For Minnesota, see *Oshkosh City Times*, 29 October 1873. For "Open Terms" see *The Prairie Farmer*, 21 June 1873, 195.
54. M. E. Gustin, *An Expose of the Grangers: Containing the Opening and Closing Ceremonies of a Granger's Lodge; the Ceremonies of Initiation, and the Eight Degrees of the Order. Being an accurate description of one of the Greatest Monopolies of the Age* (Dayton, Ohio: Christian Publishing Association, 1875), 56-57, 70-72.
55. For Socialists' offer, see *Prairie Farmer*, 3 January 1874, 1. For repudiation of socialism, see *Oshkosh City Times*, 17 January 1872. Charles F. Adams, Jr., "The Granger Movement," *North American Review* 120 (April 1875), 395. In reply, see letter from S. M. Smith, 16 September 1875, to Osborn, in Osborn, *Papers, 1873-1877*, Ownership by Oshkosh Public Museum, copy at SHSW.
56. For Kniffen, see Circular, c. 1875 in Osborn, *Papers, 1873-1877*, Ownership by Oshkosh Public Museum, copy at SHSW. For club member, see Illinois State Farmers' Association, *Proceedings*, (1873), 18. See also *The Prairie Farmer*, 22 November 1873, 371.
57. For Frew's quote, see Illinois State Grange, *Proceedings of the State Grange of Illinois, at the Third Annual Session held in the City of Springfield, January 12, 13, 14, 15, and 16, A.D., 1875* (Chicago: Harry Fish, Book and Job Printer, 1875), 24.
58. *The Prairie Farmer*, 1 November 1873, 348.
59. For this democratic and administrative coordination, see Steven Keillor, Robert Wiebe, James Weinstein, Alfred

Chandler, and others cited above. For citation, see *The Chicago Times*, 1 March 1873, 7. See also the sarcastic tone of the *Chicago Evening Journal*, 21 April 1874, 1; who noted that a Sterling, Illinois grange "lately passed the following pithy resolution... [to do away with and] do no more purchasing from traveling agents."

CHAPTER 5
URBAN CONSUMER AND ADVERTISING
PATTERNS IN THE MIDWEST, 1865 - 1880

Early residents of Midwestern country towns had vivid recollections of the men who supplied their villages with consumer goods. The adventures of these teamsters reflected the tenuous nature with which many small town consumers were connected to the nation's distribution system. One such driver, Bill "Blossom" Stanley traversed the 120 miles separating his home in Pendleton, Indiana, and Cincinnati, the primary port of call, using teams of four to six horses. Residents recalled how draftsmen often "secured a row of bells ... over the shoulders of their horses, and as they moved these bells kept up a continued jingle which could be heard for quite a distance." The wagons carried a variety of agricultural articles for the Cincinnati market, including grains, beeswax, ginseng, dried fruit, feathers, and "many other products of the country." Pendleton merchants used the empty wagons returning from this seasonal pilgrimage for the drayage of their consumer stocks.

Yet, on one memorable occasion Pendleton consumers waited weeks for "Blossom's" chimes to signify the coming of their consumer wares. While in Cincinnati, Stanley found

other profitable work that delayed his commission. A resident noted that there was "a scheduled time to make the trip, which arrived, but no Blossom -- days passed but still no tidings. Stores ran out of tea, coffee, sugar and other necessities but still no tidings. It became a town trouble with nearly all on short rations or foreign goods."

Blossom's return proved to be a fitting reason for the local denizens to celebrate. His caravan "was greeted by almost the whole population of Pendleton. The crowd, to expedite the unloading, all helped and the load was soon in the stores to be distributed." At the advent of other teamsters, also timed to the seasonal harvests of their neighboring farmers, prospective village patrons often "rush[ed the wagons] to see the quantity of new goods." These biannual odysseys confirmed the consumer dependence that all antebellum rural residents had toward the distribution network.¹

Not surprisingly then, the narrative surrounding the development of consumer practices in country towns is similar to that expressed by farmers. Indeed, their position in relation to the distribution network was comparable to that of commercial farmers and agents. The captivating economic conditions of larger regional cities, such as Chicago, St. Louis, and Cincinnati enticed farmers to sell their produce there, and gave rise to these cyclical restocking operations. As early as 1833, one Chicago settler

remarked that the greatest trade "seems to be with the inhabitants in the vicinity of the Wabash river ...they come down with large covered wagons drawn by three or four yoke of oxen ...loaded with wheat which they exchange for salt." Wabash Avenue, in Chicago, quietly notes the powerful economic links between the great cities and the Midwestern hinterland.²

Considerable research indicates that the rapid technological change following the Civil War both facilitated and taxed the consumer practices of rural Americans. Rail and telegraph facilities made it possible for the speedy transmission of information and goods, thereby reducing both the price to customers and the risk to providers. Merchants, freed from seasonal teamsters, found they could do booming business simply by keeping the goods going out the door at a brisk pace. One retailer was highlighted in the *Oshkosh City Times* for his timely application of rail and wire. The paper noted that the new "secret of his trade [was] quick sales." Such a startling pace of change led to equally amazing growth in the economic prosperity of many Midwestern towns.³

Town merchants and consumers were also influenced by the modernization of the distribution network. Railroads, in particular, replaced the labors of men such as Bill Stanley, and served to "equaliz[e] prices at a rapid rate, and so far as interior towns are concerned, they equaliz[ed] population

at a rate still greater." A contributor to *The Cultivator and Country Gentleman* judged that "every mile added to the railroads of Illinois contributes to the growth of Chicago and St. Louis,... it seems as if second and third rate towns suffered in the same proportion." Yet the unmistakable intensification of the rural consumer ethos in the farm community was less evident in town. While farmers took advantage of the "better prices and better opportunities" wrought by these changes, contributors were mute as to the opinions of urban retailers and their clients.⁴

In 1923, Thorstein Veblen analyzed the evolving economic position of the country town from 1865 and 1900, maintaining that small town communities were held together solely by the mutual desire to increase speculative property values through the process of "booming" and "boosting." Local merchants collaborated only to control the economic decisions -- both consuming and marketing -- of their agricultural brethren. Veblen stated,

the competition among business concerns engaged in any given line of traffic is kept well in hand by a common understanding, and the traders as a body direct their collective efforts to getting what can be got out of the under-lying farm population. It is on this farm-trade also, and on the volume and increase of it, past and prospective, that the real-estate values of the town rest. ... Quite as a matter of course, the business of the town arranges itself under such regulations and usages that it foots up a competition, not between business concerns, but between town and country, between traders and customers.

In effect, Veblen concluded, rural towns formed local consumer monopolies that exacted their profits entirely from

the pockets of farmers. Rather than fashioning a demand-based consumer ideology, retailers hoped to retain their traditional supply-based authority over local merchandise markets.⁵

Critics of Veblen's position noted that these monopolies were rarely absolute, but the fact remains that urban consumers and retailers were in open conflict with many of their farm neighbors from 1865 to 1880. Yet, with such similar economic and technological changes -- what some might call deterministic change -- how did their experiences differ? Further, how did small town boosterism affect the Grange sponsored agrarian consumer movement? What were the underlying personal incentives of small town consumers? Finally, did advertisements proffer farmers an attractive alternative to agrarian consumerism, or did they even recognize farmers' stated worries?⁶

The answers to these question lie both in the retailing practices of rural villages, and the published appeals for patronage made by the larger population of regional businesses. The two small Wisconsin towns of Ripon and Oshkosh ably represent the transformations affecting urban consumer culture. Newspaper advertisements from the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Indianapolis Journal*, the *Milwaukee Daily News*, the *Ripon Free Press*, and the *Oshkosh City Times* manifest the merchandising trends by Midwestern suppliers. Together, these factors determined whether the rural consumer ethos

found supporters beyond the farm.⁷

Urban consumers and suppliers were distressed by the post-war recession, the depression in 1873, and the global effects of currency retraction. As with commercial farmers, the withdrawal of greenbacks and precious credit forced municipal residents to re-evaluate their traditional consumer practices. Town merchants forswore the use of account credit -- a practice that developed "[t]o such an extent ... that many who [had] the money in their pockets or the bank [still] request[ed] it as a matter of course" -- and insisted on routine cash payments by their patrons. One Ripon merchant revealed for his clients the new influences that were felt by the modern distribution network. He wrote that the "matter, in a nutshell is this: the moment you purchase... you personally owe for not only the original material, but you owe for all the labor necessary to produce the article as well as the cost of transporting it from an eastern market." The retailer asked patrons to use commercial farming as their paradigm: "our prices are marked by the [same] standard that the farmer marks his wheat when he brings it into the city -- i.e. cash."⁸

To facilitate this conversion to a cash economy, traders employed the "one-price" system for their consumables. R. L. Biggers Dry-Good Emporium, of Oshkosh,

was lauded by that city's paper for marking all goods "in plain figures, and there being only *one price*, it does not take long to make a trade. This feature alone should recommend the establishment, as it stops all dickering." The proprietors of the Boston Store, in Ripon, attributed their sudden success to the fact that they "purchase and sell for cash, thus gaining the large discount which money always commands in wholesale dry goods circles, and free from the obligation to add to their prices the losses which the credit system always incurs." Clearly, credit worries were collective experiences by both farm and town inhabitants.⁹

As with tightened credit, village residents also shared with their farming cousins a critical view toward territorial agents. However, unlike farmers who generally saw the exclusive rights of the middlemen as an infringement upon their economic liberties, village commentators saw drummers simply as foreign competitors. Their admonishments in the local papers were directed against consumers who falsely assumed these salesman provided greater savings or better quality goods. Retailers constantly assured readers that the Chicago agents usually were "paid large salaries... their expenses [were] enormous, and it is all paid by the parties who buy the goods that these fellows sell." Travel expenses, valises, and fine clothing were all extravagances that country patrons were "taxed to support" through these inflated prices. In other words, an agent's custom of

travelling to the farm residences to make his sales was the central focus of their complaints. Unlike farmers, town retailers were not concerned that territorial jobbers were being granted exclusive retail monopolies by big city suppliers.¹⁰

The rhetoric surrounding these attacks took on normative tones, especially when related to the farmer-agent contacts. The *Ripon Free Press* used its front page to delineate the "guerilla" tactics employed by agents of the Chicago-based Harper Brothers, a grocery dealer. Invalidating the right of an individual to choose their suppliers, editors reasoned that the trade with agents was justified only if it was first proved that "our merchants were swindling the farmers." The representatives were said to have spent "lots of money for hotel bills, livery, and whiskey," in a region noted for its active prohibition, "and if they get wages in addition it would take mighty large sales to simple pay expenses." Undoubtedly, retailers believed it to be a foolish and expensive practice to meet the farmer at his home. The article concluded by focusing its wrath not on the Chicago firm -- which they viewed simply as immoral -- but rather on the treasonable farmers who patronized them,

Some farmers in this section are said to have bought large bills, paying for the goods in advance. They take many chances in such transactions. [Harper Brother Agents] report that their sales in these parts have been larger than in any place that they have visited. We regard this as about the worst compliment that could

be paid our farmers. At the present time, more than any other, can groceries be bought of our home men at the closest figures ever known. If our farmers want to buy goods for cash, they will find prices as low for the same goods, and any living man can sell them. It is wrong to patronize guerrillas who pay no taxes and who are unknown, when it is so easy to find home dealers who are square.

Again, town suppliers demonstrated their opposition to the newly forged consumer ideology of many farmers.¹¹

All told, the rapid and influential changes in the distribution network, the scarcity of cash and affordable credit, and the general antagonism felt toward many remote agents provided both farmers and country town residents similar consumer experiences during these years. Seemingly, these factors provided an opportunity to unite around an allied front in order to deflect the onrushing sovereignty of the great cities. Yet, as the last example augured, urban suppliers either would not, or could not join in the consumer-based efforts of the Grange. In fact, rather than allowing shoppers greater control over their purchasing decisions, local retailers curtailed these efforts. Rallying around the concept of geographic solidarity, or boosterism, urban citizens fostered a provincial, *enclave* mentality that worked in direct competition to the ideology of rural consumerism.

Boosters in Ripon and Oshkosh attacked the encroachment by Chicago and Milwaukee based firms using this parochial justification. As early as 1868, residents raged against the fact that the "greater portion of the immense trade of

central Wisconsin, goes over Chicago roads, to Chicago markets, at Chicago rates, to receive Chicago prices. It is time Wisconsin looked a little to her own interests."

Residents believed that protectionism might retain many of their dwindling manufacturing jobs, and thereby reduce their spiraling dependence upon these regional entrêpôts.¹²

Boosterism also subsumed individual consumer demands in favor of the communal rush for town improvement. As Veblen identified, this "community" was pressed to increase speculative property values. In this way, village retailers claimed a "natural" right to exercise absolute dominion over the consumer dollars of a locale. This entitlement superseded any conflicting consumer ideologies or even the modest pursuit of lower prices for similar goods through Chicago firms. Ripon's editors used this logic to conclude that big city wholesalers dealing directly with the public were "swindlers in one way or another." If they did not sell substandard goods, then certainly their "work [was] antagonistical to the interest of every home trader; [for] they do not aid in keeping up a town, do not pay any taxes or sustain any schools; they do not patronize hotels and livery stables, but further than this they damage[d] every trader in the city" by depriving local merchants "the trade that *naturally belongs to them*." Small town consumerism was merely a means toward a greater end: local boosterism.¹³

Oshkosh merchants echoed their approval of this retail

protectionism. They propagated the postulate that the "greatest mistake made by a community, is in not patronizing home mechanics and home trade." Any group that combined to "go abroad for their furniture, their boots and shoes, their dry goods, or other articles of luxury or necessity" was deemed a betrayer to this warped sense of town solidarity. The doctrine was so biased in favor of the supplier that even the guarantee of cost savings to individuals was "not [a] good argument, even if true." One summary, exonerating the protective stance posited by town merchants, cuts to the heart of the matter. Inadvertently foreshadowing the themes of William Jennings Bryan's "Cross of Gold" speech, which garnered The Great Commoner the Populist Presidential nomination, the *Ripon Free Press* argued that "[i]t is more to the interest of the farmers in this section to have a city here than any other class. Blot out our mercantile houses and you blot out half the value of your farms and produce."¹⁴

The conflict between urban and farm-based consumers was absolute. On the one hand, farmers turned to organized purchasing strategies which ensured the protection of their understood consumer rights. The Springfield correspondent to *The Cultivator and Country Gentleman* wrote in 1869 that,

There is a radical change taking place in the relation of town and country in central Illinois, and I presume it to be common over the whole west and the entire country. ... [The farmers'] calamity of high taxes and the probability of low prices have warned the farming community to husband their time, and reduce their

expenses, and the towns have felt and will continue to feel the change. I believe there are today many houses, stores, and warehouses [bankrupted] in the principle towns of Central Illinois, than there were [formed] the whole six years from 1861 to 1867. I don't know any branch of business which has increased for these three years, but the business of banking.

The "producer" rhetoric that accompanied this debate only served to mask the fact that the conflicting concept of individual consumption was a the root of these troubles.¹⁵

The most direct evidence of the deepening fray between rural consumer strategies came in January, 1878, with the opening of a Grange cooperative store in downtown Ripon. The running commentary in the *Free Press*, a paper supportive to the Patrons of Husbandry, clarifies the perceptual differences between these two groups. For a start, town dwellers seemed to indicate that farmers had wandered *accidentally* into the consumer realm. One writer paternalistically remarked, "[i]t seems so difficult to make the farmer understand that he today is better fixed than any class of traders, and that the farther he gets from his *legitimate business*, the worse it will be for him in the end. Still, it is better on all that they take a few lessons under that rigid old school master: experience." Discounting the years of seasoning gained through the acquisition of capital goods, the *Free Press* concluded that "no man or set of men can be good farmers and good merchants at the same time. Either of the callings will afford a man plenty of business if he tends to it properly." To the urban

sensibility the conflicting tenets of the rural consumer ethos -- cooperation and individual advantage -- were in many ways "a dangerous experiment of riding two horses, each going in different directions."¹⁶

The real issue underlying the village concern, and masked by their ignorance of what knowledge commercial farmers had gained in the previous decades, was the competing communal goals of husbandmen and other civilians. Merchants believed that there was "a degree of selfishness, or to use a farm expression, it looks a little hoggish" for the Grange to promote marketing reforms for their produce "and in turn say to the [local] retailer of clothes or ready-made clothing, 'we buy everything of the factory and have no use for you.'" Such an effort failed to compensate the merchant for his fundamental asset to the rural town: community improvements. Despite aiding farmers through the allocation of credit, the periodical held that town dealers were "also busy in pushing the various enterprises in the place. Churches must be built, colleges founded, railroads encouraged, public highways thrown up, and a thousand and one and one things which were to benefit" the town of Ripon.

The disagreement soon turned personal. Citing their belief that the Grange store was an "injustice" to local boosters, the *Free Press* accused the outlying farm community of freeloading off the good nature of the town fathers. Again providing a rationale that was truly antithetical to

the later position of the Populist movement, farmers were cited for their reliance upon the wise development of the rural town. The cost of this boosting,

always made a big drain upon the purse of the merchant while that of the farmer were only lightly tapped. While this was going on, the farmer was unconsciously gaining in wealth by the enhancement of his property [due to] the railroads, factories, schools and colleges, [that] the mercantile people had labored so earnestly for, [such actions] had not only increased the value of these farms in the vicinity, but they had likewise increased the price of all marketable commodities. To this state of things the farmers suddenly awoke, and found themselves well to-do. Few farmers today owe their financial success to their superior management, but more to the fact that they were here when the tide of wealth came in.

This paternalistic attitude by suppliers was formed from the misconceptions of farm experience, competing beliefs in the nature of rural community, and these personal attacks. They were combined to justify and rationalize retail protectionism.

Underlying these tensions between suppliers and the Grange was the divergent consumer patterns expressed by town and country residents. The origins of farmers' predilections for publicly evaluated, low-priced, quality goods have been explored above. During these same years evidence suggests that small town consumers were turning away from such communal norms and embracing competitive consumer concepts such as "fashion trends," "conspicuous consumption," and what T. J. Jackson Lears called the "therapeutic ethos" of consumption. Town newspapers increasingly berated their farm acquaintances for their lack of discrimination in making

their purchasing preferences. One Oshkosh humorist described male farmers as simple, "round, stalwart, [and] comfortable animal[s]." Farm women, when they weren't occupied by "raising children and chickens, *ad infinitum*," were often seen about with "the same frowsy head [with] which she rose in the morning, darting hither and thither for what is wanted." The clash of these consumer sensibilities is seen most clearly in the development of metropolitan purchasing patterns following the Civil War.¹⁷

While historians generally agree that the modern, urban mass-consumer society was formed from 1865 to 1900, understanding the nature of this revolution has been problematic.¹⁸ Interpretations by Warran Susman and Christopher Lasch suggest that the pursuit for material goods has largely resulted in an ideological clash between "traditional" communal values, which resented change, and the various forces, ranging from radical socialism to reactionary Social Darwinism, which promulgated a faith in consumption.¹⁹ In short, many saw the conflict as a contest between community and society -- the age old debate between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, first forwarded by Ferdinand Tönnies in the nineteenth century.²⁰ But this ideological reading of the process of consumption left only the determined impact of modernization as an explanation. As such, it results in a stark dichotomy between disciples of tradition and modernity. In reality, divergent consumer

paths were taken by many different groups. Americans, particularly in the twentieth century, expressed beliefs about the role that consumerism played in their lives that were distinctive to their perceived group status.²¹

The individual -- as the entity which either embraces or rejects group affiliation -- is the proper domain from which historians can profitably explore the consequences of the new mass market. Noting that the era was one which saw the "dawn of [consumer] self-consciousness," researchers have posited a number of reasonable interpretations to account for the rise in consumer activity. Ranging from the pursuit of a fashionable, "consumer lifestyle," to the need for their purchases to provide a "therapeutic" salve to assuage modern alienation, individuals demonstrated their relevance to the escalating behavioral change.²²

The most obvious example of the evolution of individual perceptions was the department store. William Leach and others have shown that these new emporiums, which were found from New York to San Francisco, coalesced the nebulous group and individual consumer ideologies through the private experience of "refined" purchasing. Their extraordinary concern with product presentation made consumption a tangible ordeal. This consumer training altered the process of acquisition from a logical, economic activity to an emotional preference for selected goods. Merchandise was demonetized, and buying became an end to itself as the means

to achieve happiness. In this sense, individual consumers were molded by the process of urban consumption into communities of like minded shoppers through these -- obviously manipulated -- trips through the store.²³

The fixation with experiential consumption was evident in the descriptions of local department stores recounted by Wisconsin editors. The publisher of the *Oshkosh City Times*, George Hyer, gave subscribers a tour of the window displays of their town's largest firms. Dimmicks' array was "a sight... with their endless variety of beautiful things... Isn't that window a picture!" He gave similar recommendations for a variety of other firms. Often his fanfare was not needed. Once, as Hyer passed the firm of Bigger & Hills, he reported that he had merely become "one of the crowd that had gathered in front of the store in admiration of the magnificent display made in its windows.

Those great windows set deep in large panes of glass and filled in the most artistic manner with the fancy articles that give such charm to dress -- the laces, embroideries, the silks, and cloves and artistic patterns, in all shades of color, beautifully lighted and shaded, by a jet of gas, thrown by reflectors in such a manner as to give the whole the appearance of a picture, useful and ornamental things displayed in the most tempting manner. We have seldom seen a better display.

Hyer noted that these visceral reactions gave local consumers "an index to a store... in whose cases, are displayed the excellent goods of which such promise is given in the windows."²⁴

The interior spaces of these bazaars were equally

spectacular to the city consumer. Jacob Fowle's store, in downtown Oshkosh, offered shelves of "prettily designed stone china ware, gold rimmed china sets... show cases of silver ware and of cutlery... and plated ware of every kind," all "fit for a palace," but displayed for this more provincial audience. In Ripon, new stores that combined the colored glass and gas-lights common to department stores inspired one observer to note that the merchandise "shine[s] like pure gold in the elegant new store. Their friends will enjoy these new premises, which they are invited to do."²⁵

Nor were the display windows and fine goods the only experiences upon which shoppers seized. Often, the activity of the store itself was enough to spark the imagination of patrons. For example, R. L. Biggers Dry Goods Emporium occupied a four story building in downtown Oshkosh, and employed eighteen clerks who were perpetually busy with customers. A visit led one purchaser to exclaim that the "whole establishment is a 'bee hive' from top to bottom." Climbing the central staircase, which also allowed light into the lower floors, the patron observed that "[t]o look down this hole in the floor, the moving mass of humanity on the first floor resemble a race of pygmies in size, coming and going." The activity of the store, combined with the allure of its displays made department stores unique in their propagation of an enlivening consumer experience.²⁶

Clearly then, village consumers, charmed by the

dynamism of the department store, were no more likely to support the tenets of rural consumerism than were town merchants. While they may have shared similar economic misfortunes, such as tight credit and a general downturn in regional markets, their purchasing practices suggest that they had polar interpretations of individual consumption. While farmers based this capacity on personal fiscal savings and a greater control over the availability of goods, city dwellers increasingly relied on the experiences of shopping to provide their lives with a larger meaning. In fact, by the turn of the century, many Americans would come to define their sense of belonging by the very goods which they consumed. Lacking similar purchasing experiences, towns dwellers failed to join with their rural cousins in support of a unified consumer ethos.

While small town consumers and suppliers frustrated Grange efforts to form a unified rural voice by spurning their ideology, it was unclear whether urban sensibilities were being broadcast to the farm community. As the managerial control over consumption grew, the practice of promoting their unique style also spread. The newspaper advertisements of the era provide trenchant testimony of the intent of these metropolitan suppliers toward these prospective customers.

Advertisements are, at their core, a dialog between consumers and suppliers. Firms construct their ads in order

to communicate with potential patrons and buyers. The response by consumers, in the form of sales, indicates their receptivity to such claims and promotions. As historical sources, advertisements provide important indicators of the subtle changes in the relationship between the supplier and consumer. Yet often the sheer volume of periodical advertisements preclude a systematic analysis. Historians of the Gilded Age, more often than not, utilize ads merely to highlight other economic relationships. This lack of direct evidence -- regarding both descriptive information and the changing trends in advertising -- has led to significant deficiencies in our understanding of post-war consumer practices.²⁷

Contemporary advertisers were not ignorant of the effectiveness of the medium. While newspaper ads in the first half of the century were often "dreary, matter of fact reading... completely devoid of all the customer appeal of modern advertising," those following the war began to show some ingenuity. For example, one Oshkosh vendor placed an ad showing a herd of runaway steers trampling through town. The firm promised that they would go "through the grocery market with a rush -- a regular bull team, one that can't be 'bucked off the bridge.' See how they (the bulls) come in, snorting, puffing and blowing! a regular jollification among the people!" Such vivid imagery caught the attention of consumers. Newspapers, which once had relied solely on

circulation revenue, began to bank on their advertising receipts.²⁸

Midwestern newspapers made a point of calling to the attention of their subscribers the advertising advantages of their publications. The *Milwaukee Bulletin* reported that two thousand copies of the daily was circulated "at the hotels, private residences, theater, places of amusement, steamboat docks, railway depots, street car and railway trains, making it the best medium in the city for advertising." Many gave examples of successful advertising campaigns recently concluded by local businesses. Other printers took the opposite tack with their patrons, the *Milwaukee Enterprise* gave a primer on "How to Dwarf a Town." The editors facetiously called on merchants to "[f]ail to advertise or in any way support your paper, so that folks aboard may not know whether any business is going on in that town or not." In either case, the message was the same: in order to reach consumer demand businesses must advertise. As the Oshkosh City Times wrote, "the surest way of getting [sales was] by asking for it through the advertising and local columns of their papers."²⁹

Yet, oddly, editors of the period rarely drew attention to the burgeoning consumer demand of the countryside. Given the notice paid to the Grange in most Midwestern periodicals, it is curious that little narrative information is found in newspapers that might reflect how advertisers

viewed the expression of this farm ideology. In the article from the Oshkosh paper cited above, editors did mention that local businesses were interested in extending their trade up the river, but made no mention of their efforts to address the expressed needs of farmers in their immediate vicinity. Editorials and descriptions within the papers allude to the existence of a "wholesale trade" component to many stores. But little mention of these services were made in the advertisements.³⁰

A detailed analysis of the advertising trends in both small town and large city newspapers reveals the differences between rural consumerism and the intent of urban suppliers. An examination of 4,117 advertisements from five regional periodicals published between 1863 and 1878 highlights the stated location of advertisers, the type of firms that utilized the services of these publications, and the consumers that these ads targeted (see Appendix 1). The newspaper ads, taken from the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Milwaukee Daily News*, the *Indianapolis Journal*, the *Ripon Free Press*, and the *Oshkosh City Times*, vividly indicate that agrarian consumerism was largely ignored by large and small town suppliers.

The general trends found in regional newspaper advertisements show both similarities and discrepancies between Chicago merchants and their neighbors. For example, the relative location of advertisers in these Midwestern

periodicals was consistent (TABLE 2). In both large and small markets, roughly four out of five advertisers were based in the same town as the newspaper. The category "other" refers to advertisers that originated from outside the state.

TABLE 2. LOCATION OF ADVERTISER STATED IN REGIONAL NEWSPAPERS, 1863-1878

Advertiser Location	Regional Newspaper				
	Ripon	Chicago	Ind.	Milw.	Oshkosh
Hometown	68.7%	80.5%	79.2%	79.1%	84.3%
Chicago	7.8	N/A	1.3	2.8	4.3
In State	2.1	0.7	0.0	0.3	3.1
Other	22.3	18.7	19.5	17.8	8.3
N =	332	2,214	395	393	783

The comparison hints that the smaller towns of Ripon and Oshkosh suffered more severely from predation by Chicago firms than the larger, more diverse economies of Indianapolis and Milwaukee, the physically closest market outside of Chicago (see shaded areas). The instate competition, primarily from Milwaukee, was also much larger than that faced by advertisers in Chicago, Indianapolis, and Milwaukee. Small town retailers, struggling to retain their shrinking economic hinterlands faced a greater challenge from these urban firms, and no doubt were less amenable to the purchasing arrangements of farm denizens.

This contrast pales by comparison to the different

types of advertisers in the regional publications, a relationship that highlights Chicago's position as regional metropolis. The distribution of the type of advertiser in the Indianapolis *Journal* and Milwaukee *Daily News* was similar to that in the smaller town's journals (see TABLE 3). Unlike Chicago, the regional papers were dominated by local retailers. This fact supports the aggressive, oppositional stance taken by many small town merchants toward their rural cousins who attempted to circumvent this critical node on the distribution network. Significantly, the percentage of retail advertisers increases as the size of the town decreases.

TABLE 3. TYPE OF ADVERTISER STATED IN REGIONAL NEWSPAPERS, 1863-1878

Type of Advertiser	Regional Newspaper				
	Ripon	Chicago	Ind.	Milw.	Oshkosh
Retailer	58.7%	28.7%	51.9%	51.9%	60.0%
Manuf.	21.4	20.8	27.1	30.0	20.8
Agent	5.7	28.4	17.2	13.2	10.0
Other	14.2	22.0	3.8	4.8	9.2
N =	332	2,214	395	393	783

A second noteworthy comparison was in regard to agents. Like retailers, the appearance of middlemen in this public consumer dialog seemed tied to the relative size of the local economy. If local conditions were more diverse, as was the case in Chicago, Indianapolis, and Milwaukee, jobbers

found the urban newspaper a profitable forum in which to do business. By contrast, the *Oshkosh City Times* and *Ripon Free Press* were remarkable for their relative lack of advertisements by agencies. Again, this notion supports the position stated earlier that small town retailers were not amenable to the operational aspects of the new rural consumer ethos.³¹

TABLE 4. TYPE OF CONSUMER TARGETED IN REGIONAL NEWSPAPERS, 1863-1878

Type of Consumer	Regional Newspaper				
	Ripon	Chicago	Ind.	Milw.	Oshkosh
None	88.6%	53.2%	99.2%	96.9%	95.7%
Manuf.	0.6	7.7	0.3	0.0	0.4
Agent	3.9	23.8	0.3	0.5	2.0
Other	6.9	15.3	0.3	2.5	2.0
N =	332	2,214	395	393	783

A third examination was made of the type of consumer targeted in the ads. The advertising profession had yet to discover the subtleties of mass market segmentation -- for example, there is no focus on white males of a certain age -- but, with caution, a coarse differentiation is justified (TABLE 4). Again, Chicago advertisers prove themselves to be distinct. In every regional paper except the *Tribune*, advertisements generally failed to identify a particular consumer for their product. These pitches, with a targeted consumer categorized as "none," were broadly cast to all

potential clients. The high percentage of this class suggests that it was rare for small town merchants to seek out particular groups of consumers.

The demands of rural patrons were disregarded by these promoters. Whether by ignorance or design, farmers received scant attention from the Midwestern dailies. Only 41 of the 4,117 advertisements specifically addressed farmers. The smaller markets of Oshkosh and Ripon accounted for 24 of these ads. The products offered included seed catalogs, corn huskers, "hog ringers," milling services, and agricultural machinery. In Milwaukee, the four "farm" advertisements highlighted regional distribution services offered by local commission merchants. The sole ad placed in the Indianapolis *Journal* was not even a local supplier, but the Pittsburgh Plow Co. of Pennsylvania. Lastly, the 12 promotions published in the Chicago *Tribune* were dominated by simple announcements of county fairs and stock exhibits.³²

By contrast, Chicago had an active public market for specialists. Manufacturers, agents, and others were sought out in the pages of the *Tribune*. Products were offered tailored to meet the unique needs of these consumers. In one telling instance, the Chicago agency of William A. Butters & Company offered 400 dozen monkey wrenches to prospective remarketeers. This trading, removed from the direct needs of the average consumer, was typical of Chicago's singular place as the central city of the Great West. It directly

informed the active rural consumer that the established distribution network was not responsive to their demands.³³

Further comparisons between the location and type of advertisers and their intended clients illuminates the distinct attitudes of established suppliers. For example, the correlation between location and consumer targeted in all of the regional papers except Chicago demonstrates the local bias of advertisers (TABLE 5). Hometown suppliers paid little attention to segmenting their market based on the individual needs of their patrons. Of the 1,467 local ads, only 42 thought it meaningful to target their audience.

TABLE 5. COMPARISON OF ADVERTISER LOCATION AND CONSUMER TARGETED, REGIONAL NEWSPAPERS, 1863-1878

Advertiser Location	Consumer Targeted				N =
	"None"	Manuf.	Agent	"Other"	
Hometown	97.2%	>0.1%	0.5%	2.2%	1509
Other	88.6%	1.3%	5.6%	4.3%	394

The smaller population of remotely located advertisers were more likely to limit the appeal of their ads in order to catch the attention of specific consumers. 45 out of the 349 remote advertisers (or 11.2 percent vs. 2.7 percent of local vendors) believed they should seek their patrons directly. While remote advertisers were somewhat more specialized, their focus was inward toward the manufacturers and agents that provided the goods, rather than the ultimate

consumer of their merchandise.

Taken together, these comparisons provide some clues about the nature of small town suppliers of the region. As was the case with the statements by Ripon and Oshkosh retailers, newspaper advertisements reflected the local and often defensive biases of small town merchants. Suppliers to regional newspapers outside of Chicago concerned themselves not with meeting the stated needs of prospective clients, but rather in underbidding their cross-town rivals. While farmers offered both subtle and overt indicators (such as the Grange store in Ripon) that they were unhappy with the established order, small town retailers showed no indication that they were willing to change. The profusion of local, broadly cast advertisements makes manifest that these merchants were unresponsive to the modern demands of their farming neighbors.

The advertising trends in the *Chicago Tribune* are more complicated. Larger cities such as Chicago, St. Louis, and Cincinnati had traditionally been the focus of the distribution network. In fact, studies such as William Cronon's *Nature's Metropolis* suggest that these cities were the progenitors of the modern consumer market. Briefly recounted, Cronon structures his argument around three key examples. First, he examined the McCormick reaper works as a "case study in the growth of Chicago industry and the sale of manufactured goods to hinterland customers." McCormick

rapidly built his manufacturing empire by utilizing Chicago's access to rail transportation. Cronon believes that McCormick was the first manufacturer to transform Chicago's transportation resources into a commanding market position.³⁴ Secondly, Cronon contends that rural retailers became increasingly dependent on the Chicago suppliers who mimicked McCormick's achievement. The city came to dominate the hinterland consumer economy through the many agents who moved to supply rural retailers. He concludes that "[c]rucial to the success of all the new linkages among factories, wholesalers, retailers, and final customers was the ability of each to communicate with the others."³⁵ Finally, Cronon suggests that the catalogs issued by Montgomery Ward & Co., beginning in 1872, were the crowning archetype of the city's drive to capture these consumers. Ward's catalog "was only the purest expression of [the] much broader cultural tendency" described above.³⁶ Cronon sees a progression from McCormick to independent agent to Ward's catalog. Urban suppliers ultimately established a direct and lasting relationship with consumers in the hinterland.

Careful study of the *Chicago Tribune*, can reveal if the advertisers in this regional paper were indeed seeking to address the needs of the hinterland. The *Tribune* was first published as a daily in 1847. Dwarfed by the more popular *Chicago Democrat* and *Chicago Daily Journal*, the *Tribune* remained a minor publication until 1855 when Dr. Charles

Ray, J. C. Vaughn, and Joseph Medill acquired a controlling interest of the newspaper and committed it to the cause of the new Republican Party. With the success of the Party and the editorial talents of Medill, the *Tribune's* circulation grew until it emerged as one of the leading publications of this dynamic western city.³⁷

The onset of war furthered the fortunes of the *Tribune*. In the broadest sense, armed conflict spurred the desire for all forms of printed information. News from the front, business opportunities to supply the Army, and partisan politics filled the dailies. The *Tribune* assumed the lead for the Republican cause in the west when, fearing the financial uncertainty of war, John Wentworth sold controlling interest of the *Democrat* to the *Tribune* on July 24, 1861. The extinction of their largest ideological rival was made more momentous when the Western News Company -- a firm formed specifically to meet the growing demand for a high-volume newspaper distributor in the west -- opened for business later that year. These windfalls led Medill to exhort ambitious Chicagoan's "[t]o share in this general wartime prosperity, and to enlarge business, advertise in the *Tribune*. Our terms are below what they ought to be. Travel through the west anywhere and your will find the *Tribune*." Therefore, by 1865 the paper was regional in scope.³⁸

Who placed the ads being broadcast to the Midwestern

audience? Four major categories define the most frequent occupations given by *Tribune* advertisers during this era (see TABLE 6). The most prevalent type of advertisers were, first, local agents who offered wholesaling services for a variety of goods and, second, local retailers and service professionals who catered to Chicago consumers. Each of these two groups represented nearly a quarter of the 2,200 advertisers identified in the study. Manufacturers were third most common, making up roughly 21 percent of the sample. The remaining 22 percent of the *Tribune* advertisers included auctioneers, educational institutions, forms of entertainment, and those who did not clearly state an occupation.

TABLE 6. TYPE OF ADVERTISERS IN THE *TRIBUNE*, 1866-1874³⁹

Type of Advertiser	Number	Per cent
Agent	532	28.40
Manufacturer	390	20.82
Retailer	537	28.67
Other	414	22.00
Total	1,873	99.89

The *Tribune* also revealed Chicago's unique market position. Unlike the smaller towns, brokers and manufacturers advertised frequently. The relatively low percentage of local retailers suggests that the *Tribune* was a medium directed to the general Midwestern reading public, and not merely the city limits. Unlike the secondary

markets, in Chicago it seemed that an opportunity existed whereby farmers' unique demands might be met.

TABLE 7. PRODUCTS ADVERTISED IN THE *TRIBUNE*, 1866-1874

Product Advertised	Number	Per cent
Agent and Financial Services	267	15.53
Manufactured Machinery and Supplies for Business Use, Bulk Processed Goods	253	14.72
Agricultural Machinery and Supplies	17	0.99
Bulk Raw Agricultural Goods - Flour, Produce, Meats, Hops, Hay, Wool, Linen, Cotton, Flax, Lumber	105	6.11
Professional and Personal Services	182	10.59
Mass Produced Retail Goods - Clothing, Shoes, Jewelry, Watches, Fabrics, Notions, Soaps	204	11.87
"Home" Goods - Sewing Machines, Furniture, Carpets, Musical Instruments, Art or Pictures for Home Display	163	9.48
Patent Medicines	171	9.95
Other - Alcohol, Tobacco, Religious Goods, "Unique" Ads (i.e., Response to Slander), Consumer Clubs, Multiple Products, Residential Property, Printed Information, Educational Services, Live Plants, Fuels, Theater, Concerts. Skating, Lotteries, Dancing, Circuses	357	20.77
Total	1,719	99.99

A second important characteristic of the ads was the type of product or service offered. The broad variety of goods seen in the database supports the notion that Chicago's distinctiveness had little bearing upon the representative nature of the advertisements (see TABLE 7).⁴⁰ The products promoted in the largest number were traditional

consumer and business wares. These include bulk manufacturing supplies, agent and financial services, medical care, clothing, music and entertainment, patent medicines, printed materials, and transportation. Therefore the *Tribune* never overspecialized as a result of its wider circulation.

Finally, a large portion of the advertisements found in the *Tribune* failed to identify a "targeted" consumer (See TABLE 8). More than half of all ads gave no indication of their intended audience. The liberal representation of the category "general" consumer in this study is quite possibly overstated. While ads targeting agents and manufacturers are relatively easy to discern (e.g., not many other consumers were able to utilize 20,000 watches, or 2,000 tons of coal), few goods were targeted to a specific type of consumer. Directing ads toward the "general" consumer was a suppliers best method to cast his message as broadly as possible. More importantly, the study shows that the newspaper's advertisers did target agents and manufacturers. Unlike smaller regional competitors, the *Tribune* reflected the reality of the distribution network. Middlemen, brokers, and manufacturers *could be* addressed directly by the general populace if they chose to do so. While it was likely that only these parties would respond to ads offering 20,000 damaged watches, the access to goods in large quantities was made publicly known in the Chicago press.⁴¹

TABLE 8. CONSUMERS IDENTIFIED BY *TRIBUNE* ADVERTISERS,
1866-1874

Consumer Targeted	Number	Per cent
None	998	53.23
Agents	446	23.79
Manufacturers	144	7.68
Other	287	15.30
Total	1,875	100.00

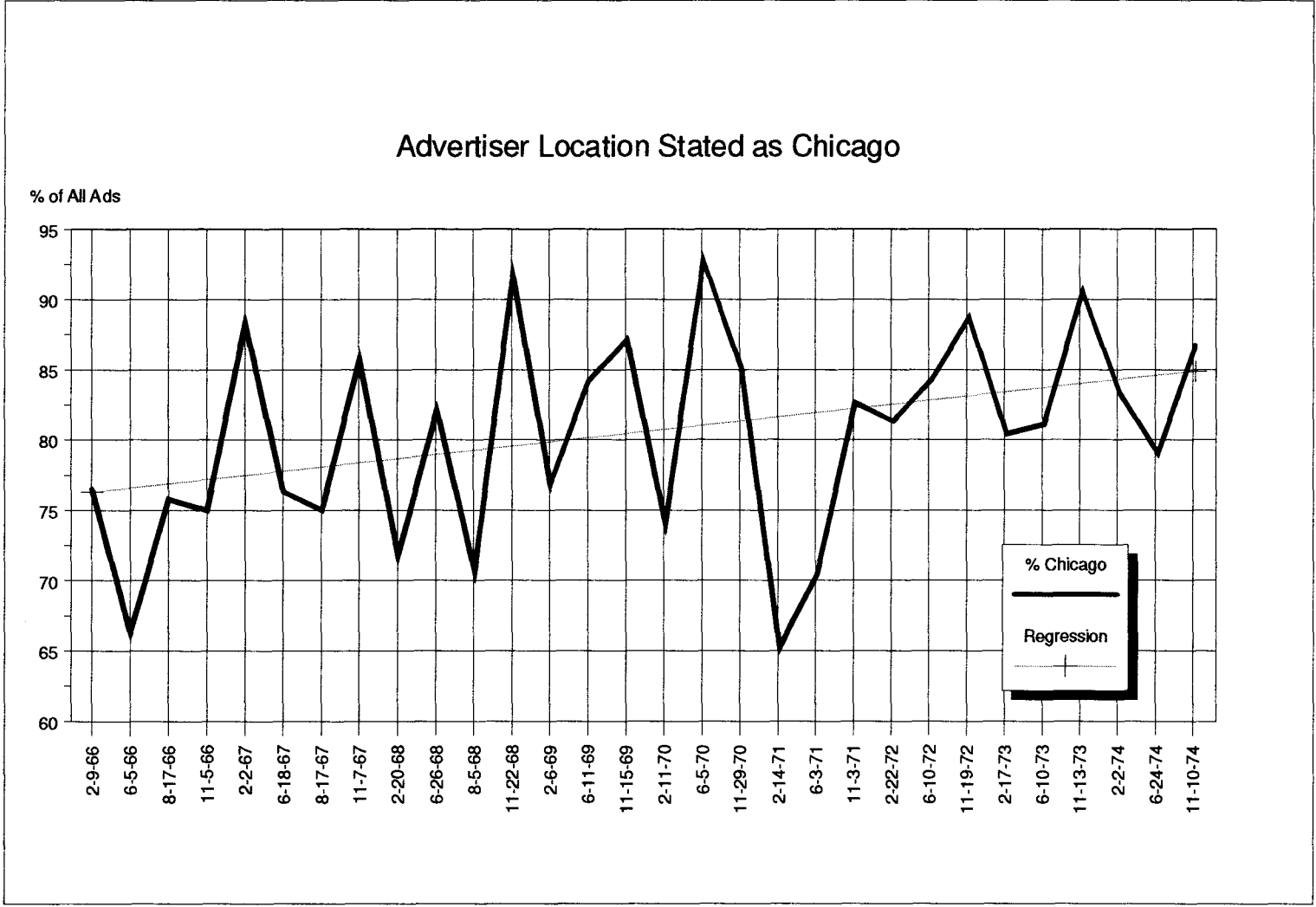
Most significantly -- considering the *Tribune's* movement toward the hinterland via local political appeals and their expansion of circulation by way of the Western News Company -- was the relative lack of advertised farm products, services, and raw materials. Clearly the city's distribution network was immature, yet the near complete absence of rural consumers -- as noted above only 12 of the ads specifically targeted farmers -- suggests that Chicago advertisers ignored the needs of rural patrons, at least until 1874. Although ads targeting specific audiences like city dwellers or men or women also were small, they still outnumbered promotions targeting farmers by more than thirteen to one. Further, urban retailers had a natural geographic advantage which erased much of the need to specifically solicit metropolitan patronage. While it is often assumed that urban businesses and agents were *reaching* for consumers in the countryside during these years, *Tribune* advertisements prove quite the opposite.

During these years, the stated location of *Tribune*

advertisers continued to shift toward Chicago (see FIGURE 5). The city's increasing control over its economic hinterland is best shown by comparing advertisers from Chicago and those of other locations -- predominantly New York, Boston, and Philadelphia. Advertisers from Chicago consistently increased their representation during these eight years at the expense of eastern firms. For example, New York based companies topped seven percent of all ads in an issue only one time after 1871, whereas they passed that number nine times previously. Chicago firms, on the other hand, steadily increased their commanding advertising presence from 76 percent of all ads in 1866 to more than 85 percent by 1874.

Neither the fire, the post-war depression, nor the paper's political positions seemed to have any negative effect on this trend towards parochialism. The only noticeable deviation from the norm followed the Great Fire, where there was a rapid increase in the *number of ads* placed by all firms -- *regardless* of location.⁴² From an average of 74 ads per issue, the publication of 3 November 1871 had a total of 121 promotions, 100 of which were based in Chicago. In large part, this increase can be explained by the need to replace goods lost in the inferno, as well as an effort by local suppliers to affirm their survival to the public. For example, clothing wholesaler Clement, Morton & Co. poignantly stated "we ask neither discounts nor extensions

FIGURE 5.

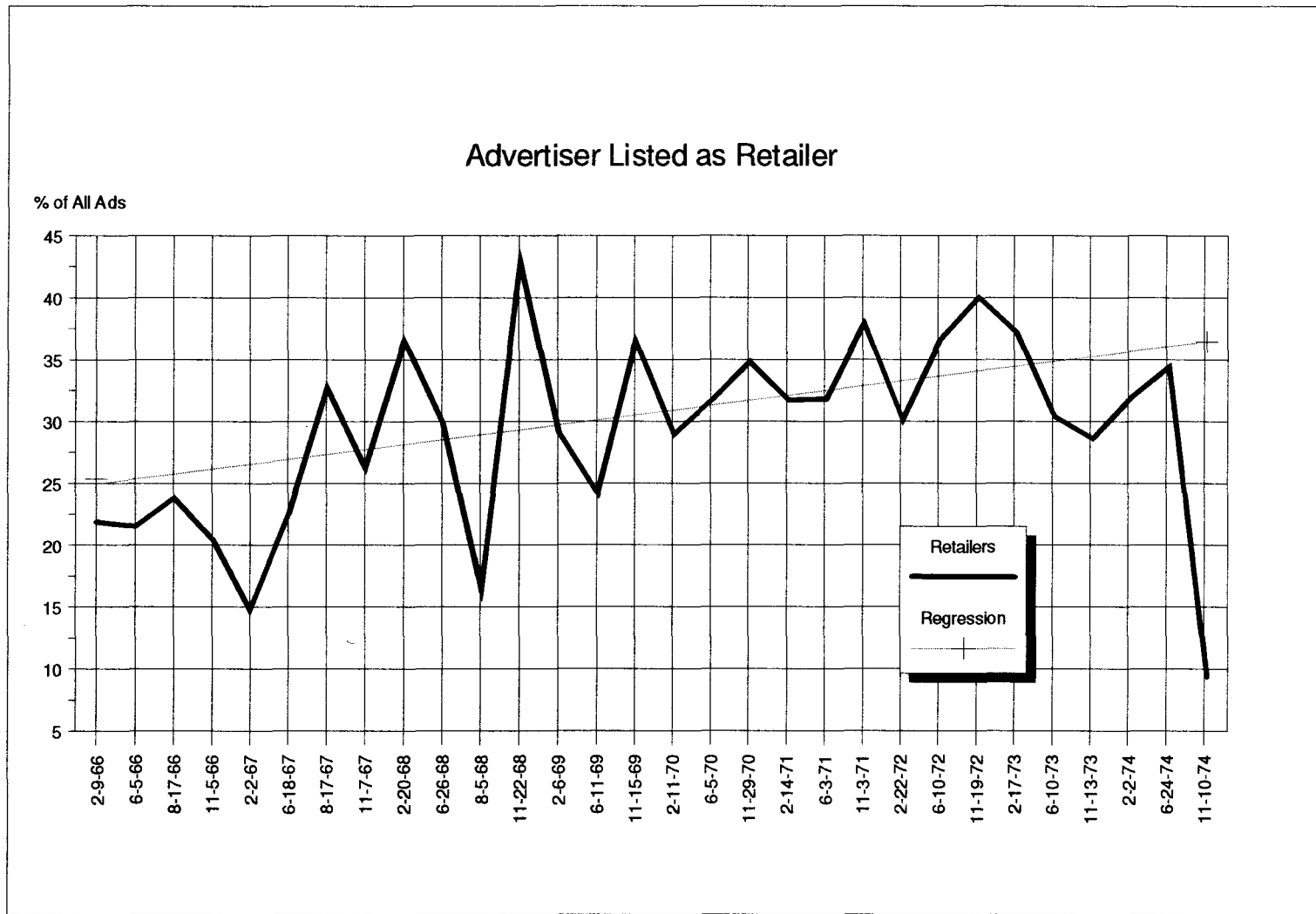


from our creditors, and nothing from our debtors but prompt payment of bills at maturity."⁴³

While this trend supports the thesis that Chicago was increasingly the central city of the Great West, it is important to note that many of the more prominent Chicago-based manufacturers and retailers of the era were not actively advertising in the *Tribune*. While larger firms such as Field, Leiter, & Company, Matson & Company, and Carson, Pirie & Company promoted some sales, their presence was not representative of their class. Local retailing giants such as McNeil & Higgens or W. M. Hoyt went unrepresented. Regional manufacturing bellwethers including Marsh Harvester, Kaestner Machines, the Scherzer Company, and Deering Harvester also were absent. Most likely, these suppliers, like Cyrus McCormick, still relied upon territorial agents and agricultural journals to broadcast their message to the hinterland, rather than through Chicago-based institutions. In other words, Chicago's mastery over its eastern rivals was not accompanied, nor can it be explained by an increased advertising emphasis of leading suppliers targeting rural consumers.

A regression analysis, such as that applied to the advertiser's location, can be used to explore the key attributes of each type of promotion. For example, three different groups of advertisers display significant change over time. First, Chicago retailers increased their presence

FIGURE 6.



(see FIGURE 6): ranging from only nine to seventeen percent in 1866 and 1867, retailers comprised approximately one-third of the sample by 1874. These proprietors advertised using specific products and terms for their goods. Such specificity gave their ads a clear focus on the intended use of their products. Alternatively, agents and manufacturers exhibited a marked decrease in advertising presence, a fact that takes on greater significance when compared to the changing composition of the advertised products and the consumers specified (see FIGURES 7 and 8, for agents and manufacturers).

Trend lines for the types of products offered correspond to these changes in advertiser. General retail goods such as ready-made clothing, jewelry, fabrics, and notions rose from ten to sixteen percent (see FIGURE 9). "Other" goods (listed in TABLE 7) increased even more dramatically, doubling from sixteen to thirty-three percent of the sample (see FIGURE 10).⁴⁴ Bulk manufacturing supplies and machinery fell in accordance with the drop in manufacturers placing ads in the *Tribune* (see FIGURE 11). Interestingly, purveyors of patent medicines also showed a marked decrease. These suppliers were almost exclusively eastern manufacturers who addressed the general consumer directly. One explanation of their fall -- from eighteen to only nine percent by 1874 -- may be that patent medicine ads were less numerous, but often much larger than other spots

FIGURE 7.

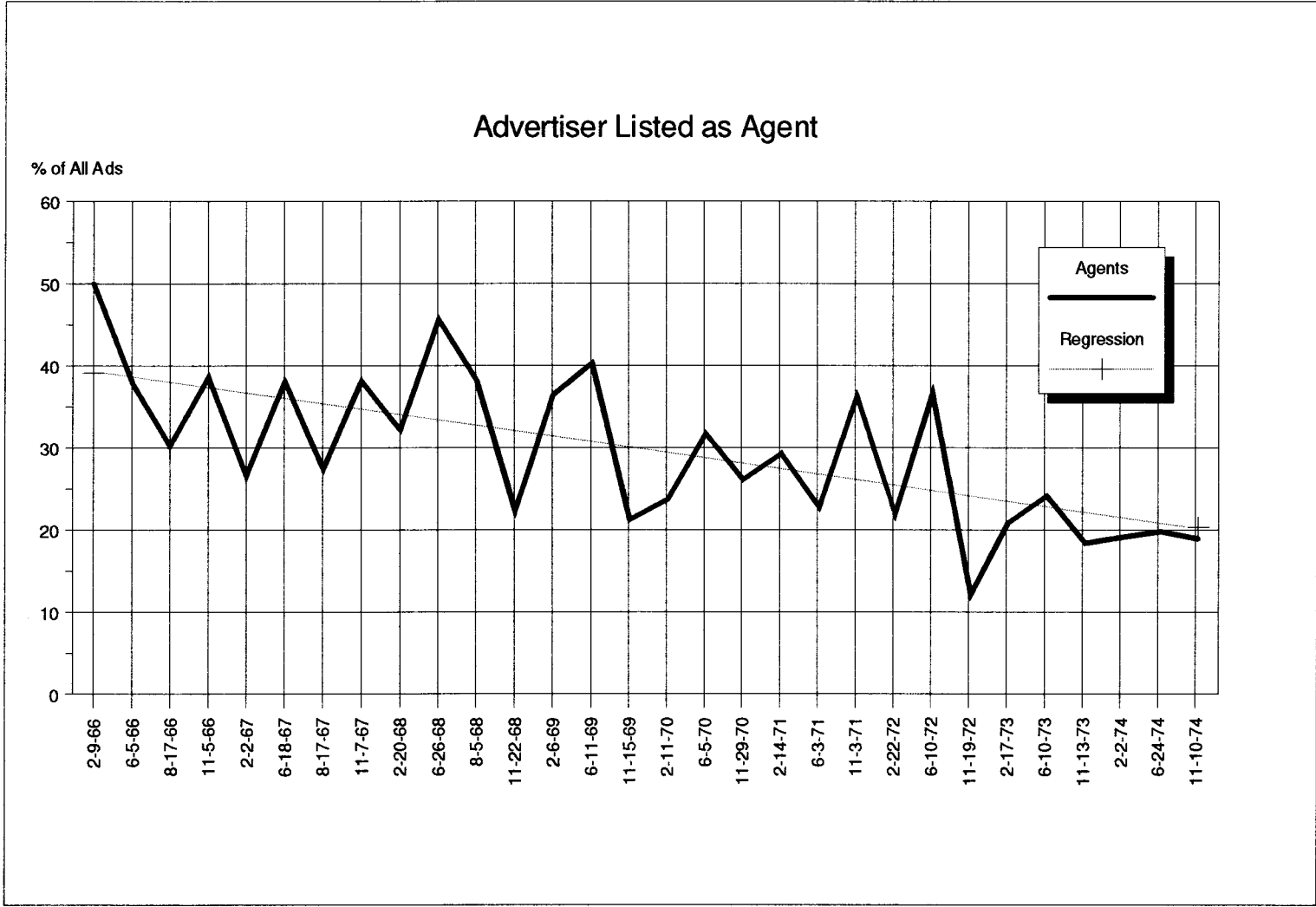


FIGURE 8 .

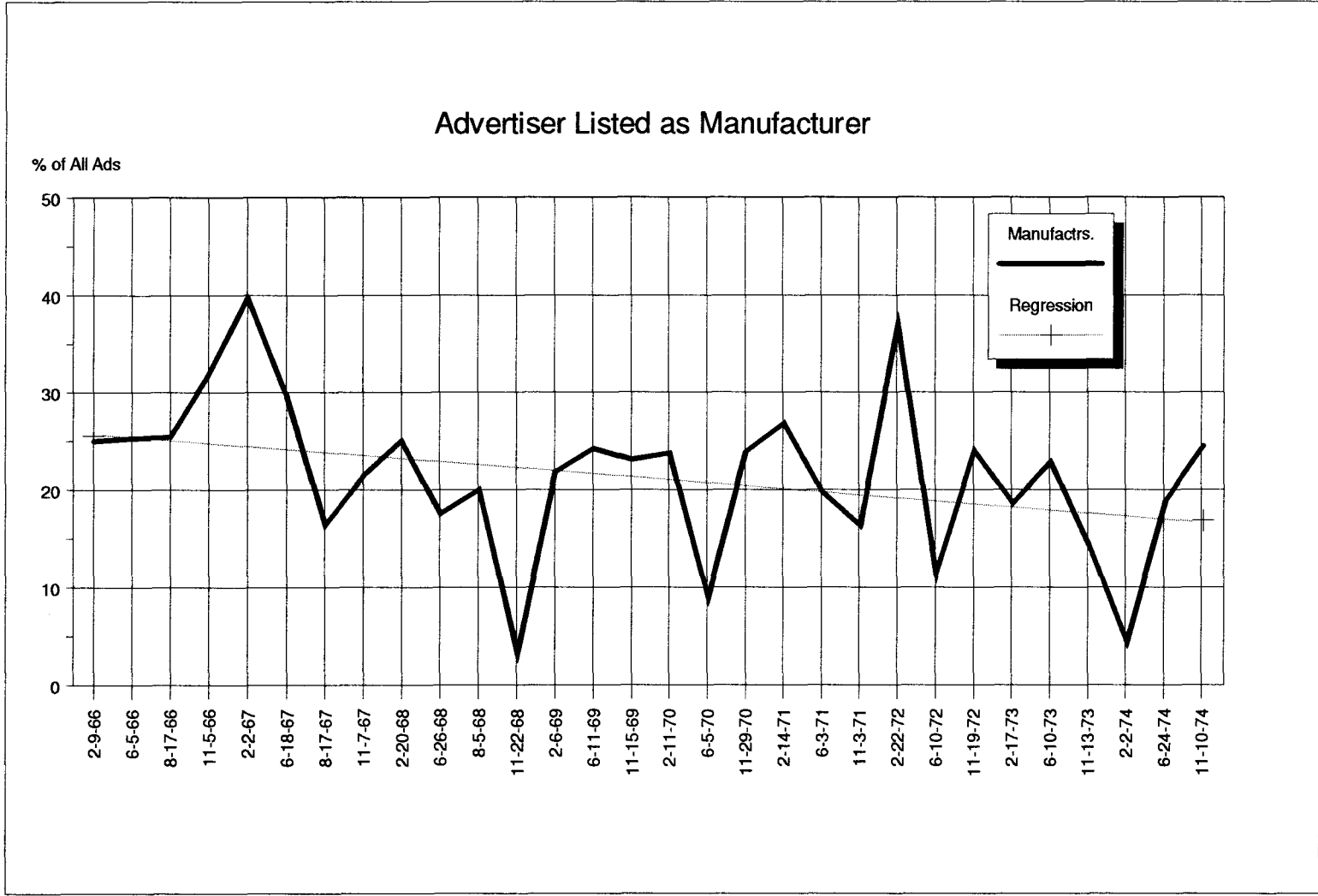


FIGURE 9 .

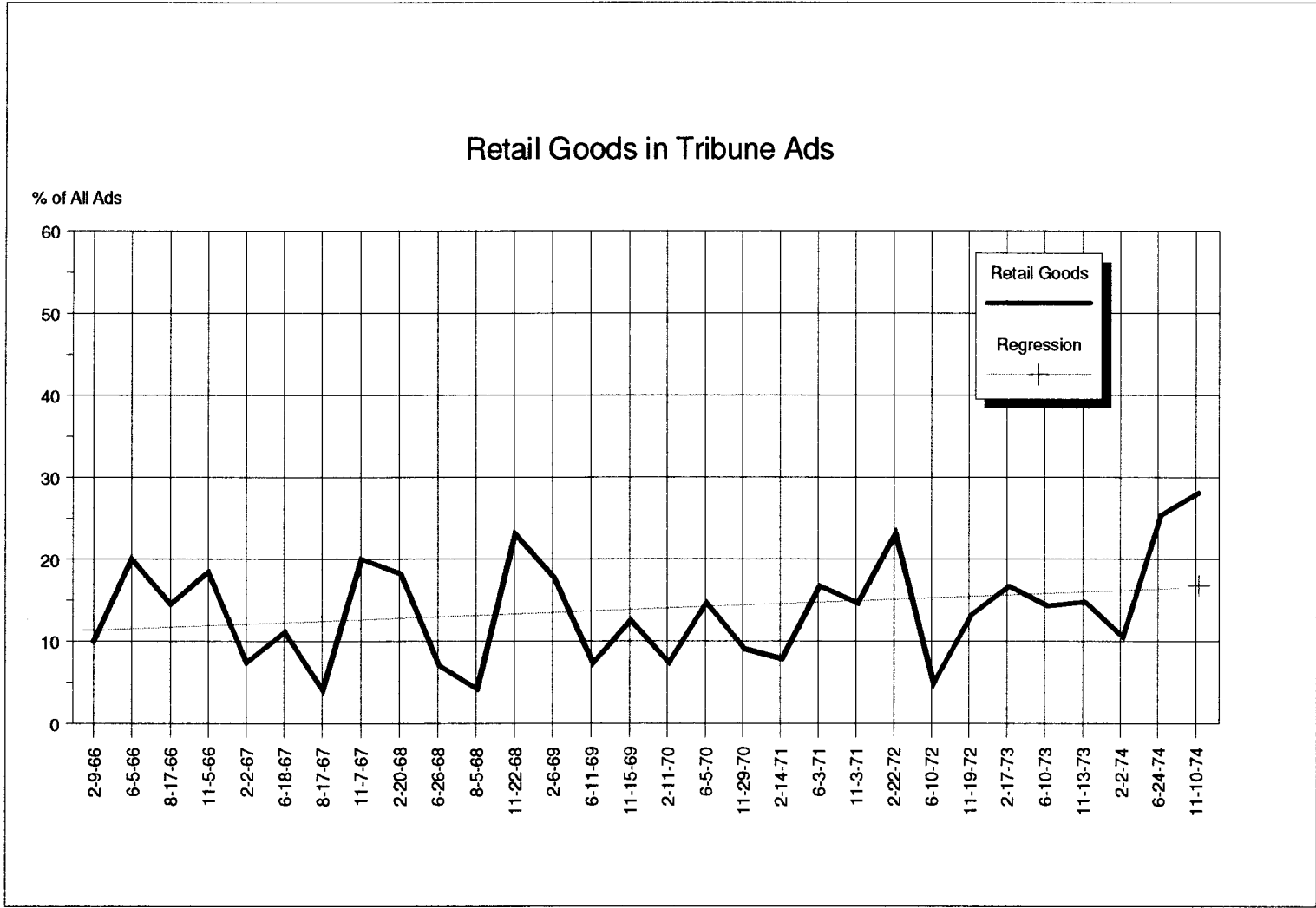


FIGURE 10.

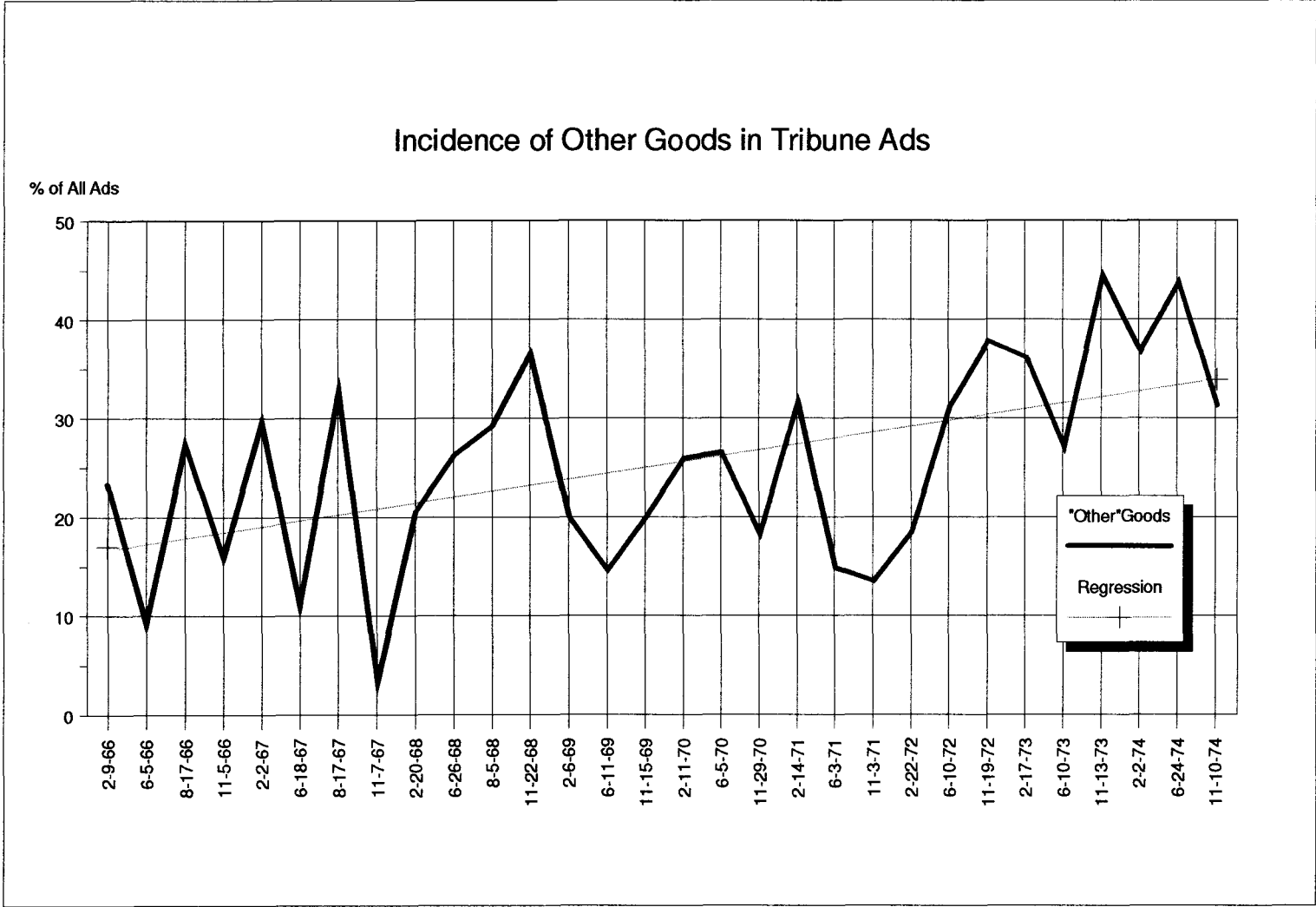
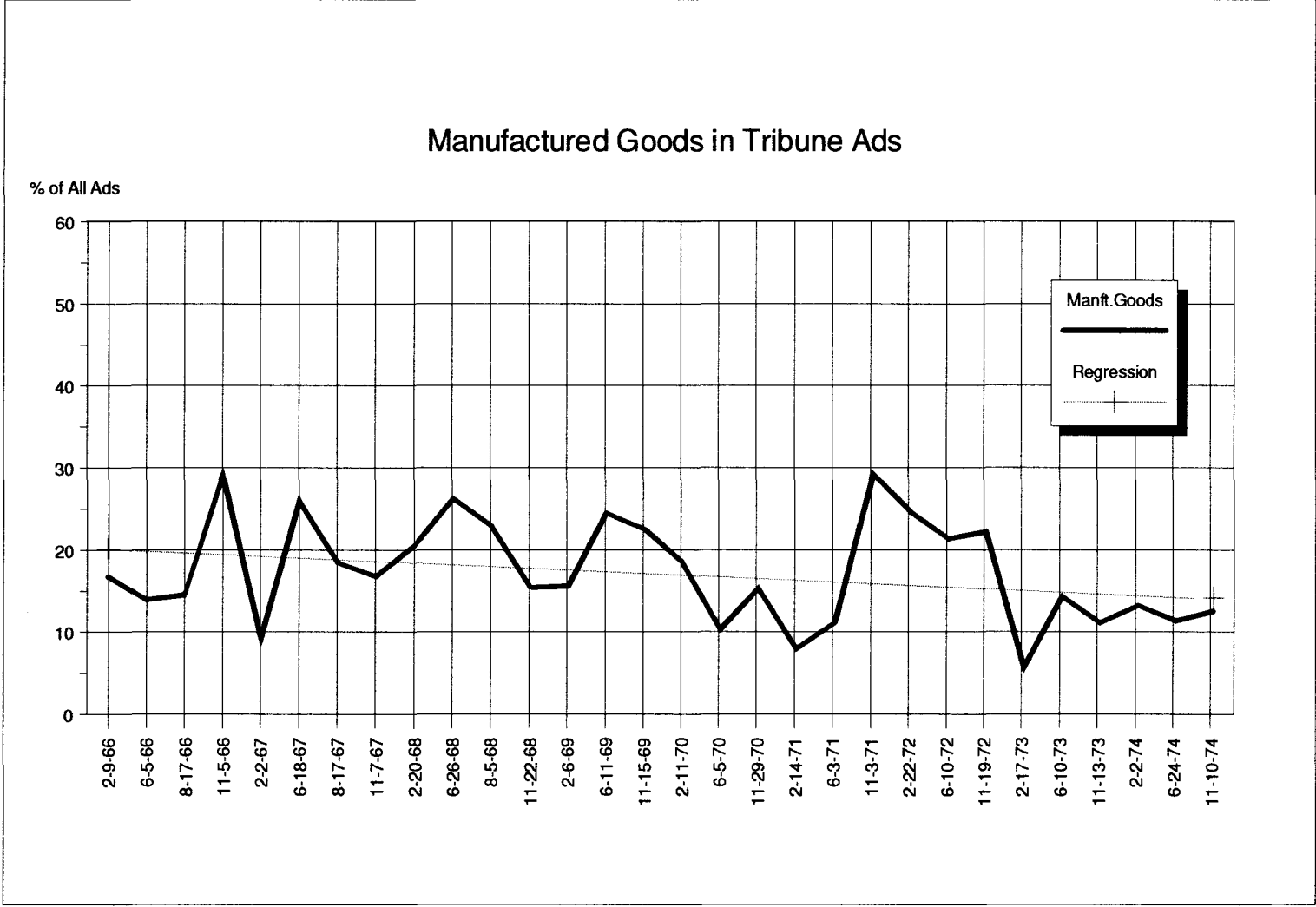


FIGURE 11.

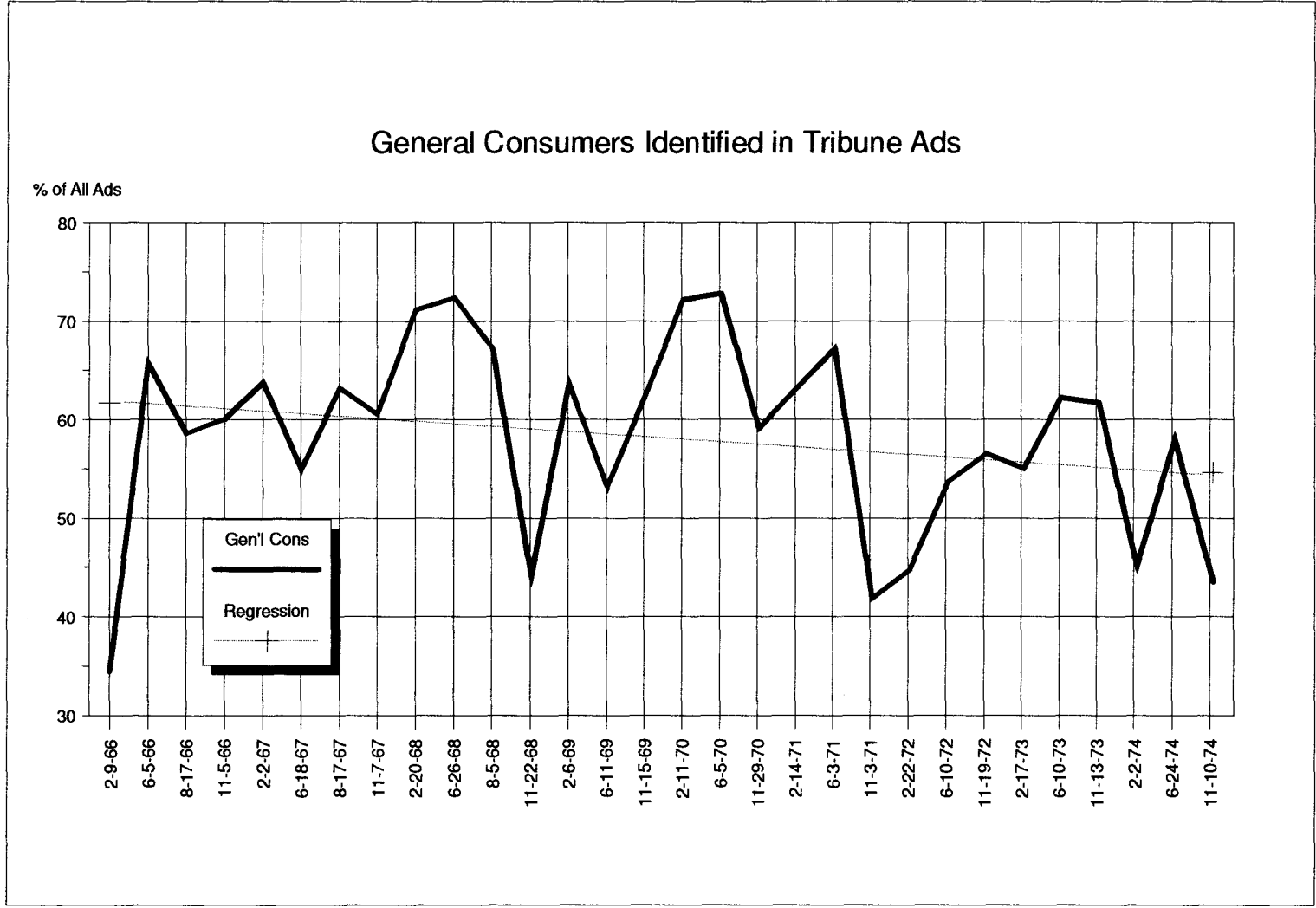


(usually occupying an entire column in later issues).

The general reduction in advertisements offering bulked goods implies that Chicago too was moving away from the basic tenets of the Grange effort -- which promised to purchase large caches of merchandise for individual consumers. Rather, the promotions indicate that retail sales were also becoming dominant, as they were already in Indianapolis, Milwaukee, Ripon, and Oshkosh. Not only were opportunities shrinking for farmers who wanted to contact agents and manufacturers directly, but the products that were advertised suggest an ever increasing demand for fashionable, urbane goods which undermined their peculiar brand of consumer solidarity. It was the urban, and not the farm consumer ethos that was sustained by these trends.

The representation of consumers was also in flux. While less dramatic than the other examples, this aspect confirmed the widespread trend away from agents and manufacturers and toward the general consumer. While the regression line for "general" consumers actually lowered over time, this population still represented more than half of the ads by 1874 (see FIGURE 12). "Other" consumer groups -- such as those in ads targeting a gendered audience or ones that were labeled as "urban" -- increased significantly in the later stages of the survey. The ads mirrored the attempt by retailers to fashion artificial definitions of community. Through this process, product usage was defined by the

FIGURE 12.

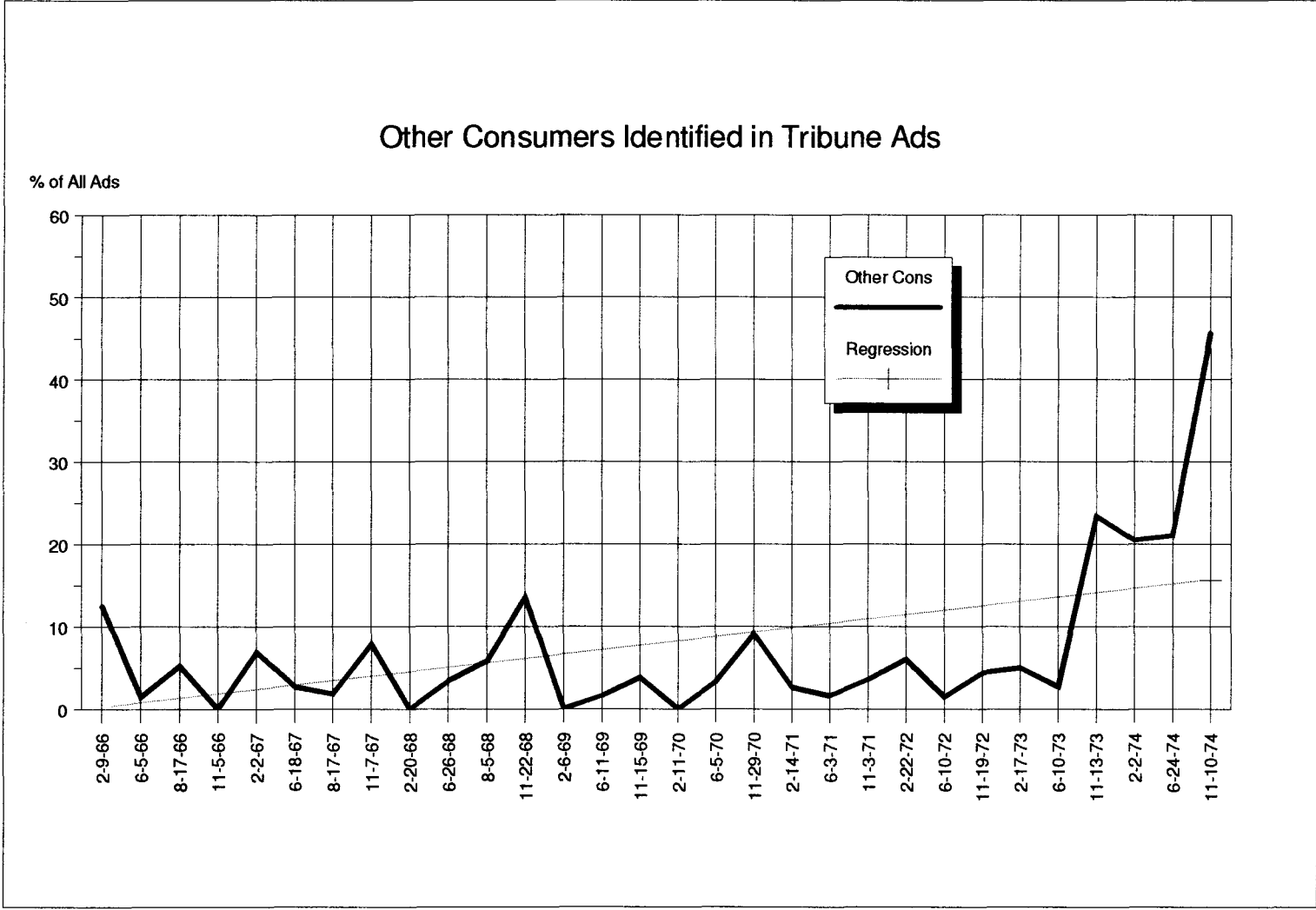


supplier and not controlled by the consumer (see FIGURE 13).

Combining these trends in advertising demographics with a reduction in non-Chicago competition, several notable features of the city's consumer culture become apparent. One suggests that the earliest stages of product distribution -- that from raw materials for manufacturers to bulked finished goods for agents -- were being removed from the public consumer dialogue. In other words, it was more likely for *Tribune* readers to be aware of a new shoe store than for them to notice an opportunity to buy shoes in bulk quantities. Whether agents and middlemen relied more on "private" lines of communications -- such as the Board of Trade or the secluded realm of the horizontally-integrated corporation -- is unclear from these sources. While agents clearly continued to "buy wholesale," their efforts were no longer made public through the *Tribune's* advertisements. Manufacturers, too, seemed to be increasingly dependent on markets that were not "broadly cast" to the general public. It was only in times of crisis -- such as after the Great Chicago Fire -- that agents and manufacturers scurried to place public notices and thereby re-establish these furtive linkages.

If agents and manufacturers were receding from popular view, then local retailers were filling the void. Advertisers, products, and consumers all reflected this trend towards a greater retail emphasis in the *Tribune's*

FIGURE 13.



ads. The change gave consumers superior access to a larger variety of merchandise. In trade, consumers forfeited the ability to chose the means of procuring those goods.

The changing nature of the Chicago consumer network suggests that the reduction in out-of-town competition and the rise of local retailing were linked. By the late 1860s, the city had been transformed from a leading way-station of goods to an important and final marketplace for those products. In short, Chicago was no longer simply sending goods from east to west, but was consuming a large portion of this traffic locally. At first glance this transition appears to be a pivotal one in cementing the city's position of leadership in retail modernization -- accompanied as it was by the growth of retail institutions such as the popular State Street district. Paradoxically, this image of dynamic retail leadership runs counter to the trends found in the rural heartland. The ads of the outlying region show that Chicago was, in fact, late at arriving at this stage of retail supremacy. Chicago advertisers were in all likelihood delayed due that city's long-standing role as regional middleman. Therefore it was highly improbable that Chicago advertisers led the region's consumer revolution during the Gilded Age.

TABLE 9. TYPE OF ADVERTISER AND PRODUCTS OFFERED, 1866-1874
(READ HORIZONTALLY)

PRODUCTS OFFERED	TYPE OF ADVERTISER			N=
	Agents	Manuf.	Retail	
Business Machinery and Supplies	31.7%	60.6%	7.7%	208
Agent and Financial Services	57.2	4.9	37.9	203
Professional and Personal Services	3.6	3.0	93.4	168
Patent Medicines	22.6	67.2	10.2	137
Mass Retail Goods	27.9	21.2	50.9	165
Other	26.7	24.6	48.7	232

Quantifying the trends in two sets of different variables permits a final comparison of the various characteristics of print advertising in Chicago. Two specific analyses are important: the relationship between the advertiser and the product offered, and that between the products offered and the consumer targeted. Not surprisingly, the first inquiry indicates that products displayed a close correlation to the type of advertiser (see TABLE 9). For example, bulk processed metals, chemicals, and machinery were predominantly offered by manufacturers, rather than by agents or other providers. Likewise, two of three ads for patent medicines were furnished directly by the manufacturer, and fully 93 percent of professional services were offered directly by the provider.

However, the reverse relationship proved false. While one may expect certain groups to standardize around a single

commodity, this did not occur (see TABLE 10). Agents and others offered a wide variety of services -- from bulk orders of shoes to the arranging of intercontinental travel. In other words, specialization came to the product but not the businesses that made up the distribution network.

TABLE 10. TYPE OF ADVERTISER AND PRODUCTS OFFERED, 1866-1874
(READ VERTICALLY)

PRODUCTS OFFERED	TYPE OF ADVERTISER		
	Agents	Manuf.	Retail
Business Machinery and Supplies	20.2%	38.8%	3.5%
Agent and Financial Services	35.5	3.1	16.7
Professional and Personal Services	1.8	1.5	34.1
Mass Produced Retail Goods	14.1	10.8	18.2
Patent Medicines	9.5	28.3	3.0
Other	18.9	17.5	24.5
N=	327	325	461

Following from this, a second examination explores which products were targeted to address specific consumers. Most striking was that many goods were *not* aimed at a definite consumer niche (see TABLE 11). Clothing, patent medicines, printed materials, medical services, entertainment, transportation, and other products were offered almost exclusively to the general, unspecified consumer. As Alfred C. Chandler, David Houndshell, Jackson Lears, and others have noted, these products represented

goods and services from producers who were at the "leading edge" of modernization.⁴⁵

TABLE 11. PRODUCTS OFFERED AND TARGETED CONSUMER, 1866-1874
(READ HORIZONTALLY)

PRODUCTS	TARGETED CONSUMER				N =
	"None"	Agents	Manuf.	Other	
Business Machinery and Supplies	24.8%	23.6%	48.4%	3.2%	250
Agent and Financial Services	18.3	78.6	1.1	1.9	262
Professional and Personal Services	91.0	4.8	2.4	1.8	167
Mass Produced Retail Goods	65.2	26.6	0.0	8.2	158
Patent Medicine	97.4	0.9	0.9	0.9	155
Other	78.3	9.6	1.6	10.5	313

However, Chicago's prominence was gained by firms that sold bulk supplies and finished manufactured goods to rural retailers. Further, it was here that the Grange efforts sought allies in their struggle to supply their members. The data reveals that these suppliers' ads evidenced a *close correlation* between the product advertised and the intended consumer (see TABLE 12). Clearly, these elements of Chicago's marketplace were engaged in communication solely with those *within* the city limits. Nearly four-fifths of the ads offering agent services were targeted to other agents and wholesalers; those for bulk supplies were equally specific. As with the regional retailer, it seems that Midwestern agents and manufacturers did not address their

appeals to the vociferous consumer demands made by farmers.

TABLE 12. PRODUCTS OFFERED AND TARGETED CONSUMER, 1866-1874
(READ VERTICALLY)

PRODUCTS	TARGETED CONSUMER			
	"None"	Agents	Manuf.	Other
Business Machinery and Supplies	8.1%	17.0%	90.3%	12.7%
Agent and Financial Services	6.3	59.5	2.2	7.9
Professional and Personal Services	19.9	2.3	3.0	4.8
Mass Produced Retail Goods	13.5	12.1	0.0	20.6
Patent Medicine	19.9	0.2	0.7	1.6
Other	32.1	8.6	3.7	52.4
N=	762	346	134	63

Two conclusions can be drawn from the results of the comparisons described above. First, that the advertisements in the *Tribune* displayed characteristics common to other regional papers: a general trend which moved away from the raw distribution of goods to a more nuanced, refined, and personalized consumer experience via retailers. These ads were placed by a wide range of suppliers and offered equally diverse products. It was true that Chicago-based advertisers were continuing to replace their eastern competitors. Finally, *Tribune* ads for the newer, mass produced consumer goods generated a nondescript, broadly cast message to shoppers that corresponded to personal interpretations of consumption discussed above.

The second key point to be made from this comparison involved the big city agents and wholesalers found in the *Tribune* ads. While this population also targeted consumers, these patrons were predominantly their brethren within the city's marketplace. In short, agents and manufacturers engaged in a strictly urban dialog. Despite the Grange's bid to secure goods in large volumes, there is no indication that the existing distribution network responded to this increased demand in any visible way. Suppliers were hardly the driving force behind Chicago's modernization and increased consumer control over the rural hinterland.

We are left, then, to consider the conflict between the content of local print advertising and the recent historiography of Chicago's evolution as the consumer capital of the west. Specifically, William Cronon's contention that urban suppliers directed the growth of this consumer network from Chicago is less convincing.⁴⁶ Cronon provides a well-documented explanation of the logic of capital, as well as a graceful concept of "second nature," illustrating the importance of the extension of communication links from urban suppliers directly to the rural consumer -- the growing "reach of Chicago's informational hinterland."⁴⁷ A closer inspection of his examples, however, fail to demonstrate that urban businesses either utilized the modern communications infrastructure or directly addressed the rural consumer -- as would be the

case with the catalog sales firms of Ward and Sears. For example, McCormick's sales were based on the activities of agents who were physically located in the rural community and who competed with other local agents and producers.⁴⁸ Similarly, Chicago wholesalers did not supply the final consumer, but rather the retailers who then competed in their *local* markets. Neither example relies upon a Chicago-based institution for its interaction with rural consumers. While showing how Chicago gained market supremacy over its eastern rivals during this era, Cronon's data do not accurately describe or explain the transition from these indirect and even traditional patterns of economic relations to the modern consumerism rural Midwesterners manifested by 1900.

This case study both substantiates and challenges some of the conclusions presented in *Nature's Metropolis*. In one sense, the advertisements validate Cronon's narrative account that Chicago had attained economic control over the Great West by 1874. Most strikingly, Chicago advertisers continued to replace their eastern competitors as potential suppliers to Midwestern consumers. Equally important, the visible if shrinking role played by agents and manufacturers conforms with Cronon's narrative. Yet the data presented here argue that Chicago merchants never targeted their appeals to the rural consumer. Rather, they merely acted to *supply* the newly acquired distribution network. While these

transactions between wholesalers and retailers had lasting effects on the economy of the hinterland, this action was not instrumental in the economic assimilation of rural consumers into the metropolitan marketplace.

More importantly, the story of the Chicago's changing consumer environment adds weight to the issues described in the first half of this chapter. While farmers clearly articulated a new demand driven consumer ideology through the purchasing agency of local granges, their neighbors supported a distinctly opposing viewpoint. Small towns rejected all activities that failed to boost the economic prospects of their local settlements. The focus on hometown retailing meshed with the emerging urban consumer culture as exemplified in the department stores of all Midwestern towns. While farm consumer patterns were rejected at home, regional advertisers indicated that they too were unwilling to grant consumers greater control over the acquisition of goods.

By the turn of the century, Thorstein Veblen noted, small towns had little defense against the invasion by retail chain stores, big city department stores and mail-order firms. Steeped in a tradition of experiential consumerism, local town patrons simply shifted to those firms that were better able to provide the therapeutic benefits demanded of them. Aided by professional advertising campaigns, larger retailers perfected the system of consumer

manipulation begun in the 1870s.⁴⁹

During these years, Midwestern farmers found that they were without allies in their effort to perfect a consumer controlled purchasing system. Their work throughout the remainder of the decade was contained wholly within the institution of the Patrons of Husbandry. Unfortunately, policy shifts by organizational leaders buffeted the Grange, beginning in 1875, and disrupted their consumer gamble.

ENDNOTES

List of abbreviations:

- CHS Chicago Historical Society, Chicago, Illinois.
 InHS Indiana Historical Society, Indianapolis, Indiana.
 ISHL Illinois State Historical Library, Springfield, Illinois.
 InSL Indiana State Library, Indianapolis, Indiana.
 SHSW State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin.
 UI University of Illinois Library, Champaign-Urbana, Illinois.

1. For narrative, see "Reminiscences of Pendleton" (1927) by Benjamin Rogers and I. Price Rinewalt in Madison County, *Miscellaneous Records*, InSL; and the *Pendleton Republican*, 27 February 1896.
2. Quote by Colbee C. Benton, in John Spencer Bassett, *The Life of Andrew Jackson* (New York: Anchor Books, 1967), 489.
3. For quote, see *Oshkosh City Times*, 14 July 1868.
4. *The Cultivator and Country Gentleman*, Vol. 35, 2 November 1870, 708.
5. See Thorstein Veblen, "The Country Town," *The Freeman* (11 July 1923): 417-420; and (18 July 1923): 440-443. For more on Veblen, see Paul T. Homan, *Contemporary Economic Thought* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1928), 107-192.
6. For refutation of Veblen, see Lewis E. Atherton, *Main Street on the Middle Border* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1954), 49-57.
7. While each locale had unique economic traditions, both were symbolic of the developing rural-urban conflicts of the era. By 1865, both locations had diversified and traditional commercial economies that relied heavily upon the patronage of the local farmers. Ripon, noted as the founding location of the Republican Party in 1854, was settled initially by farming families dedicated to the phalanx principles of Charles Fourier. Oshkosh was organized around more conventional commercial precepts, focusing on the harvesting of the white pine forests indigenous to Wisconsin. In 1868, Oshkosh alone boasted over 2,100 residences, two hundred and twenty "buildings occupied for the sale of goods," and over one hundred manufactories. For more on both towns, see Larry Gara, *A Short History of Wisconsin* (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1962), 62, 85, 102, 143,

- 164, 169-170. See also *Oshkosh City Times*, 18 February 1868; 25 February 1868; 31 March 1868; and 28 August 1868.
8. *Ripon Free Press*, 23 April 1876.
9. *Oshkosh City Times*, 11 December 1872. The Palace Store and Hart's Dry Goods Palace also turned to one-price shopping, see *Ibid.*, 26 April 1871. For Boston Store, see *Ripon Free Press* 6 February 1879.
10. *Ripon Free Press*, 9 January 1879.
11. For Harper Brothers, see *Ripon Free Press*, 11 September 1879; and 18 September 1879.
12. See *Oshkosh City Times* 17 November 1868; an article in support of Prairie du Chien river improvements. See also *Ibid.*, 12 January 1869. For Milwaukee complaints, see *Ripon Free Press*, 26 August 1875. For lost manufacturing opportunities, see *Oshkosh City Times*, 29 October 1867.
13. Italics mine. *Ripon Free Press*, 26 August 1875.
14. *Oshkosh City Times* 6 April 1869. *Ripon Free Press*, 18 September 1879. Bryan said: "You come to us and tell us that the great cities are in favor of the gold standard; we reply that the great cities rest upon our broad and fertile prairies. Burn down your cities and leave our farms, and your cities will spring up again as if by magic; but destroy our farms and the grass will grow in the streets of every city in the country."
15. *The Cultivator and Country Gentleman*, 24 June 1869, 494.
16. For the following debate surrounding the Grange store, see *Ripon Free Press*, 17 January 1878; and 7 February 1878. All italics mine. For support of the Grange, see *Ibid.*,
17. For satire directed at the farm community, see the *Oshkosh City Times*, 10 December 1867.
18. For the economic and social changes underpinning this movement, see Samuel P. Hays, *The Response to Industrialism, 1885-1914* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 4, 13, 54, Chapter 7; for technology, transportation, and new "system building" by businesses, see Alfred Chandler, Jr., *The Visible Hand: The Managerial Revolution in American Business* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press, 1977), 122-143, 147-167, 175, Chapter 7. For an understanding of other social and psychological changes wrought, see Robert H. Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877-1920*, American Century

Series, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967), 111-163.

19. See Warren I. Susman, *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1973); and Christopher Lasch, *True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1991). For an overview of the hodge-podge of consumer ideologies, see T. J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Anti-Modernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* (New York: Pantheon, 1981), 1-47. For a socialist interpretation of consumption, see Karl Marx's theories as presented in Patrick Brantlinger, *Bread and Circuses: Theories of Mass Culture and Social Decay* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), 82-183; and Gary Cross, *Time and Money: The Making of Consumer Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 16-45. See also Edward Bellamy, *Equality* (Upper Saddle River, N. J.: Gregg Press, 1968), iii-iv, 31-61. For a liberal perspective, circulated by Thorstein Veblen, Simon Patten, and James Bates Clark, see Morton G. White, *Social Thought in America: The Revolt Against Formalism* (New York: Viking Press, 1952), passim; James T. Kloppenberg, "In Retrospect: Morton White's *Social Thought in America*," *Reviews in American History* 15 (September, 1987): 507-519; and Paul T. Homan, *Contemporary Economic Thought* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1928), 15-103, 107-192. For conservatives such as William Graham Sumner, see Robert G. McCloskey, *American Conservatism in the Age of Enterprise: A Study of William Graham Sumner, Stephan J. Field, and Andrew Carnegie* (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), Chapter 2, passim. For a sociological perspective, which includes Emile Durkheim, the "Chicago School," and Robert and Helen Lynd, see Hugh Dalziel Duncan, *Symbols and Social Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), xx, 147-154, 284, 285, Chapter 12; Robert E. Park and E. W. Burgess, *Introduction to the Science of Sociology*, 3d ed., revised (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), 443-444, 482-488, 978; R. E. Parks, E. W. Burgess, and R. D. McKenzie, *The City* (Reprint, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967, 1925), 37-38; Albert J. Reiss, Jr., *Louis Wirth: On Cities and Social Life, Selected Papers* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1964), xx, 26; Robert S. Lynd and Helen M. Lynd, *Middletown: A Study of American Culture* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1956), Introduction, 87, 81-82, 158. See also Richard Wightman Fox, "Epitaph For Middletown: Robert S. Lynd and the Analysis of Consumer Culture," In *The Culture of Consumption: Critical Essays in American History, 1880-1980*, T. J. Jackson Lears and Richard Wightman Fox, eds. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983), 125-6, 130-134.

20. For good reviews of the problems of this ideological focus, and the perceptions of irreconcilable conflicts between the camps, see Gary Cross, *Time and Money: The*

Making of Consumer Culture (New York: Routledge), 1-45; Daniel Horowitz, *The Morality of Spending: Attitudes Toward the Consumer Society in America, 1875-1940* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1985), Introduction, xii; and Daniel Miller, *Material Culture and Mass Consumption* (Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwood, 1987), 3-18, Part III.

21. Most tellingly, class stratifications offered a variety of interpretive frameworks. See Andrew Heinze, *Adapting to Abundance: Jewish Immigrants, Mass Consumption, and the Search for American Identity*, *Columbia History of Urban Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990); Lizabeth Cohen, *Making A New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 99, Chapter 3; Gunther Barth, *City People: The Rise of Modern City Culture in Nineteenth Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), Chapter 3; T. J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981), 300, 62-67, 100, 206, *passim.*; Elaine S. Abelson, *When Ladies Go A-Thieving: Middle-Class Shoplifters in the Victorian Department Store* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), Chapter 1; W. Hamish Fraser, *The Coming of the Mass Market, 1850-1914* (London: The MacMillen Press, Ltd., 1981); and Dana Frank, *Purchasing Power: Consumer Organizing, Gender, and the Seattle Labor Movement, 1919-1929* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

22. For the "dawn of self-consciousness, see Neil Harris, "Introduction." In *The Land of Contrasts, 1880-1901*, ed. Neil Harris (New York: George Braziller, 1970), 1. For "consumer lifestyle," see Grant McCracken, *Culture and Consumption: New Approaches to the Symbolic Character of Consumer Goods and Activities* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1988), 27; this pattern was demonstrated earlier in Europe, see Rosalind Williams, *Dream Worlds: Mass Consumption in Late Nineteenth-Century France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 1-15; and Thomas Richards, *The Commodity Culture of Victorian England: Advertising and Spectacle, 1851-1914* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), Chapters 1 and 2. For the mythical "therapeutic" effect from consumption, see Lears, *No Place of Grace*, 42-58. For the propagation of these self-defining myths, see Martin V. Martel and George J. McCall, "Reality-Orientation and the Pleasure Principle: A Study of American Mass-Periodical Fiction, 1890-1955," *People, Society, and Mass Communications* Lewis Anthony Dexter and David Manning White, eds. (New York: The Free Press, 1964), 317-319, and Christopher P. Wilson, "The Rhetoric of Consumption," in Richard Wightman Fox and T. J. J. Lears, eds. *The Culture of Consumption*, 39-64.

23. See William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993); and Abelson, *When Ladies Go A-Thieving*, Introduction, Chapters One, Two, and Three.
24. *Oshkosh City Times*, 15 December 1868; and 11 May 1870.
25. For Fowle's store, *Oshkosh City Times*, 21 July 1868; For Ripon see *Ripon Free Press*, 26 October 1882.
26. For Biggers, see *Oshkosh City Times*, 11 December, 1872.
27. While much has been written on the subject of advertising and consumption, it remains closely linked to urban populations. The most complete works on advertising and consumption are David Morris Potter, *People of Plenty: Economic Abundance and The American Character* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954); Stuart Ewen, *Captains of Consciousness: Advertising and the Social Roots of the Consumer Culture* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976); T. J. Jackson Lears and Richard Wightman Fox, Eds *The Culture of Consumption*; Daniel Pope, *The Making of Modern Advertising* (New York: Basic Books, 1983); Stephen R. Fox, *The Mirror Makers: A History of American Advertising and Its Creators* (New York: Morrow Press, 1984); Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way For Modernity, 1920-1940* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985); Richard S. Tedlow, *New and Improved: The Story of Mass Marketing in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1990); Susan Strasser, *Satisfaction Guaranteed: The Making of the American Mass Market* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1989); James D. Norris, *Advertising and the Transformation of American Society, 1865-1920* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990); William Leach, *Land of Desire*; and Jackson Lears, *Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1994).
28. For first citation, see Lewis E. Atherton, *The Pioneer Merchant in Mid-America* (New York: DeCapo Press, 1969), 125. For second citation, see *Oshkosh City Times*, 25 January 1871.
29. *The Milwaukee Bulletin*, 11 August 1866. For examples of successful campaigns, see *Ripon Free Press*, 9 January 1879. *The Milwaukee Enterprise*, 12 April 1873. For citation, see *Oshkosh City Times*, 29 December 1868.
30. See *Oshkosh City Times*, 11 May 1870; 14 June 1871; 11 December 1872; and *Ripon Free Press*, 18 September 1879.
31. The "other" category is less clearly distinguished. In Ripon, for example, a large number of these advertisers were

associated with the local college (publishers of books, the college itself, and the like). In Chicago this represents a combination of many factors. In sum, the "other" category in the big city reflects a larger diversity among the economy where this is not a valid conclusion for the smaller markets. Unfortunately, this is a problem that can't be fully explored using this quantitative method.

32. *Indianapolis Journal*, 13 October 1870. This ignorance was noted by Sherwood Anderson in 1902 when he wrote, "Some of the big, general advertisers seem [only recently] to be grasping the fact that the agricultural press is tucked up close to the hardest reading, best living class of people in the world, the American farmer." Citation from *Agricultural Advertising* 9 (February 1902): 6; in Ray Lewis White, ed., *Sherwood Anderson's Early Writings* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1989), 9.

33. *Chicago Tribune*, 2 February 1874.

34. William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (Chicago: W. W. Norton & Co., 1991), 313.

35. *Ibid.*, 318-333; for quote see 332.

36. *Ibid.*, 339.

37. For more on the relationship between newspapers -- including Horace Greeley's *New York Tribune* and John Wentworth's *Chicago Democrat* -- and the new Republican Party, see Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party before the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), passim; for the *Chicago Tribune* and the Republican Party, see Lloyd Wendt, *The Chicago Tribune: The Rise of a Great American Newspaper* (Chicago: Rand, McNally & Co., 1979), 3-25.

38. For the geographic rivalries between the Western News Company and the New York based American News Company, as well as Medill's role in the formation of the Western Associated Press (1865), see J. Seymour Curry, *Chicago: Its History and Its Builders: A Century of Marvelous Growth*, Vol. 2 (Chicago: The S. J. Clarke Publishing Company, 1912), 201-203. For Medill quote, see in Wendt, 168.

39. The category of "general notices" is not included in the final count of all advertisements. For this reason the total number of ads will not equal 2,214 in each section.

40. Each category provides evidence of "expected results" with no startling deviations. By this I mean to say that agents, manufacturers, and patent medicine advertisements

are commonly seen in the newspapers of this time and are well represented in the secondary literature on the subject, see note 2. The fact that the database shows no disproportionate categories is, I feel, a sign that the sample is representative.

41. Agents were targeted consumers by "describing themselves" within the ads, as seen in spots such as those placed by F. Lester, who advertised "2,000 tons of coal," see *Chicago Tribune*, 22 November 1868, 1; or the firm of Stark and Allen who promoted the sales of 20,000 "damaged watches," see *Chicago Tribune*, 3 November 1871, 1. A common indicator that the ads were intended for remarketeers was the claim, for example, made by the wholesale clothing firm of Hamlin, Hale & Co., that "Our buyers for the several departments have purchased at auction and of the manufacturers, liberally, at low prices, and we are prepared to fill orders and to supply the trade." See *Chicago Tribune*, 19 November 1872, 5.

42. The ads do demonstrate a remarkable seasonal pattern that also appears to wane as the years pass. For example, in seven out of ten instances when eastern firms evidenced an increase over expected results in the number of ads it was during the *cold weather months* of November and February. Yet, it seems logical that Chicago firms would dominate the market (due to difficult shipping conditions, suspended grain markets, etc.) yet this was not so.

43. A common request by businesses after the fire was for their customers to notify them on the state of their accounts. This sentiment was echoed by piano dealer W. W. Kimball, who asked "all persons who have rented or leased pianos [to] please call and report;" see *Chicago Tribune*, 3 November 1871, 4. For quote in text, see *Ibid.*, 2.

44. "Other" goods include a variety of goods, such as Alcohol, Tobacco, Religious Goods, "Unique" Ads (i.e., Response to Slander), Consumer Clubs, Multiple Products, Residential Property, Printed Information, Educational Services, Live Plants, Fuels, Theater, Concerts. Skating, Lotteries, Dancing, and Circuses.

45. Without going into great detail, medical and service professionals modernized first in the form of associations and regulatory bodies while transportation companies changed through their bureaucracies. See the indispensable works of Robert Wiebe, *The Search For Order*; Alfred Chandler, *The Visible Hand, The Managerial Revolution in American Business*; David A. Houndshell, *From the American System to Mass Production, 1800-1932* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1984); and T. J. Jackson Lears, *No Place*

of Grace.

46. For a particularly non-productive critique of Cronon's volume, see Peter A. Coclanis, "*Urbs in Horto*," *Reviews in American History* 20 (1992): 14-20.
47. Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis*, 333.
48. For an excellent treatment of these agents, see Timothy B. Spears, *100 Years on the Road: The Traveling Salesman in American Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).
49. Veblen, "The Country Town," 440.

CHAPTER 6

THE RENUNCIATION OF THE RURAL CONSUMER ETHOS

BY THE PATRONS OF HUSBANDRY, 1875 - 1882

In February of 1874, at the seventh annual meeting of the National Patrons of Husbandry, Grange Master Dudley Adams invited the assembled leadership to give their full attention to the question of rural consumption. Adams noted that many farmers had "given this one point more thought and attention than perhaps any other," resulting in a viable and independent purchasing agency system throughout much of the Midwest. He cautioned them that while "satisfactory progress has been made -- millions of dollars saved to the members of the Order ... we are as yet only on the threshold of this great work." The assembly asked the standing Executive Committee on Business Plans and Agencies to conceive a strategy to coordinate these regional activities. The Committee recognized that the system, as it existed locally, suffered from "want of cash, the efforts of antagonistic interests, lack of confidence, and probably more than all these, the failure to effect combined co-ordinated action." They then proposed a novel and seemingly straight-forward solution to unite the disparate state plans. The National Grange would organize, fund, and promote regional mail-order

supply houses -- based in New York, Chicago, and New Orleans -- to provide members a full array of discounted consumer goods.¹

While these purchasing strategies were ambitious, they were rooted in the basic ideology of the Grange movement. Balancing individual consumer desires and the need for fair access to goods by the entire rural community, the Order followed the axiom that "successful results of general welfare can be secured only by general effort" in their purchasing activities. The prosperity of the grass roots purchasing agency system from 1867 to 1875 gave farmers confidence that "combined co-ordinated action" at the national level would maximize individual benefits while providing a truly communal alternative to the established distribution system.²

The purchasing agency system, or what came to be known as the "granger style" by competing retailers, was both revolutionary and evolutionary. This technique was based on the dedication of Midwestern farmers for the demand-driven access to goods, the progressive reform of the distribution system, a communal justification of purchasing activities, and a democratic and virtuous application of the economic benefits derived by their efforts -- what I have termed a rural consumer ethos. This ideology overturned the traditional supply-based distribution process and placed consumer demand at the apex of the new consumer economy.

This novel approach, if fully implemented, blurred traditional geographic, occupational, and gendered distinctions. In other words, attributes such as rural and urban, farm or non-farm, and even male or female became less important than one's distinction as cooperative consumer. The promulgation of these tenets were insurgent enough to bring down the charge of socialism upon the Grange by those who opposed their consumer efforts.³

But the agency was also enmeshed with the traditional buying customs of generations of Midwestern farmers. Bulk sales and purchases, interaction with territorial agents, the need for large amounts of cash and credit, and the communal evaluation of capital goods all gave their current consumer practices deep roots in their prairie experiences. Even the Patrons of Husbandry borrowed much of its organizational legitimacy from the time-honored practice of forming local Farmers' Clubs and Horticultural Societies. In these ways, the purchasing agency was both a new and a conventional application of rural consumerism.

Yet, despite these advantages, the state agencies often struggled to remain solvent after 1874. For example, sales of the Illinois State Agency fell to a trickle by 1876. Farmers were lured by the unscrupulous pricing tactics of retail competitors, and State Agent S. J. Frew lamented "that the present dime was ... better than the future dollar" to many farm consumers. Additionally, the proximity

of urban suppliers in Indianapolis, St. Louis and Chicago made this betrayal all the more common. In a letter to Wisconsin granger Joseph Osborn, R. M. Guy of Bloomington commented that Illini members "have so many other ways into this state besides coming through Chicago that they will not do business" with the State Agent. Frew reported annual sales of only \$4,049.38 at the December, 1875 meeting of the State Grange. When compared to its neighbors -- the Wisconsin grange sold more than six thousand dollars in the *month* of December alone, and \$38,149.39 for the year while the Indiana grange had annual sales of over \$58,000 -- it can be questioned whether the Illinois Grange still had a viable purchasing agency by this date. Without national supervision then, the State Agency was condemned to become an unused and ridiculed department that relied upon the same competitors that the purchasing agency concept was originally formulated to surmount. As late as 1881, the Wisconsin State Grange held up their neighbor's efforts as "an office doing strictly a commission business, and keeping no goods on hand."⁴

In neighboring Indiana, Patrons also faced stiff competition from the many regional supply houses. The potential failure of the Agency carried with it an implied threat to the Order itself. State Master Henley James commented that "some of the state granges have bankrupted their treasuries, by attempting to carry an intricate and

expensive business at the expense of the State Grange." He contended that the purchasing agency must be "self-sustaining to be successful, and the expense of such enterprise must be derived from the profits growing out of the business." It was "both unwise and hazardous... to assume financial responsibility on account of any business enterprise of any character whatever."⁵

Despite strong sales, the Indiana agency demonstrated a profound need for stable fiscal support in early 1876. Agent Alpheus Tyner reported that the department has incurred a deficit through "a combination of circumstances... unavoidable upon our part." He asked for the state officials to consider,

some plan for the better protection of the interests of the agency....I would suggest that a business fund be provided for, separate and independent from the regular revenues now derived from the fees and dues, and that this fund be raised upon a mutual basis that every member of the Order may feel that he has an interest in it and the success of the business.

The response by state leaders was clear and absolute. The special committee to oversee the bureau demanded "the present system of the State Agency be discontinued" and its assets liquidated. The motion was passed by the assembly and the task given over to the Executive Committee in January, 1876.⁶

By the end of the decade, many Midwestern states' purchasing efforts were in shambles. Rather than creating independent organs by which farmers could control the access

of goods, members met in Chicago, on October 8, 1879, to investigate how to educate Patrons "in the ways of doing business in the city of Chicago." It seemed that grangers no longer hoped to direct purchases through their institution, but were content to allow suppliers to regain control over the terms and conditions of consumption. Where they once led the movement, Midwestern granges now followed the conservative and neglectful management of the national body.⁷

The cause of this ideological retrenchment was complex and goes to the heart of the problem created by the institutional control over such a grass roots phenomenon. Beginning in 1875, and lasting until the close of the decade, the Grange faced a general desertion from its ranks that almost destroyed the Order. Participation plummeted in 1875 from 858,000 to about 124,000 in 1880. Most of these losses occurred in the Midwest. Illinois alone fell from 676 to fewer than 100 Subordinates statewide. It was during these years of institutional privation that the purchasing agency system also failed in the region. Yet the links between falling membership and the agency are not clear. For example, while the State Master's address at the 1876 meeting of the Wisconsin Grange focused on the numerical losses to the Order, State Agent L. G. Kniffen reported a rapidly *increasing* business volume. If there was not a direct correlation between falling membership and the

success of the agency, then the actions taken by the leaders of the State and National Grange were paramount to understanding why such a popular service failed to sustain itself.⁸

The historiography of the Grange generally agrees on the root causes of the failure of the purchasing arm. Most historians have claimed that the efforts lacked central guidance, business experience, or were undercapitalized. Still, in light of the intrinsic desires by many farmers to construct a purchasing agency, the question of the role of the National leadership in the collapse of that bureau has yet to be examined. Historians have focused on the changes that led to the *institutional survival* of the Grange, not the factors unwittingly destroyed in that process. Thomas Allan Woods' account, *Knights of the Plow: Oliver H. Kelley and the Republican Origins of the Grange*, makes the convincing argument that, beginning in 1875, "radical" leadership wanted the Grange to focus on the social agenda originally proposed by Kelley. These members openly clashed with those who were more hesitant to abandon the burgeoning purchasing department. The confrontation over the intent of the business activities resulted in a coordinated effort to return to the "true" purpose of the Order. Central to this change was the ideological codification of rural consumerism.⁹

Wood's thesis of an ideological *coup d'etat* bears fruit

in this discussion. The debate surrounding the purchasing agency offers clues as to the National Order's intent regarding rural consumer patterns. By examining the theories that buttress their disagreement with the purchasing agency concept, our understanding of the various consumer options are freed from the limiting institutional focus of the Order. This analysis focuses on the State Grange of Wisconsin -- where the established purchasing agency existed the longest -- and the leaders of the National Grange in an effort to discover whether it was the actions by the leaders of the Order or the underlying consumer ideology of its members which caused the downfall of this purchasing system.

Without a doubt, the purchasing activities of Midwestern state granges suffered dearly from operational considerations such as a lack of business experience, rising competition, and an unreliable source of funding. Routinely, Grange purchasing agents were ill equipped to contend with the huge volumes of mail and large quantities of diverse goods, and often poorly kept records that the transactions generated. Yet this lack of experience was not a problem in itself until the Order was faced with competition for farmers' dollars by the large urban supply houses formed in Chicago, St. Louis, and Milwaukee.¹⁰

In the early years of the movement, access to Chicago

wholesalers, such as one run by Z. M. Hall, were actually encouraged by grange leaders. The *Prairie Farmer* recounted numerous examples of Subordinates who did their business through Chicago, such as one, "having bought something near \$1,000 worth of goods, which have given the best of satisfaction [and]... *being just what they were recommended.*" The periodical often evaluated local firms, noting that "Z. M. Hall, the first grocer of Chicago to attempt direct dealings with Grangers, was mentioned in the highest terms," that the "wholesale grocery house of Roe Brothers... [was] unexceptional in all respects," and "Montgomery, Ward & Co. ... [were] of considerable business tact, and bearing a reputation for honesty and promptness."¹¹

Only later did state agents recognize the threat to the Grange sponsored departments from the private sector. Thomas Wilcock, the secretary for the La Valle Grange in Wisconsin, wrote to Osborn that "the members generally feele [sic] that we shall have to give up the State Agent and fall back on direct trade with Chicago Houses." In 1876, State Agent Kniffen reported that he was "compelled to decline to fill orders of this character, and the majority of Granges continued to send their orders to such 'Grange Supply' houses as would give them satisfactory terms."¹²

Making matters worse, state agents had difficulties in securing reliable operating capital by which they might

obtain prices comparable to these larger wholesalers. Often obliged to use their personal lines of credit, agents were loath to seek out greater volume purchases due to the risk of insolvency. Just as Alpheus Tyner hoped to secure an endowment for his ill-fated Indiana agency, an "implement fund" was often created through a special assessment of the state's members. One agent felt that such a fund would make "every member of the order... feel that he has an interest in it and the success of the business." Unfortunately, the lax prosecution of the levy by officials made the fund woefully inadequate. Kniffen noted the institutional limits of the Grange in enforcing this communal consumer ethos: "Do not say that the Grange is a failure. It is a grand success.... The failure, so far as there is any, is in the men -- in the material composing the Grange, not the Grange principles. ... A Grange society organized purely from selfish motives and personal agreement can never succeed."¹³

While not directly related to purchasing options, the diverse social agenda of the Order lessened the concentration that was applied to these operational complexities. For example, through the grange farmers pursued legislation which resulted in the Department of Agriculture, the establishment of state agricultural colleges and experimental stations, rural free mail delivery, parcel post, and "many other [programs] of lesser importance or too numerous to mention." Further, a

retrospective on the South Greenville Grange (WI) noted such social functions as a Christmas celebration, six annual dances for young members, musical instruction, and an yearly children's day picnic.¹⁴

Paralleling these social functions were the tensions caused by the incessant conflict between local and centralized authority. Midwestern farmers resisted the push by state and national leaders to defer to their judgement. One example of this trend was the sudden and unsanctioned formation of county "Pamona" granges and county councils that sought to redirect power away from the more centralized bodies in favor of local Patrons. Most notably, state leaders intent on providing an implement fund had to contend with these hierarchical tensions. Wisconsin Executive Committee member H. D. Hitt reported that while "it is thought by some of the brethren that [the implement fund] had better be left to our county organizations.... on full consideration I am satisfied that the central power in this department should rest in your Executive Committee. From them an inexpensive and simple channel may be devised through which this business may be carried into the county organizations." In step with this penchant were the independent purchasing activities of the Subordinates. The Champaign County Pamona Grange found, in 1873 and 1874, that they were capable of negotiating discounts for clothing and general merchandise on their own.¹⁵

A good example of these opposing, and often paradoxical stances taken by local members was the Nettle Creek Grange of Dalton, Indiana. While they believed that the formation of a grange store was essential to their Order, the various local communities argued over the actual placement of the depot. One organizer lamented "we have conferred with Little Creek Grange but did not receive much encouragement, some members promise to take stock if it is located at Dalton, some would take stock only if certain persons could manage it, &c." While they debated the physical site, regional wholesalers attempted to pick off hesitant grangers by offering slight discounts for their merchandise. Patrons ultimately rejected these offers by relying on the supporting tenets of rural consumerism: communal action and individual demand-driven consumption. One member wrote:

After mature deliberation we give it as our opinion that members of the order will not be benefitted by making a contract with either of them because each [on the committee] have a preference as to which place the trade... & because we believe we can by clubbing together make purchases on better terms than we could with either... because neither of the above persons kept goods that will give persons a chance to have a choice of goods and one frequently could not obtain what they wished.¹⁶

Still, none of these obstacles -- whether operational or matters of institutional priority -- were insurmountable. Though the issues facing the purchasing agency were thorny, the rationale for collective consumer practices remained sound. The demand for a delicate balance between market individualism and communal solidarity was possible through

the widespread belief in the principles of the rural consumer ethos. The fact that a great number of purchasing agencies had been generated, well before the National Grange even attempted to lend a centralized, institutional equilibrium, testifies to the potential of this grass roots conception. The plan for regional supply houses in Chicago, New York, and New Orleans was a workable one, if only the National Grange showed as much agility as their local affiliates.¹⁷

Adams' call to action in 1874 indicated that the National Grange indeed intended to respond to the need for "combined co-ordinated action." Yet by the end of that year, plans formulated to meet these wants showed that National and State leaders were headed in opposite directions. "Conservative" strategies, which called for the promotion of regional, commercially based supply-houses were challenged by the more ideological plans calling for strict or "true" social cooperation. The decrease in national membership after 1875 undoubtedly heightened the sense of gravity surrounding the debate. The notion of creating an agency that was safe (i.e., fiscally sound) and which reinforced the economic need for membership in the Order was paramount. Even the Executive Committee's report in 1874 recognized that the agency concept would further erode membership if not treated delicately. The radical members began looking for a proven example of "true" cooperative purchasing. They

found it in the Rochdale Plan.¹⁸

The Rochdale Equitable Pioneers Society was founded in 1843 by twenty-eight weavers in the Lancashire town of Rochdale, in northern England, and quickly spread throughout Britain. Using ideas popularized by Robert Owen, the societies pooled their funds to purchase goods and services. The goods were sold to members at market prices, the profits being *reinvested* into the society. Dividends were issued either annually or quarterly based on a members' net purchases, or percentage of participation. The society had gained supporters throughout the world and had first appeared in the discussions of the National Grange in 1874. By 1876 the Report on Co-Operation issued by the Patrons concluded that the "more thoroughly we investigate and understand what is known as the Rochdale Plan, so fully tested and matured throughout England, the more we are convinced that it is the safest and best system of co-operation which can be devised to secure, in business matters, 'the greatest good to the greatest number.'"¹⁹

Despite such high praise, the Executive Committee report expressed doubts about the applicability of the Rochdale concept in the rural United States. While successful in England and the eastern half of the nation, the panel questioned "whether or not the conditions for their success exists, to any great extent, among the members of our Order." The prerequisite for the Rochdale cooperative

was proximity to "large manufacturing establishments" where "a numerous working population is compacted." Noting that this scenario was contrary to conditions existing in much of the agricultural Midwest, members reasoned that "some modification... [need and] will ultimately be identified" to adapt the current system to the Rochdale principles.²⁰

Such a system was a significant departure from the purchasing agency concept. Rather than refashioning rural biases into a working consensus, the Rochdale Plan capitulated to the members' incipient longing for local autonomy. The requirements of stock membership -- which discontinued the need for an annual implement fund -- further limited the movements' stated goal of helping all farmers to acquire goods more cheaply and easily. Such a commitment to selective, local solidarity came at the expense of an individual member's market position. While the concept did fiscally stabilize a local community's cooperative efforts, it circumscribed the participation of individual farmers to these local bodies. In other words, rather than all members gaining the economic advantages earned through the collective funding and amassed orders of a centralized purchasing agency (even if a local grange rarely met), regional farmers could only benefit through the purchasing activities of stock-holding members of the Rochdale Society (which was designed to assure the solvency of local chapters, and the viability of the larger

organization).

Advocates of the new plan had no reservations about the problems of implementation or the limits to individual consumers. National Grange Master John T. Jones proclaimed that the Rochdale Plan alone offered a "deep philosophy, pure morality, lofty virtue, and genuine religion, that underlies cooperative life.... The material, moral, social and intellectual influences are in near connection with each other." Others were even more direct in their support of the plan. They termed the Rochdale system the only "practical application of true co-operation." In their present form, the state and local agencies were "cooperative" in name only. As described above, Midwestern farmers intended only to create the necessary means to secure the benefits of aggregate purchasing. The National Grange voiced its position that it did "not approve [of this] existing system, if system it be." While agreeing to temporarily support the regional plans, "Our efforts should be to convince the most arrogant as well as the humblest Patron that *self must be forgotten for the benefit of the many.... We have much to undo that has been incorrectly done.*"²¹

In their effort to "undo" the existing structure, the National Grange vilified the existing purchasing agency's role in regulating rural participation in the broader, capitalist marketplace. By November, 1875, the hierarchy was agreed that the agencies had fallen far short of the

benefits which "could be realized under a more perfect and uniform system." They pronounced that the discounts were only marginally greater than those obtained from the usual commission merchants. The National Grange proclaimed the purchasing agency -- which was the founding principle of the association at the grass-roots level in 1867 -- was "false in theory, unjust to our members... and that under this system, instead of building up our Order, we are building up commission merchants under our auspices." In one of the last acts of the session, the body voted against the resolution providing the state agencies the regional control centers in New York, Chicago, and New Orleans, by a vote of eight in favor to thirty-five opposed. The purchasing agency system, as defined by local rural consumers, was never again considered by the National Grange as a viable alternative to the Rochdale Plan.²²

The actions of the National Grange might not have been so destructive to many of the state agencies had they remained simple resolutions or speeches. However, the National Grange published and promoted an unprecedented series of pamphlets in order to weaken existing purchasing strategies. Three pamphlets in particular, issued in early 1876, led the successful attack on the purchasing agency. In one, Master John T. Jones promised an international fraternal and economic union through the Rochdale Plan "by which the farmers of America and the co-operators of Great

Britain, and perhaps eventually of other countries, may begin a more direct international trade, to handle at least a portion of the products of their farm and factories." A second suggested that this cooperative confederation would allow for a kinder and more "mutual system of trade, or manufacture, as distinguished from the competitive system of either."²³

Oliver Kelley authored the most popular of the three. Priced at five cents, Kelley's bulletin explained how "true cooperation" differed from the more mercantile pursuits of the purchasing agency in that it "invest[s] the profits in favor of those who purchase." Furthermore, the Rochdale policy of retail pricing fostered no complaints from urban competitors, whereas the wholesale practices of the agency gave "no substantial evidence of profit, but an invariable creation of prejudice throughout the mercantile community." Taken together, and isolated from the realities of most farmers, these pamphlets aptly demonstrate how Grange leaders fell prey to simplistic economic theory. "True" cooperation, under the guise of the Rochdale Plan, may have fostered greater fraternalism than the purchasing agency, but it sacrificed the economic individualism that was at the heart of their capitalist membership.²⁴

The pivotal operational changes proposed by Jones, Kelley, and others to the existing system revolved around the allocation of profits. As described above, Midwestern

Subordinates were hesitant to fund the delivery vehicle of consumer goods through depots and storerooms. Now, the Rochdale Plan demanded of these consumers that they *first underwrite* the local implement fund, then wait for dividends to accrue before pocketing the profits from their purchases. National Grange Master Samuel E. Adams justified the policy of retaining the profits of consumers to fund the Rochdale societies:

The system which our grange agencies started upon of giving the profit on each transaction to the purchaser, by not adding ordinary trade profits, is one whose whole scale of advantage begins and ends in this single act; there is no intercourse amongst members, nor is there any object to be attained, or any idea promulgated beyond that of getting goods -- at cost price. If this be the only object, it is equally answered whether the advantage be given in each separate transaction, or in the form of dividends at the end of a quarter or half year, while the latter places at the disposal of the agency funds for the extension of business.

In other words, the Rochdale concept demanded a *greater* investment by consumers, and lent less assistance to individual solvency than the existing system.²⁵

Additionally, the Rochdale Plan escalated the promised benefits to rural consumers through this funding approach. By assuming that farmers would allow their savings to be reinvested into the operating fund of the local society, the pamphlets described an upward cycle of readily available cash to be used by members. Consequently, the promise of a global union of consumers that participated in the Rochdale society led to heightened expectations. Lastly, the plan

proposed that the use of *all* agents or other intermediaries be discontinued. Unlike the purchasing agency concept, that focused on achieving economies of scale, thereby removing the "barnacles sticking to our ship," the Rochdale Plan was, ultimately, nothing more than a reworked utopian socialist dream of segregating producers and consumers onto a new "ship," sheltered from the squalls and eddies of market capitalism.²⁶

If the rapid collapse of the Illinois and Indiana purchasing agencies hints at causes other than the directional changes of the National leadership, then the slow-death of the Wisconsin purchasing agency draws this linkage more clearly. Here the State Grange successfully operated under the purchasing agency concept until 1882. The Wisconsin office was surely aided in its longevity by the isolation of the state. Removed from the constant pressures of urban suppliers, the State Agency was able to operate profitably throughout the decade. While suffering from localism and underfunding, the agency did not succumb to these forces. The proceedings of the Wisconsin State Grange demonstrate how the competing consumer philosophies clashed as this agency was buffeted by operational and institutional changes. The victory by Wisconsin Patrons dedicated to returning the Order to its "founding" social principles was representative of the battles fought at the National level.

The Wisconsin State Grange was organized in Ripon on

December 10, 1872. For four months, H. E. Huxley held both the State Secretary and Purchasing Agency positions. At that time, Huxley resigned as Agent and the body elected Joseph Osborn, of Oshkosh, as his replacement. Osborn, who was also chairman of the Executive Committee, was the central character in the development and leadership of the agency from 1873 until 1875. He created Subordinate "county councils," which provided local funding for consumerism, and shepherded legislation through the State government to make these bodies legal. Osborn served as the State Master of the Grange in 1876, and he resigned from leadership in 1877.

Osborn's fraternalism was not limited to the Grange. He became an active member of the Sovereigns of Industry in 1874, where he worked to form cooperatives based on the "industrial interests of society." His ultimate aim was to unite these workers with the rural "producers" of the Grange. His correspondence with Sovereign Secretary J. C. Abbott and Business Secretary J. L. Sands indicated that Osborn planned to "[undertake] nothing less than the revolution of the Commerce of the Country - a pretty big job." This activism was transferred to his duties with the State Grange. He was particularly passionate in his efforts to disrupt the territorial agents and the manufacturers who depended on them. To Osborn, these agents were "so well established, so extensive, and so strongly entrenched upon the wants of our people as to have rendered themselves

almost a necessity, as well to the manufacturers as to the farmers." More than any other factor, his desire to see the total eradication of these drummers fueled his radical vision of rural consumerism.²⁷

At the second annual session of the State Grange, Osborn spelled out his vision for the Orders' purchasing agency. Noting that the existing agency only "may be considered as preparatory," the State Agent suggested that Wisconsin move aggressively to form class-based collectives. Osborn recounted his state's early and bitter disputes with local suppliers, concluding that "to-day there is no misunderstanding the fact that [farmers and manufacturers] cannot be reconciled with one another."²⁸

Osborn's idealism is evident in the goals he saw for this new consumer bureau. As mentioned above, the proposed union with the Sovereigns of Industry was to commence an upheaval in American business. Osborn was "seiz[ed] with eager joy and exultation [by] the long looked for means of relief, the ranks of mechanical labor are to-day marching in the footsteps of agricultural labor and the very air resounds with the tread of marshalled hosts everywhere." In January, 1875, Osborn assembled and edited the *Bulletin*, a monthly publication available by subscription to grangers, which he managed throughout his years with the Grange. By July, the periodical was the primary forum for speeches by leading members of the Sovereigns, various tracts on "true"

cooperation, and numerous, spirited editorials impelling his Order to do battle with American suppliers.²⁹

Joseph Osborn represented the earnest revolutionary fervor and fraternal intent of the Patrons of Husbandry. His political activism -- as aide to Governor W. R. Taylor and later with the Greenback Party -- was transferred to the Grange, where he sought to form a "movement culture" very similar to the one S. O. Daws achieved with the Alliance in 1886. Yet Osborn wrote to colleagues of his frustration with the Grange. This frustration, coupled with his desires for cooperation and rapid change, made Osborn the perfect emissary for the National Grange's "radical" swing toward the Rochdale Plan and the outright rejection of the more malleable and market-based purchasing agency.³⁰

L. G. Kniffen acted as Osborn's ideological doppelgänger in his resolute support for this "traditional" purchasing agency concept. Biographical data on Kniffen is scant, but from Grange records it is clear that he was both a farmer and businessman from the town of Tomah in Monroe County, Wisconsin. He was the elected representative for his community at the state sessions. Kniffen was appointed State Purchasing Agent upon the sudden death of Adelmorn Sherman in June of 1875. Elected to the post the following year, Kniffen held office until he was forced from the Order in 1890.

Kniffen's business experience apparently was quite

extensive. He declared that he had "over fifteen years as a manufacturer, and devoted much time to handling a large corps of agents, I know the pro and con of selling goods." This training gave him an exacting manner when dealing with the purchasing agency. His articles in the *Bulletin* reflected a strong belief in the "laws of commercial relations." Patrons could benefit from these principles, but only through the collective power of the agency. As agent, Kniffen demanded that expenses be paid promptly, circulars and other advertisements used to promote business, and that his column in the *Bulletin* be devoted to boosting trade. The agent frequently visited the Subordinates in order to promote the purchasing agency concept. He was most pleased by the fact that "the granges always patronize us after we visit them," rather than from any increase in social fraternalism ancillary to his mission.³¹

Most significantly, Kniffen's level-headed administration kept the agency solvent when other states suffered from mis-management and neglect. For example Kniffen was the driving force behind the early use of National Grange funds to support the State Agency. Additionally, he lectured his peers in the Wisconsin Grange about the necessity of promoting and maintaining the state Implement fund. Kniffen's belief in a reasoned and moral approach to the agency was revealed in an article published in May, 1875,

When we entered upon this position we laid aside our individualism. We have no pet plan to promulgate. In every business transaction we endeavor to act for the *individual Patron*, the same as he would act for himself, standing in our place keeping in mind *our duty to the whole Order*... It is a fact that we have been so long in the habit of judging commercial institutions and stores by the glitter and tinsel they display in their shop windows, and magnifying men by the office or position they hold, that we have become like moths flickering around the light of a candle, and occasionally get singed. Should not the Grange teach Patrons the true value of implements and merchandise?

These and other examples suggest that Kniffen believed in the purchasing agency concept as it was originally conceived -- a subtle combination of community and individualism, of cooperation and capitalism. Kniffen represented an agency that reflected the conflicting aspects of rural life, not one which demanded adherence to a doctrine intended to avoid these tensions.³²

By some estimates, Kniffen and Osborn should have been closely allied. Much like the leading members of granges in Georgia, as described by Steven Hahn, the Wisconsin executives were cut from similar cloth. Kniffen and Osborn were representative of their managerial brethren in that they were white, native-born middle-aged males with middling to above-average economic prospects. Further, both Osborn and Kniffen shared an extensive retail experience in Oshkosh and Tomah, respectively. While Osborn's political affiliations indicate that he was more partisan than his successor, Kniffen on occasion voiced his beliefs that the public ballot was sometimes preferable to the often

cloistered protest of the Order. Yet in reality, their opposing views regarding the purchasing agency made each an unequivocal spokesperson for the two different proposed solutions: the established purchasing agency system and the Rochdale Plan.³³

The clash between Kniffen and Osborn never occurred at a personal level, but only through their explications of the role to be played by the State Agency. In correspondence, the two were cordial, and they cooperated frequently. Despite a confidential attack on Kniffen by his aide, Osborn publicly defended his successor to those who complained about delayed orders or poor response time. It was not until the external pressures began to multiply -- such as decreasing membership, competition, and rising localism -- that the two split in their general support for the agency. While it is facile to invent stark dichotomies to more easily understand the past, in this instance Kniffen and Osborn did offer antithetical goals for a single institution.³⁴

In 1876, Osborn demonstrated his frustration with the purchasing agency concept by turning to the Rochdale Plan. In a letter to H. E. Huxley, Osborn decried the agency for involving the Grange with hated manufacturers and other "outside parties, to a degree which interferes with that absolute freedom of control which... is imperative in our affairs." To another granger, H. D. Hitt, he flatly stated

that "I do not like the commission business inside of the Grange." By April of 1876, Osborn actively promoted the replacement policy advocated by the National Grange. He often specified O. H. Kelley's "little pamphlet on Cooperation" as a vital tool to educate local consumers. Osborn favored the philosophy of "true cooperation," as defined in the Rochdale Plan, rather than the more mundane State Agency when instructing Subordinates.³⁵

Kniffen's defense of the agency was utilitarian. At the 1876 annual session, he noted that the funding policies of the agencies in the Midwest were the key source of concern. Using the loan secured from the National Grange, Kniffen recounted the "great advantage which the very moderate sum of money placed at his disposal has been to the agency." Appealing to members of the Wisconsin assembly he added, "It is of paramount importance that this agency, already successfully established, should receive *your* fostering care." In response to the intense call for change, based largely on the utopian promises of a global union, Kniffen wrote in the *Bulletin* in July, 1877 that while the Grange could "look for the coming of a financial savior. [It] must not expect some Moses to lead us out of our financial wilderness of debt. We must save ourselves by laboring earnestly, economizing frugally, and voting intelligently." The purchasing agency in Wisconsin survived the era of institutional reconstruction largely due to Kniffen's fiscal

conservatism and business experience.³⁶

However, notions of "true cooperation" and the "false theory" of the current purchasing agency were gaining in popular usage. The pamphlet campaign of the National Grange was only the most obvious example. In Wisconsin the *Bulletin*, under Osborn's direction, increased its attacks on the purchasing agency concept. In September, 1877, an editorial spelled out the "Distinction Between Joint-Stockism and Co-Operation." Joint-stockism, as embodied in the State Agency and local stock companies, fostered individualism motivated by profit. Cooperation, in the form of the Rochdale Plan, lifted members "above the murky atmosphere of false pretenses, of personal aims and selfish cares... into a purer air, bright with the vision of the true, the just, and the good."³⁷

Calls for change came on several fronts. Osborn pressed the Grange to merge their agency with that of the Sovereigns of Industry and turn toward their unique cooperative ethos. Others, such as State Master H. C. Sherman, echoed the sentiments of National Grange leaders who recommended the complete discontinuance of the department. A more somber development for advocates of the purchasing agency concept was the move to withdraw the implement fund from Kniffen's use. Thomas Wilcock, Master of the La Valle Grange, led the call for the restitution of funds for their use in forming local Rochdale societies.³⁸

Kniffen was able to defend the State Agency from these attacks, but the Wisconsin State Grange was irrecoverably split on the issue after 1877. Kniffen argued that the "innumerable little Grange stores" allied to the agency were "almost invariably prosperous and profitable." Stripped to only the barest essentials in order to provide services locally, these "stores [were] safe from all competition... [because the] more opposition hurled against them, the greater the reduction in prices to defeat them, the more their customers benefitted by a general reduction in cost of supplies." Kniffen heralded the fact that the purchasing agency concept was never based on abstract rules, nor did they rely on the "recommend[ation] or advoca[cy] to any extent by Grange authority... [but] have come naturally into existence as the necessity of the hour." In contrast, Rochdale stores competed directly with other retailers. They required that their members supply the venture capital by which they might enter the market and begin their attempt at providing savings. The stores needed business talent and a broad range of goods, "for if the Grange stores only deal in groceries, the competition will put its profits on dry goods or articles the Grange store does not command, and sell groceries at cost leaving the Grange store no margin of profit whatever at competing prices." Kniffen concluded that with "less capital than is necessary or less experience and ability at command, it would appear that the little store in

connection with the Grange had better be adhered to."³⁹

While Kniffen's arguments carried the day, clear lines had been drawn between State leaders. Most obvious was the departure of Osborn from the Grange hierarchy. After his proposition to unite with the Sovereigns through the Rochdale Plan failed, Osborn resigned from the Executive Committee. He then led a group of prominent grangers, including H. E. Huxley, in forming an independent "Industrial and Provident Society" in alliance with local Sovereigns.⁴⁰

Between 1879 and 1882, Kniffen faced a constant assault on his agency by members favorable to the Rochdale Plan. Unable to malign his reliable accounting practices, these grangers forced repeated resolutions to the floor demanding the return of the implement fund. Seeing Kniffen as an obstacle to reform, a series of procedural maneuvers were tried to make the State Agency an appointed position, tenured for only one year, rather than an elected one without limitations on service. Again and again, Kniffen publicly defended his position using the "logic" of market capitalism and the need for the concentration of assets, as delivered through the implement fund,

... business is only business the world over, and it is not different whether under Grange auspices, private firms, corporations, or co-operations. Its very foundation rests on this basis: capital, responsibility, and confidence. A firm with limited capital, and limited responsibility, must necessarily be a limited operator. Our successful grange operations are those that have not been backed by limited capital,

but by a lien on the honor, capital, and full responsibility of parties contracting for goods.⁴¹

By 1882, opposition had undermined the agency through lost membership and financial support. As many locals opened Rochdale societies, they withdrew their support for the general Implement fund. In 1879, in an effort to disarm opponents of their most effective weapon, Kniffen proposed that the agency be made fiscally self-sufficient through the use of a small commission on sales. In 1881, a deficit at the bureau opened the way for opponents to dissolve the movement. Kniffen reacted sharply to the "personal onslaught" on his stricken bureau. Having been exonerated from blame by the Executive Committee, Kniffen held that the charges against the agency "had no foundation -- in fact were made only for effect." But the attacks proved to be productive. The following year the Implement fund was returned to the regional agents, and Kniffen was left a nominal reservoir by which he could continue to keep his office operational.⁴²

Kniffen lingered as State Agent until 1890, but the agency concept never again approached the potential realized in the 1870s. Without independent funding, the agency merely created an additional layer of bureaucracy and overhead to farmers seeking bulk purchases. Further, by the 1880s, urban supply houses had fully exploited the delays in the implementation of the purchasing agency concept by the Grange. Kniffen's final departure from the Order was as

ignominious as that of the agency concept. In 1890, Kniffen sued the Wisconsin State Grange, claiming to have been cheated of \$2,500 for goods alleged to have been delivered by the Order. In response, the Grange turned to Luis Losse, a private supplier in Milwaukee, to provide for the Subordinates. The case, which was heard by the State Supreme Court, was settled in 1897 against Kniffen.⁴³

In the end, Kniffen proved to be such a resolute defender of the agency because he understood that it was based on the deeply-held convictions of many rural consumers. At the 1882 annual session he spoke of his hope that "future laborers in this work may unearth the mouldy records of this State Grange and review this, our early labor, with interest and curiosity. Our works will live when we are all passed away and forgotten." Yet what remained after the agency had passed into oblivion was a nation increasingly driven by the privately owned, mass consumer market. For this reason alone, the conclusions drawn regarding these early efforts at gaining consumer controls are compelling to the heirs of these rural customers.⁴⁴

First, while farmers were not immune to the allure of a cooperative "vision of the true, the just, and the good," they demanded low prices and easy access as the essential precondition of local participation. Critics may charge that these pragmatists were too simplistic -- demanding low costs

through cooperative purchases while asking for high prices as individual suppliers of raw materials. In reality, their unique experiences gave farmers an early insight into the properties of modern mass consumption and rapid distribution which validated the efforts of the purchasing agency. At that time it was possible for a well-organized consumer group to gain control over the distribution and pricing of many mass produced goods.

Second, the failure by the National Grange was due to their drive for ideological purity. While Midwestern purchasing agencies had proven to be extremely versatile, the forced march of "true" cooperation drove from their ranks those most interested in participating in the new consumer economy. The lack of primary sources makes it tempting to conclude that falling membership alone scared Grange leaders into the fateful decision that sealed the agency's doom. Yet Joseph Osborn's actions in Wisconsin suggests just the opposite -- that the ideological movement had deep roots in many of the leading members. Unfortunately, their fashionable doctrines failed to account for the wide range of rural consumer needs.

Finally, why did they fail at their central goal of fashioning a "combined co-ordinated action?" Without adequate funding and accounting procedures, a hierarchical and efficient agency was beyond the experience of these Midwestern small capitalists. Even local managers such as

Kniffen had difficulties in maintaining liquidity and customer loyalty in the small markets of Wisconsin. Only the development of large corporations made such internal integration even possible -- and even this occurred by trial and error. For example, Montgomery Ward was not even one of the largest regional suppliers when they catapulted to the lead of the mail-order industry. Many of their larger competitors fell from view simply as a result of the caprice of the marketplace. Given their divided leadership and chronic underfunding, failure of the Grange endeavors was nearly inevitable.

The formation of a collective consumer strategy by rural Midwesterners was largely contained within the Purchasing Agency of the Patrons of Husbandry from 1869 until 1882. The failure of Grange efforts was not an indictment against the Order, but simply the result of a conflict between the endemic desire for goods by members and the intended goals of the institution. Organizers of the Grange were plain in their proposed use of the agency to attract members to their social union. The rapid growth of both the Grange and its consumer departments attested to the wisdom of this policy. But Grange officials were soon faced with the costs of such a strategy. The intended universal benefits and autonomous operation of the purchasing agency ran counter to the fraternal goals of the Order. Furthermore, by 1876, the mounting requirements for money

and administration were seen within the prism of a rapidly falling membership as a danger to the very existence of the Grange. The "radical" swing towards the Rochdale Plan was a legitimate response by the National and State bodies to return the Order to its cooperative ideological roots. The resulting collapse of the State and Local agencies, seen in this light, is neither an indication of the failure of the Grange nor of an inadequacy by rural Midwesterners to articulate a clear plan of action to realize their consumer desires.

Rural consumers had based their actions on the communal experience of farm life. The common need for implements, distance from suppliers, interaction with territorial agents, education of the fairs, and knowledge of the distribution network led to a grass-roots effort to form a communal policy. The Grange formed in the Midwest concurrently to these desires and became the vessel by which these hopes were contained. The failure of the purchasing agency concept left an inefficient and redundant marketing arm within the Grange. As they had before, rural Americans now turned to alternative means by which to satisfy their continuing consumer wants. The reciprocal relationship between these farmers and the urban supply houses became the new nexus for the rural consumer vision.

ENDNOTES

List of abbreviations:

- CHS Chicago Historical Society, Chicago, Illinois.
 InHS Indiana Historical Society, Indianapolis, Indiana.
 ISHL Illinois State Historical Library, Springfield, Illinois.
 InSL Indiana State Library, Indianapolis, Indiana.
 SHSW State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin.
 UI University of Illinois Library, Champaign-Urbana, Illinois.

1. For Adams, see National Grange of the Patrons of Husbandry, *Proceeding of the Seventh Session of the National Grange of the Patrons of Husbandry* (New York: S. W. Green, Printer and Stereotyper, 1874), 13-14. For report of Committee, see National Grange of the Patrons of Husbandry, *Proceeding of the Eighth Session of the National Grange of the Patrons of Husbandry* (Claremont, N. H.: Claremont Manuf'g Co., Printers and Stereotypers, 1875), 23-26.

2. For Wisconsin Grange motto, see Circular to Granges from Joseph Osborn, Oshkosh, January 2 1874, in Joseph H. Osborn, *Papers, 1855-1890*, Folder 1855-1874, SHSW.

3. For "granger style," see Purchasing Agent's Department, in Executive Committee of the Wisconsin State Grange, *Bulletin*, July, 1875. For charge of socialism, see Charles F. Adams, Jr., "The Granger Movement," *North American Review* 120 (April 1875), 395. See also *Prairie Farmer*, 3 January 1874, 1; and *Oshkosh City Times*, 17 January 1872.

4. For Frew, see Illinois State Grange, *Proceedings of the State Grange of Illinois, at the Third Annual Session held in the City of Springfield, January 12, 13, 14, 15, and 16, A. D., 1875* (Chicago: Harry Fish, Book and Job Printer, 1875), 19; for Guy to Osborn, dated March 18, 1876 see Osborn, *Papers*, SHSW. For Illinois' numbers, see Illinois State Grange, *Proceedings* (1875), 31; for Wisconsin, see Wisconsin State Grange, *Proceedings of the Fourth Annual Meeting of the Wisconsin State Grange, Patrons of Husbandry Held at Milwaukee, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday, January 4th, 5th, 6th and 7th, 1876* (Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Sentinel Co., 1876), 15; for Indiana, see Indiana State Grange, *Proceedings of the Sixth Annual Session of the Indiana State Grange, Patrons of Husbandry* (Muncie, Indiana: Hoosier Patron Steam Printing House, 1876), 17. For quote from the Executive Committee report, Wisconsin State Grange, *Proceedings of the Ninth Annual Meeting of the Wisconsin*

State Grange, Patrons of Husbandry Held at Milwaukee, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday, January 18, 19, 20, and 21, 1881 (Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Trayser Bros., Book and Job Printing House, 1881), 36.

5. The State Master noted that competition was rife "growing chiefly out of location, and facilities of trade," see *Indiana State Grange, Proceedings* (1876), 5-6.

6. For Tyner quote, see *Ibid.*, 17-18. For committee response, see *Ibid.*, 21-22. See also "Business Circular to the Granges Office of the Indiana Farmer," 7 January 1877, in Isaac and Benjamin B. Beeson, *Papers, 1870-1897*, Box XI, InSL.

7. For Chicago meeting, see *Indiana State Grange, Proceedings of the Seventh Annual Session...* (Indianapolis: Indiana Farmer Co. Publishers and Printers, 1879), 44. See, for example, a letter from R. S. Thompson, publisher of the *Live Patron* of Springfield, Ohio to Benjamin Beeson, December 2, 1879 where Thompson demanded that discounted consumer goods were only available to subscribers of the magazine; "If anyone else wants any of these articles let them subscribe for the [*Live*] *Patron* first, then they can get them at the same terms." In *Beeson, Papers*, Folder 3: 1878-1897, InSL.

8. For numbers, see Lowell Dyson, *Farmers' Organizations*, *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of American Institutions* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), 239; Morton Rothstein, "Farmer Movements and Organizations: Numbers, Gains, Losses." *Agricultural History* 62 (June 1988): 169; Roy V. Scott, "Grangerism in Champaign County, Illinois, 1873-1877." *Mid-America* 43 (July 1961): 162-3. For Wisconsin, see *Wisconsin State Grange, Proceedings* (1876), 6-10, 39-45.

9. For example of problems facing purchasing movement, see Colston Estley Warne, *The Consumers' Co-Operative Movement in Illinois* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1926), Introduction and Chapter 1. For leading works on the grange and a discussion of purchasing activities, see Dennis S. Nordin, *Rich Harvest: A History of the Grange, 1867 - 1900* (Jackson: The University Press of Mississippi, 1974); William D. Barns, "Oliver Hudson Kelley and the Genesis of the Grange: A Reappraisal," *Agricultural History* 41 (July 1967): 229-242; Thomas Allan Woods, *Knights of the Plow: Oliver H. Kelley and the Republican Origins of the Grange* (Ames: University of Iowa Press, 1992); Douglass R. Hurt, "The Ohio Grange, 1870-1900," *Northwest Ohio Quarterly* 53 (December 1981): 19-32; and Margaret K. Andersen, "Agrarian Union: The Grange in the Midwest, 1870-1900," Ph.D. diss., Northwestern University, December 1989.

10. For examples of inept mail handling, see Erastus Brown to Joseph Osborn, July 14, 1875, in Osborn, *Papers*, Owned by Oshkosh Public Museum, copy at SHSW; and letters from Alpheus Tyner to Isaac Beeson, April 27, 1876 and May 2, 1876, in Beeson, *Papers*, InSL. For examples of the overloaded agency, see April, 1875, and March, 1877 in the Executive Committee of the Wisconsin State Grange, *Bulletin*, SHSW. For record-keeping, see the "Account of the transactions of the agent of the Nettle Creek Grange No. 735 during the year 1876," in Beeson, *Papers*, InSL. In another account, December 10, 1876, when auditing the books of the Indiana State Grange, State Secretary C. C. Post noted that while the ledgers balanced the agent's books were "in the form of notes of the value of which I will not now express an opinion." In Indiana State Grange, *Minutes of the Executive Committee*, InSL. For examination of goods, see the Winnebago Pamona Grange, *Minutes*, ISHL.

11. For Montgomery, Ward & Company -- which included a comma between the founder's name at this time for unexplained reasons -- see *Prairie Farmer*, 1 November 1873, 348; for Hall and Roe Brothers, see *Ibid.*, 13 December 1873, 395.

12. See Wilcock to Osborn, August 2, 1875 in Osborn, *Papers, 1873-1877*, Ownership by Oshkosh Public Museum, copy at SHSW. For Kniffen, see Wisconsin State Grange, *Proceedings* (1876), 41-42.

13. For first quote, see Indiana State Grange, *Proceedings* (1876), 18. In one year, only one in eight Subordinates paid their dues to the implement fund, see Wisconsin State Grange, *Proceedings* (1876). For Kniffen, see Executive Committee of the Wisconsin State Grange, *Bulletin*, September 1879, SHSW.

14. See South Greenville Grange #225 in Greenville, *Records, 1873-1973 (Microfilm Edition, 1979)*, SHSW. Grangers noted that it was "hard for parents to leave children below that age [14] home alone, so a Juvenile Grange was organized for them, under the guidance of a Matron. Thus the whole family can come to our meetings and the youngsters receive great training and enjoyment." For other social functions, see "Circular No. 3 for Sovereigns of Industry," in Osborn, *Papers, 1873-1877*, Ownership by Oshkosh Public Library, copy at SHSW.

15. For Pamona formations, see Champaign County Pamona Grange, *Proceedings, August 2, 1873 - August 1, 1877*, Illinois Historical Survey Collections, UI; and the Big Spring Grange, Treasurer's Book, 1874-1876, October 17, 1874 in Jonathan Turley, *Papers, 1875-1885*, InSL. For county

councils, see Wisconsin State Grange, *Proceedings of the State Grange of Wisconsin at its Second Annual Session Held...* (Oshkosh, Wisconsin: Times Printing House, 1874), 50-51; and Wisconsin State Grange, *Confidential Circular* [c. 1875], SHSW. Hitt noted that "In fact, I have had some sympathy with this idea [of local control] myself," for his comments, see Wisconsin State Grange, *Proceedings of the State Grange of Wisconsin, Third Annual Session Held at Madison, January 5th, 6th, 7th, and 8th, 1875* (Neenah, Wisconsin: Boyton & Cunningham, 1875), 34. Pamona and county councils were also more likely to deal directly with independent wholesalers, see December 19, 1873 and January 16, 1874 in Champaign County Pamona Grange, *Proceedings, August 2, 1873 - August 1, 1877*, Illinois Historical Survey Collections, UI.

16. For Nettle Creek Grange in Dalton, Wayne Co., Indiana, see Beeson, *Papers*, InSL; for quote see *Ibid.*, Box XI, Folder 9, "n. d."

17. The need for competent managers at these imaginary clearing houses was not an insurmountable obstacle. While the retail skills of the average farmer were often overmatched, even at the local level, there did exist competent businessmen within and affiliated with the Grange who had the acumen to successfully run such an operation. See, for example, L. G. Kniffen in the following discussion.

18. For conservative and radical camps, and the effects of falling membership, see Woods, *Knights of the Plow*, 35, Chapter 10.

19. See Executive Committee of the Wisconsin State Grange, *Bulletin*, September 1878, SHSW; Cerny, "Cooperation in the Midwest," 204; for quote see National Grange of the Patrons of Husbandry, *Proceeding of the Tenth Session of the National Grange of the Patrons of Husbandry, 1876* (Louisville: John P. Morton & Co., 1876), 144.

20. National Grange, *Proceedings*, (1875), 35.

21. For Jones' quote, see National Grange of the Patrons of Husbandry, *Proceeding of the Tenth Session of the National Grange of the Patrons of Husbandry, 1876* (Louisville: John P. Morton & Co., 1876), 7-8. For second quote (*italics mine*), see *Ibid.*, 110-111. Ironically, while the National Grange met in Chicago, busily "undo"-ing the purchasing agency system, they accepted an invitation from Montgomery Ward and Company to visit their store and inspect their stock, see *Ibid.*, 93.

22. National Grange, *Proceedings* (1875), 21; for the vote, see *Ibid.*, 166-167.
23. National Grange, *Patrons of Husbandry, Grange Co-Operation: A Pamphlet Containing Circular Letters Issued to the Patrons of Husbandry July 14, 1876* (Louisville, Kentucky: John P. Morton & Co., 1876); *Rules for Patrons' Co-operative Associations of the order of Patrons of Husbandry, and the Directing for Organizing such Associations* (Louisville, Kentucky: Published by the National Grange, 1876); and *Co-operation: Europe and the Grange. Address by J. W. A. Wright, of Borden, Cal., Who was Commissioned by the National Grange to Visit Europe in the Interest of American Farmers* (n. p., 1876).
24. For Jones, see National Grange, *Grange Co-Operation*, 3-4; for second example, authored by J. W. A. Wright, see National Grange, *Co-Operation*, 1-3; for Kelley, see National Grange, *Rules for Patrons'*, 4-7.
25. For Samuel E. Adams, see *Patrons of Husbandry, Proceeding of the Eleventh Session of the National Grange of the Patrons of Husbandry, 1877* (Louisville: John P. Morton & Co., 1878), 9.
26. In one example, used by Kelley, an original \$100 investment saves \$10 on purchases. The following year, Kelley assumes that \$110 is available which would produce an \$11 profit, thus bequeathing \$121 for the following year, and so on. This pattern then continued until the fund multiplied. See National Grange, *Rules for Patrons'*, 6.
27. Quote of Sand to Osborn, for letters dated February 23, 1874, February 24, 1874, March 17, 1874, and November 28, 1874, see Osborn, *Papers, 1873-1877*, Ownership by Oshkosh Public Library, copy at SHSW. For Osborn and agents, see Wisconsin State Grange, *Confidential Circular*, n. d. [c.1875], SHSW; see also Wisconsin State Grange, *Proceedings*, (1874), 51-52.
28. Wisconsin State Grange, *Proceedings* (1874), 49-52.
29. For example, see January 1875, July 1875, and December 1875 in Executive Committee of the Wisconsin State Grange, *Bulletin*, SHSW.
30. For example, see letters dated January 29, 1876, and March 17, 1876 in Osborn *Letter Book, 1876, Jan. 13 - 1877, March 5*, SHSW. For Osborn's frustrations, see letter to Osborn from J. C. Abbott, 23 February 1874; and circular for Weed Sewing Machines, 20 June 1873, both in Osborn, *Papers, 1873-1877*, Ownership by Oshkosh Public Museum, SHSW; and

Wisconsin State Grange, *Proceedings* (1874), 49-59.

31. For Kniffen experience, see Wisconsin State Grange Circular, c. 1875 in Osborn, *Papers, 1873-1877*. Ownership by Oshkosh Public Museum, copy at SHSW. For article cited, see Executive Committee of the Wisconsin State Grange, *Bulletin*, September 1875, SHSW. For grange visits, see Kniffen to Osborn, 2 June 1875, and 9 June 1875, in Osborn, *Papers, 1873-1877*, Ownership by Oshkosh Public Museum, copy at SHSW. See also letter dated June 9, 1875.

32. For Kniffen's use of implement fund, see Wisconsin State Grange, *Proceedings*, (1876), 8. For May article, italics mine, see Executive Committee of the Wisconsin State Grange, *Bulletin*, May 1875, SHSW. In addition, Kniffen also expressed his beliefs that the purchasing agency take an active role in the consumer exhibitions at the State and County fairs, and even promulgated the need for product guarantees and return policies. All of which correspond to the fact that the purchasing agency was intended as an expression of consumer experience, and not something cobbled together to insure the survival of the Patrons of Husbandry. For members' consumer individualism, see Beeson, *Papers*, Box XI, Folder 9, "n. d.," InSL; for fairs see Executive Committee of the Wisconsin State Grange, *Bulletin*, March, September, and December 1875, SHSW; for guarantees, etc., see Wisconsin State Grange, *Proceedings* (1876), 68-69.

33. For Georgia experiences, see Steven Hahn, *The Roots of Southern Populism: Yeoman Farmers and the Transformation of the Georgia Upcountry, 1850-1890* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 220-225. For demographics of Wisconsin Grange, see Gerald L. Prescott, "Wisconsin Farm Leaders in the Gilded Age," *Agricultural History* XLIV, No. 2 (April 1970): 183-199.

34. In a letter from aide, William Orlidge to Osborn, Orlidge wrote, "There is something about Kniffen in this I don't like, he continually throws stones against any such Idea [i.e., giving discounts to newly formed granges through established grange stores without allowing them to form their own support structures].... I see mischief in his eye and danger in his actions. ... Keep your eye on the purchasing agency there is blood there, don't be foolish in this again, say nothing as I do, but keep your eye open.... this is for yourself, if you let Kniffen beat you I shall again have the unpleasantness of knowing that it is your own fault. Caution and grit is about which is wanted." Orlidge's credibility can be questioned when he wrote letters like one to Osborn that ended "Devil! Devil! I am not so far gone as that, no wonder you thought me crazy or perhaps drunk," dated July 28, 1875. See Osborn, *Papers, 1873-1877*,

Ownership by Oshkosh Public Museum, copy at SHSW.

35. See letter dated March 17, 1876 in *Osborn Letter Book, 1876, Jan. 13 - 1877, March 5*, SHSW. For Huxley letter, see January 29, 1876, *Ibid.*, SHSW. For his reference to Kelley's book, see letter to H. F. Clark, a local grange Master, *Ibid.*, SHSW.

36. Wisconsin State Grange, *Proceedings*, (1876), 9. Executive Committee of the Wisconsin State Grange, *Bulletin*, July 1877, SHSW.

37. Executive Committee of the Wisconsin State Grange, *Bulletin*, September 1877, SHSW.

38. For Osborn, see Wisconsin State Grange, *Proceedings*, (1877), 51-52. For Sherman, see Wisconsin State Grange, *Proceedings*, (1878), 10. He continued to rhapsodize on the Rochdale Plan: "I fondly cherish it as a sure panacea for debt among our farmers; as a sure cure for strikes and mobs; as the harbinger of peace and plenty among all classes of laborers. Hundreds, and I may say thousands of men are in possession of a home today in England, Scotland, and Wales, who never put the sum of one dollar directly to the purchase of that home, simply permitting the profits on the household necessities to be applied to the purchase or building of the same. Fathers, mothers, and children, weep with joy and sing loud hallelujahs in praise of co-operation. What is good for England's poor, hard-worked, half-paid sons of toil, surely ought to be good for America's hard-worked, doubly-taxed, interest-eaten, agent-ridden, monopoly-bound farmers." *Ibid.*, 14. For Wilcock, see *Ibid.*, 67-68.

39. For Kniffen's defense of the communal benefits of the Agency, see Wisconsin State Grange, *Proceedings* (1878), 28-30; For article, see Executive Committee of the Wisconsin State Grange, *Bulletin*, March 1878, SHSW.

40. See Articles of Association for the Winnebago County Industrial and Provident Society, April 5, 1877, in Osborn, *Papers, 1855-1890*, Folder: 1875-1877, SHSW. For Osborn's resignation, see Cerny, "Cooperation in the Midwest;" and Marquart, *Wisconsin's Agricultural Heritage*, 13-17.

41. Wisconsin State Grange, *Proceedings of the Seventh Annual Meeting of the Wisconsin State Grange, Patrons of Husbandry Held at Milwaukee, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday, January 21, 22, 23, and 24, 1879* (Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Sentinel Co., 1879), 41-42.

42. For Executive Committee, see Wisconsin State Grange, *Proceedings of the Ninth Annual Meeting of the Wisconsin*

State Grange, Patrons of Husbandry Held at Milwaukee, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday, January 18, 19, 20, and 21, 1881 (Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Trayser Bros., Book and Job Printing House, 1881), 35-36; for Kniffen quote see *Ibid.*, 38-40. For return of funds, see Committee on Appeals and Complaints, Wisconsin State Grange, *Proceedings of the Eleventh Annual Meeting of the Wisconsin State Grange, Patrons of Husbandry Held at Madison, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday, December 12, 13, 14, and 15, 1882* (Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Trayser Bros., Book and Job Printing House, 1883).

43. Kniffen was forced to sell eighty acres of property to meet the judgement. Marquart, *Wisconsin's Agricultural Heritage*, 20. See also, Wisconsin State Grange, *Proceedings of the Nineteenth Annual Meeting of the Wisconsin State Grange, Patrons of Husbandry Held at Madison, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday, December 9, 10, and 11, 1890* (Neenah, Wisconsin: Gazette Steam Print, 1891), 16-17.

44. Wisconsin State Grange, *Proceedings*, (1882), 35.

CHAPTER 7

THE COMMERCIALIZATION OF THE RURAL CONSUMER ETHOS, MONTGOMERY WARD AND SEARS ROEBUCK, 1873 - 1906

The mail-order firm of Montgomery Ward & Company began inauspiciously. The Chicago *Tribune* cried, on 8 November 1873, "Grangers, Beware! Don't Patronize 'Montgomery, Ward & Co.' They Are Dead-Beats." The editors moaned,

Another attempt at swindling has come to light. ... and the parties specially aimed at by the project are no less important a body than the Grangers. This swindling firm, in a bill headed "Grangers Supplied by the Cheapest Cash House in America," sets forth that at the "earnest solicitation of many Grangers," they have consented to open a house devoted to furnishing farmers and mechanics throughout the Northwest with all kinds of merchandise at wholesale prices. Then comes the list of Utopian figures, such as [a] gold locket for \$1.50; 10 yards poplin, \$1.75; ... and the balance of 200 articles all at the same figures. The firm boast that they "make no display;" in fact they keep altogether retired from the public gaze, and are only to be reached through correspondence sent to a certain box in the Post Office. They are prepared to make purchases for the customers of all kinds of merchandise they do not keep, and do it "simply as an accommodation to customers," who are charged only 5 per cent commission on the net cost. The firm employ no agents. There is probably only one man, and he wants to have all the money the gulls send him for himself. He gets all the letters, with 10 cents enclosed for sample, the occasional sums sent to make purchases on commission, and all of the remittances for the trash sent to his dupes, if, in fact, anything at all is sent.

The paper detailed how the scheme was run, concluding

cynically that Ward will ultimately prosper "until wealth brings renown, and finally, he becomes the successful candidate for aldermanic or higher honors on the ticket of a bumper party."¹

Yet on Christmas Eve that same year, the editors gave the enterprise an unexpected, if justified gift. The *Tribune* retracted the editorial. The paper admitted that their conclusions were "grossly unjust, and not warranted by the real facts." The concern was deemed "a bona fide firm, composed of respectable persons and doing a perfectly legitimate business in a perfectly legitimate manner." Describing their practice of large cash purchases, the rapid dissemination of a wide variety of merchandise directly into the hands of consumers by means of express and freight shipments, the lack of retail overhead, and the use of a liberal return policy -- whereby the consumer is no "way obliged or compelled to take the goods, or pay therefor, except for his own volition" -- the journalists conclude "It is difficult to see how any person can be swindled or imposed upon by business thus transacted."²

This tale of an urban editor astonished by the marketing genius of Aaron Montgomery Ward -- on par with the infamous "Dewey Defeats Truman" gaff of the *Tribune* -- has become folklore regarding the expression of modern consumer practices in the rural community. The mistaken impression given by the paper's honest admission of error is that

Ward's venture -- so well known to succeeding generations -- was so unconventional that even experienced urban consumers were blinded to its potential. The sudden appearance of these remarkable practices suggested that finally an urban supplier had successfully discovered how to integrate the stubborn rural consumer into the modern mass-consumer society. The unquestionable result of this fusion was the advancement of American business and the material refinement of the farm population. For example, in 1947, the Grolier Club of New York City, a society for bibliophiles, included Wards' catalog as one of the one hundred most influential books published before 1900. They reasoned that "no idea ever mushroomed so far from a small beginning or had so profound an influence on the economics of a continent as the concept, original to America, of direct selling by mail for cash -- the mail order catalog has been perhaps the greatest single influence in increasing the standard of American middle-class living."³

The establishment's breadth and rapid growth also came to represent American enterprise and opportunity at its best. Teddy Roosevelt merged this domestic conceit with dreams of imperial cultural hegemony when he related to the Union League Club in Chicago his experiences in Africa:

I was coming down the Nile - a most interesting journey, for I came out of an absolutely immemorable past, out of a perfectly wild and naked savagery, degree by degree -- until I got down to the complete civilization of the seaport at the mouth of the Nile, and stopping at a mission station still within the

domains of savagery I was greatly interested to find that they fitted themselves with whatever they needed from a catalogue sent them by a Chicago business house. Right out there, where, excepting the missionaries, there was not anyone who had a rag of clothing on, there I met this catalogue, and the two things that struck me most about it was the enterprise of the house that sent it there, and the fact that they made good so absolutely what they said in the catalogue that the missionary could afford to buy it on trust with a certainty that what he bought would come there.

The Rev. Elbert L. McCreery, head of the American Mission in Sudan, told representatives from Wards that "the bed Mr. Roosevelt slept on, the food on his table, the furniture, bed clothing, even the house over his head were [all] bought from Montgomery Ward & Co., and shipped to the coast of Africa."⁴

In later years, the firm propagated the myth that their efforts solved the vexing problems of affordable consumer goods for many rural patrons in order to promote their contemporary sales. In an 1895 poem titled "Here! I want it!," penned to correspond to the verses of Longfellow's popular epic "Hiawatha," the company portrayed itself as the savior of the poor and underprivileged.

Times [were] hard and cash not plenty;
 Clothes [were] worn and cupboards scanty.
 We must try and save and pinch and
 Go without much that is needful.
 Thus the hard times cry uplifted,
 carried far throughout the nation,
 Reached the ears of those we speak of--
 Of Montgomery Ward & Comp'ny.

Two years later, the mail-order house claimed that Gilded Age farmers came to see "that *our way* is the right way, and now our way is their way, and everyone is pleased with our

prices and the way we treat them." All around, people were convinced that the catalog business begun by Aaron Ward in 1872 was a novel, urban-centered solution to the problems of rural consumers.⁵

The reality of Ward's success and growth was much more complicated. While it cannot be denied that Ward and his partner and brother-in-law, George R. Thorne, gambled their personal savings on the practice of a mail-order supply house attuned to the needs of rural consumers, the underlying tenets of this penchant had deep roots in the established consumer customs of Midwestern farmers. Concluding their yuletide article, the *Tribune* explained to its urban audience that this "plan of doing business was [initially] suggested by the growing combinations of farmers and Grangers, to deal directly with first houses." Further, "manufacturers have already made arrangements in many cases to deal through agents with Granges or Clubs, at wholesale prices." Ward's venture merely offered the "same arrangement, but extend[ed] the advantage to all persons, clubs, or individuals."⁶

The idea of rural consumerism stoked the drive by farmers to join the Grange and form purchasing agencies. The failure of institutional support for these efforts allowed private concerns such as Montgomery Ward & Co. access to this powerful economic authority. The success of their firm, and later of Sears Roebuck & Co., is visible evidence that

the basic tenets of the purchasing agency were viable given a proper "combined co-ordinated action."

More troublesome was the consequence of commercialization on the founding principles which defined rural consumerism. The private control over a convention that professed the primacy of consumer demand -- as generated by communal desires and mores -- added a new wrinkle to an already paradoxical relationship between the individual and the collective in consumer practices. In the Grange, elected men such as L. G. Kniffen acted as ideological sentinels by checking the excessive growth of individualism or communalism in the purchasing agency. Would Aaron Montgomery Ward, the "watchdog of the lakefront," prove to be as vigilant in defense of these beliefs as he was of Chicago's shoreline? What about those who followed Ward, and the forces unleashed through their competition for finite consumer dollars?

Modern advertising methods that emerged at the end of the nineteenth century interacted with a well-defined and active belief in community by a firm's fundamental constituency. Through the Grange, farmers briefly balanced the needs of the many with the economic freedom of the individual. Through the mail-order houses, these patrons hoped to continue this symmetrical relationship. Yet the progression from Ward's first Grange-sponsored catalog, in 1873, to the huge, corporate competition between his firm

and that of Richard Sears illustrated that this harmony was destroyed along the way. By the turn of the century, the catalog giants openly pandered to the needs of individual consumers without an apparent need to defer to communal sensibilities. Cut off from their cooperative moorings, individual rural consumers were susceptible to all of the dazzling manipulations that modern ads offered. Orchestrated to appeal to this public "weightlessness" -- to use the term of Jackson Lears -- advertisers refashioned the notions of community to include the use of their products.

By 1873, urban suppliers were increasingly pliable to the stated demands of rural consumers. Suffering from a general economic malaise and the coordinated efforts of the Grange, many wholesalers looked to ways to cooperate with farmers in order that they might satisfy their specific consumer exigencies. In Chicago, businesses such as Ward's provided all manner of merchandise along terms very similar to those of the grange purchasing agencies. For example, three days after the *Tribune's mea culpa*, the *Prairie Farmer* announced that the new firm of "Dickinson & Co., well-known wholesale dealers of this city, announce[d] that they are ready to deal direct with Granges and Clubs. It looks as though it will not be very long before every respectable house in Chicago will fall in line with the new order of

things." Regional grange agents such as Kniffen, S. J. Frew, and Alpheus Tyner all commented on the dampening effect that these urban houses were having on the purchasing departments of their state bodies.⁷

Interestingly, Ward was only a secondary player in the earliest period of this new market. Chicago based Z. M. Hall & Co. proved to be the most often cited supplier of granges and farmers' clubs. In a series of articles, titled "The Business Feature of It," the *Prairie Farmer* noted the clear preference by purchasing agents in dealing with Hall. In one issue alone, the periodical published letters from eight separate granges wherein "the name of Z. M. Hall, the first grocer of Chicago to attempt direct dealings with Grangers, was mentioned in the highest terms."⁸

To understand the tremendous growth of Ward's venture, one must first understand the personal history of its founder. Born February 17, 1844 in Chatham, New Jersey, Ward moved with his family to Niles, Michigan, via the Erie canal, in 1852. Aaron left his Niles job in a barrel-stave factory to pursue retail sales in neighboring St. Joseph. Ward wrote in his diary, "within nine months I was engaged as a salesman in a general country store at the princely salary of \$6 per month and board." Clearly possessing marketing talents, young Ward quickly rose to the level of head clerk, then general manager -- earning up to \$100 per month -- before he left for Chicago at the close of the

Civil War.⁹

Ward unquestionably had a strong sense of rural community from the time spent in Michigan. The company journal *Forward* noted in 1928 that its founder "maintained a practice of visiting Niles every Christmas until the death of his mother and remained in close touch with the little city long after he was established in Chicago." Further, Ward "provid[ed] liberally" for local residents who were left destitute and without means of support. Finally, in St. Joseph, Ward met and became friends with fellow retail clerk George R. Thorne, with whom he later collaborated in forming his mail-order business.¹⁰

Upon arriving in Chicago, Ward bounded from firm to firm endeavoring to make his fortune. He clerked at Field, Palmer, and Leiter from 1865 to 1866. For the next two years he worked as a traveling agent, filling orders from country retailers for several Chicago wholesalers. In 1870, he accepted a position with the St. Louis firm of Walter M. Smith & Co., whereby he saw much of the southern half of the Midwest. The next year, however, Ward returned to Chicago for good when he hired on at C. W. & E. Partridge & Co. (later The Boston Store and then Hillman's), a wholesaler and retailer of dry-goods, notions and carpets on State Street near the corner of Washington Street. Thorne, who also migrated to the big city after the conclusion of the war, entered into retail trade in partnership with his

father-in-law, Merritt D. Cobb, just north of the Chicago River. In their 1876 catalog, Ward and Thorne wrote that "One of the firm was brought up on a farm, and when of age went into a country store and served there in different capacities for fifteen years. The other served twelve years in a country store, and ten years as a buyer for some of the largest wholesale houses in Chicago and St. Louis. We think our experience has been sufficient to enable us to know our business."¹¹

Thorne and Ward remained close, and when the latter decided to start his own wholesale operations, he first went to Thorne as a prospective partner. Despite his refusal, by 1871 Ward had enough money on his own to acquire goods and print a price list. Unfortunately for Ward, the Chicago Fire burned his inventory and he was again forced to find investors. Interestingly, Ward allowed the assets of his company to burn while he aided Partridge & Co. in salvaging their goods from the inferno. Undaunted, Ward convinced two associates at C. W. & E. Partridge -- George S. Drake, a cashier, and Robert Caufield, an entry clerk -- to begin anew, and after the three accrued \$1,600 they rented a small shipping room on North Clark Street and published their first price list in 1872.¹²

The year proved quite eventful in the development of Ward's future business. First, Thorne's lumber business -- opening after the fire claimed his grocery -- failed due to

a corrupt partner. Following the withdrawal of Drake and Caufield, Thorne bought a third share of Ward's existing business. Then, in February, Ward married Thorne's sister-in-law, Elizabeth Cobb. The connection to the Cobb family proved fateful. For one, Ward was obliged to employ Merritt and Nathan Cobb (Elizabeth's father and brother).

Significantly, Elizabeth's uncle, Jerome Cobb took an active interest in the promotion of what had become a family business. Jerome Cobb was particularly important, for as the purchasing agent for the State Grange of Michigan, he directed Ward toward industrious Patrons in Illinois and other neighboring states.

Unfortunately, the sources fail to directly link Ward's relations with Jerome Cobb to his rising reliance upon Grange patronage. Still, the verifiable actions of Ward following February 1872, suggest that their union had a great impact on the direction of his firm. That spring Ward travelled to Bloomington, Illinois to speak at a grange sponsored picnic for the first time. The son of the McLean County master, Leo Dillon recalled that "Mr. Ward... said if this Grange would canvass McLean Co. & Get \$300 worth of purchases he would entertain the Patrons [for] 2 nights in Chicago & all expenses paid." Dillon's father "appointed a committee who canvassed the county, [while] he canvass[ed] Normal Township, he also sold over \$300 and he took [thirteen year old Leo] with him to Chicago which was my

first visit to Chicago." An internal document from the company secretary to the "General Attorney," dated June 28, 1938, remarked that the Grange affiliation of the firm started "probably... when Mr. Thorne came into the business. ... [and that it was] strange that there should be so much mystery about the date of the origin of the business."¹³

More striking was the vocal support which Jerome Cobb lent Ward's firm in the first years. A long testimonial letter by Cobb was prominently appended to the back sections of their earliest catalogs. Cobb noted, somewhat deceptively, that "Having a little spare time in Chicago I called on Montgomery Ward & Co. ... for the purpose of learning more of their extent and manner of doing business with our Order." He found his relative's company "occupying commodious but not expensive quarters, with ample room for doing an extensive business, and with a very complete assortment of such goods as come within the range of farmers' wants." Further, a "careful examination of their books and business" -- made possible no doubt through his close ties to the founders -- enabled Cobb to laud the "system" which pervaded every department. While he did admit in his letter that he had "known the gentlemen of this firm for some years," he assured his readers that "With me, the 'good of the Order' [was] the object of first and vital importance." Cobb concluded that until the Patrons could control their own purchasing activities through the grange-

sponsored departments, farmers "shall in our attempt to inaugurate a better system, be compelled to apply the convincing argument of ordering supplies, for a time, where we can obtain them at wholesale rates for cash."

Unquestionably, the granger was supporting the underlying concepts of Ward's endeavor, and not his company *per se*.¹⁴

Cobb's persuasion had its intended effect, for much of the rural consuming public remained true to the vision of a grange sustained purchasing agency system. For example, while the *Prairie Farmer* championed Ward as a man of "considerable business tact, and bearing a reputation for honesty and promptness," they flatly stated that they "do not recommend the firm, [but] are only stating what we learn and believe about them. In general, we caution Granges and Clubs against these specious schemes and offers." They held that the grange purchasing agent, "whose competency and honesty are above question" to the farmers, were the proper contacts for "these organizations to tie to." Still, by the first quarter of 1876, as the National Grange turned away from its own centralized purchasing operations, Ward's catalogs brandished passionate endorsements by prominent leaders such as Dudley Adams, founder Oliver Kelley, Illinois State Agent S. J. Frew, and Wisconsin's H. E. Huxley. A letter by one local organizer, John P. Jones of Benson, Illinois reflected the tremendous confidence by farmers which these official approvals gave to the mail-

order house. Jones wrote that he was "besieged by dozens of men, since the receipt of your goods, for your Catalogues [sic], and I have but one left. Please send us a supply of them."¹⁵

Clearly from the time of his marriage and formal association with Thorne and the Cobb family in 1872, until the dissolution of the National Grange purchasing strategy in 1876, Ward firmly hitched his enterprise to the institution of the Grange. Far from being a pragmatic, urban solution to the problems of appealing to the rural consumer, Montgomery Ward & Co. was a logical extension of the Grange efforts, which were in turn based on the tenets of rural consumerism. As with their organizational focus on rural patrons, this ideological indebtedness can also be traced to the concerns which had been voiced by farmers for the better part of thirty years. The rural consumer ethos was transplanted onto the pages of the Ward's catalogs for all to see.

Beliefs such as those expressed by Midwestern farmers often took the form of clichés when set in the corporate arena. While it is tempting for modern, and more cynical readers to disregard these maxims as mere platitudes or superficial panderings to egotistical consumers, at this early date they should be accorded greater respect. Throughout the 1870s Grange activity created palpable strife between the various social and economic elements of the

region. As in the case of Ripon, Wisconsin, cooperative stores and their related ideological foundations alienated many urban patrons and upset traditional distribution patterns. By forcefully stating their allegiance to the popular adages of the rural philosophy, Ward assumed enemies where none need exist. These "illogical" economic actions add substantiation to the claim that farmers' purchasing beliefs were the bedrock upon which their mail-order business was based.

Most discernible was the central role that consumer demand played in the shaping of Ward's policies. The catalogs were structured in such a way as to present merchandise as a means of meeting customer expectations, rather than simply an aggregation of dissociated advertisements. Beginning in 1875, Montgomery Ward committed their venture to a series of procedures intended to ensure that their patron's wishes always guided corporate behavior. Most notably was the money-back guarantee that allowed dissatisfied shoppers to return goods deemed unacceptable. While the policy was probably copied by Ward from the guarantee pioneered in 1866 by Marshall Field, Potter Palmer, and Levi Z. Leiter -- during which time Ward clerked for the firm -- Ward's commitment went beyond this earlier plan.¹⁶

It is facile to argue that distant and skeptical farmers needed these assurances before they were willing to

do business with the Chicago firm. While this was in part true, the guarantee also was only one component of a broader commitment by Ward to respect the wishes of his consumers for the type of goods presented in the catalogs, the terms of sale, and the ease of obtaining those wares. Although Ward specified certain restrictions on sales and shipping, these strategies were always presented with clear explanations as to how they gave the consumer greater benefit from the various aspects of the sale (e.g., lower costs, greater variety, better utilization of railroad shipping rates).

By the release of *Catalogue No. 17* on August 15, 1876, the company had perfected this pivotal focus on the consumer. Through their recent "experience of past years" with rural patrons, the firm publicly committed to increase the variety of merchandise displayed in their directory and to give more descriptive information of each good. Ward intended to make the bi-annual document "more complete and comprehensible.... [by] add[ing] several useful lines of goods to our present quotations, and in every way endeavor to meet the wants and merit the esteem of our extensive trade." For example, in 1876, the firm discontinued the profitable trade in alcohol at the behest of their rural patrons. Unlike their urban colleagues, the mail-order house was in the business of meeting consumer needs, not shaping them.¹⁷

Secondly, Ward clearly viewed his firm as an overdue reform of the established distribution system. Rather than abiding by conventional practices, their first catalog related how they, like the grange purchasing agency system, overturned ensconced business protocols. Ward paid no rent for retail lodgings, employed no "high-priced [retail] salesmen to sell our goods," sold nothing on "six-months" time, nor used middlemen to distribute his wares. More tellingly, unlike the crass consumer manipulations employed by urban retailers -- such as exotic lighting and crafty advertising schemes -- Ward promised his clientele that he would eschew all fakery in favor of simple business efficiency. *Catalogue No. 12*, issued in the Fall of 1874 implored farmers to "be convinced that we are a house of mushroom[ing] existence!"

No grand gift enterprise! No lottery scheme!! No false Inducements!!! We simply ask you to trade with us, and pay for what you buy only. It is not customary for people to work without pay. When you see a lavish display of printers' in calling attention a "Grange Annual Distribution!" "Extra Grand Offer!!" "Goods Given Away!!!" etc. etc. BEWARE!!!!

Two years later Ward summarized their square dealings: "Our motto has been, and shall continue to be, value for value."¹⁸

But most importantly, Ward's catalogs reflected the farmers' belief that the process of consumption was at essence a balance between individual and communal needs achieved through the application of civic virtue. As late as

1895, when Aaron Ward finally and voluntarily removed himself from active leadership of his colossus, the firm emphasized their conviction that consumers "don't owe any [supplier] a living." The company communicated their primary goal of creating an unwritten social contract between rural consumer and urban supply house, whereby each party was granted both rights and responsibilities.¹⁹

Farmers were expected to extend to the establishment a level of trust that allowed Ward to operate profitably via the mail. Early catalogs suggested that skeptics attempt a small trial order, so to verify the company's claims. Despite the unfamiliar practice of communicating by written dispatch, Ward assured his patrons that "distance counts for nothing except time." All they asked was that customers write their "name and address Plain. We can read anything else."²⁰

Rural patrons were also asked to be trusting with their money. Ward was forthright in their explanation of their particular practice of gaining profit through the use of strictly cash sales. They wrote that their object was to "close the transaction at the first entry, hence, be sure and send enough; if you send too much we will refund the balance at once." While the firm did allow granges pre-paid express shipments for their goods, they asked that the agrarian union regularly submit updated lists of officially sanctioned members. Further, in the Fall catalog issued in

1874, Ward wrote that,

This being an affair of honor, and a place wherein we put our trust in the honesty of the Granger, we hope we shall never be called upon to refuse shipment in this way because of the risk of non-payment. ...We here notify all Granges with whom we have dealings that we keep a blacklist, and unless remittance are made without unnecessary delay, we shall be obliged to place them on this list as being too slow, and refuse to ship them goods.

While this was clearly an administrative method by which Ward could control the number of authorized shipments -- not an insignificant expense -- the formality placed farmers' cooperative actions squarely at the center of the concern's marketing plans.²¹

For their part, Montgomery Ward admitted that they had "pledged our faith to the people... and promised them that we would supply them with the necessaries of life, and sell them everything they used at wholesale prices, whether they bought in large quantities or small." Furthermore, while their cash-only policy might lose some sales, the company was committed to the practice because of their obligation to support the wishes of their clientele. One catalog editor asked,

Hasn't your experience in this life proven to you the truth of the old saying that "the Lord helped those who help themselves?" That has been the experience of every human being regardless of sex. The almighty dollar rules this world, and with most of you this same dollar is almighty hard to get, and every mother and father owes it as a duty, not only to themselves, but to those they love so well, to make that dollar go as far as they can. [While credit sales may lead to a temporary respite] ...time never ceases to roll along -- the note becomes due. ... [and after failing to meet the rising debt] the mortgage is foreclosed, and you find yourself

and family driven from home. It will be no use then to think of what might have been done. It's too late! ... Our system of doing business will keep you out of debt. ... we don't believe in the credit business for almost without exception, it will lead to the financial ruin of any man.²²

In addition to these pledges for protection, the corporation also underwrote consumer confidence through their return policy and promised not to resort to spurious advertising schemes.²³

The reciprocal relationship between the supply-house and Midwestern farmers was based on these complimentary, moral obligations, and was central to the company's eventual success. Only nine years after Aaron Ward first aligned his enterprise to the tenets of rural consumerism, his firm boasted that they were "the only house that ever made a success in selling direct to the consumers, Why? Because they gave 36 inches to the yard, 16 oz. to the pound, and never misrepresented their goods." The catalogs were visible proof of their commitment to providing farmers with the greatest amount of useful product information on a large variety of goods at the lowest market prices. The establishment openly chided rural patrons who failed to abide by their mutual social contract: "The Buyers Guide is just what the name indicates. It tells you the RIGHT PRICE of nearly everything; IF YOU PAY MORE YOU'RE THE ONE TO BLAME. It opens to you the markets of the world, and affords you all the advantages in buying that are enjoyed by the residents of the largest cities."²⁴

Ward's voluntary assault on urban retailing practices also suggested that his firm's corporate ideology was harvested from its rural patrons. The first broadsheet in 1872 gave glaring confirmation of their allegiance to the farmers' earliest efforts to curtail retail control over rural purchases. In 1898, a Ward advertising executive admitted that this public battle with retailers and middlemen was one of the most popular characteristics of the catalog titan in the eyes of many farmers. It certainly proved to be profitable. As the manager noted, Ward's "best advertising return comes from our catalogues, but one of the best mediums is the talk of retail dealers. They run us down, our goods and our methods. This comes to the ears of our customers, who know what the retailer says isn't true. The result is, the retailer antagonizes his customer by lying about us, and very naturally that customer comes to us."²⁵

One visitor to Ward's Chicago operations, in 1906, gave testimony to the results that these positions had in the mind of many rural consumers. Samuel Kaufman of Thayer, Missouri, recounted how local merchants alienated their rural clientele through their attacks on Ward's. Their action "only inclined to make converts for such houses as yours." Kaufman continued,

In a late article published in our Thayer paper, the writer stated that it was not the city or town people who patronize mail order houses for they are too intelligent; but it is mainly the farmers, who are more

ignorant, who do not know better than to work against their own interest, and in the interest of the home merchants. I tell some of them that we farmers when we get beat are sufficiently intelligent to quit dealing with the beating party, and know enough to keep on dealing with them just as long as we think we gain by ordering.

Clearly, Ward's visible assault on urban retailers, beginning with their earliest publications, was in harmony with deeply held rural consumer beliefs.²⁶

For these reasons, then, Ward felt justified in presenting his operation as the "Store of All the People." He had dedicated his venture to the principles of demand-based consumer control, the efficient and progressive reform of the established distribution network, and to a virtuous and interactive social contract with the rural community of consumers. The company's image was further enhanced through their clash with urban retailers and these merchants' subsequent ham-handed response to this competition.

Ward's attention to rural ideology sustained its rapid, continual, and notable growth. From their original investment of approximately twenty-four hundred dollars, Aaron Ward and George Thorne saw their firm amass over one million dollars in sales by 1887. Between 1886 and 1889 alone, the company received over three million letters and mailed out by express more than 800,000 parcels. Freight shipments, which were not totalled, required three to five "double trucks" used the entire year to haul the materials to the train depot.²⁷

In 1889, the partnership became a corporation, listing over a half of a million dollars in assets. A favorite anecdote of Ward's illustrates the growing reputation of the firm. One New York supplier asked for cash in advance to cover one particularly large order. Sensing the mistrust of his financial ability, Ward related that,

we did not have a lot of money lying idle, so Mr. Thorne and I held a conference and the next morning Mr. Thorne put on his Prince Albert coat and silk hat and went down to the First National Bank, where we have always done the largest percent of our banking. He told him the story and said we would like to borrow a check for \$100,000 and send it to this concern, telling them we were glad to be of service to them. The banker thought it was a pretty good thing to put over, so loaned us the check. It was signed, of course, by Montgomery Ward & Co. and a letter accompanied it stating how sorry we were to learn that they were in financial difficulties and, as it was very important to us to have our merchandise shipped on time, we were sending this check which they could put to our credit and charge against it, and if this was not sufficient we would be glad to do something further for them, as we had a very kindly feeling toward them.

After four days, the check was returned along with the manufacturer's apology. "This was my story of high finance," Ward would say, "It was one of the happiest moments of my life when I could take \$100,000 back to the bank and say 'We don't need it.'"²⁸

Physically, Ward's firm matched this capital expansion. The catalog grew from a single sheet in 1874 to 238 pages by 1882, and over 1,000 pages by the turn of the century. The diversity of products expanded apace, from 163 items in the earliest catalogs to more than 8,000 products by 1882. The directories charted the company's growth in accommodations

as well. Beginning in a single room, the concern expanded to two whole floors by 1875, three stories and a basement one year later, and finally seven floors and various adjacent warehouses when they moved to their Michigan Avenue location in 1887. The "Tower Building," which still stands, was patterned after the Campanile in Venice and led famed architect Frank Lloyd Wright to drolly comment that "Montgomery Ward presents us with a nondescript Florentine Palace with a grand campanile for a 'Farmer Grocer.'"²⁹

More tellingly than the firm's physical and fiscal development was the fidelity that many Midwestern farmers demonstrated to their concern. Stories abound of customer loyalty that stretched decades -- a fealty which could only be explained by Ward's commitment to the farmers' purchasing cause. For example, E. J. Nicholson of Ross Station, Indiana, traded with the mail-order house for twenty-eight years, and "averaged a trip to the store each month during that time. Everything he use[d], with the exception of a few groceries... [was] supplied by this firm." His reliance on Ward's reached such a level that he actually deposited his commissions from the sale of his produce with the company's cashier, "taking the firm's check for any balance that may be due after paying for his purchases; as he expresses it he can then go on his way home without any fear of being robbed or of losing his funds." Even grange purchasing agents such as Samuel Kaufman were so pleased with Ward's commitment to

rural patrons that they "now [did] as much missionary work for Montgomery Ward & Co. as the next best man."³⁰

Grange activist Henry Griswold best exemplifies how farmers dedicated to the community principles of the Patrons of Husbandry responded to Ward's efforts. From 1889 to 1904, Griswold maintained a log of the purchases that he made from all suppliers. During these years, Griswold transacted business with Ward no less than thirty-four times, spending more than \$657. His longterm loyalty to the "Original Grange Supply House" was evident. For example, despite sending a small trial order to Sears Roebuck & Co. -- \$3.34 for a pair of pants in August, 1895 -- he never again used this Chicago rival. More importantly, after a neighbor was "humbugged in the goods bot [sic] of" an agent for Harper Brothers, a grocery dealer in Chicago, Griswold sent all but one subsequent order to Montgomery Ward. Clearly a special relationship existed between Midwestern farmers and this responsive urban supplier.³¹

Ward's success must be attributed to their application of rural consumer ideology, rather than the urban-formulated stroke of genius so commonly identified in the historiography. As early as 1876, Ward's admitted that it was already an "undisputed fact that all consumers, whether Patrons or not, have been benefited, which fact must redound to the credit of the Patrons alone." Ward continued,

To Patrons we say "do not be selfish, but remember that you are doing your Christian duty by helping your

neighbors as well as yourselves; if you hold fast together the day will soon come when every manufacturer in the land will consider how he can best place his wares before you at the least possible price."

This was the fullest expression of the consumer ideology, born of the common experiences of Midwestern commercial farmers, codified during the turmoil of the Grange experience, and given full vent through the Ward catalogs.³²

Inevitably, success and expansion brought challenges to the management of Ward's concern. Their response to these trials indicates that the corporate leadership was not immune to the temptations of moving past their rural roots. As noted above, by 1895 both Aaron Ward and George R. Thorne, men steeped in the rural consumer traditions, were leaving the daily operations to a younger generation of men who did not share these experiences. Anecdotal evidence suggests that Thorne's sons, who assumed command of the firm, greatly lacked for the "common touch" which had so wisely guided the founders in their early policy decisions.³³ Yet generational indiscretions cannot explain all of Ward's growing disconnection with their clientele. For example, it was during Ward and Thorne's tenure, in 1879 and 1880, that the firm briefly experimented with retail operations -- in Milwaukee -- and even the employment of territorial "agents in every town throughout the Western States and Territories to sell our goods!" When the establishment retreated from these policies in 1882 it was due not to a guilty sense of lost mission, but rather from

the fiscal failure of both schemes. Clearly, something was prompting Ward to extend beyond the bounds of the consumer practices proscribed within their association with rural patrons.³⁴

The clearest source of change in the operational practices at Montgomery Ward was the rising competition from other mail-order houses. A questionnaire sent to subscribers of the publishers of *Farm, Field and Fireside Weekly* and *The National Rural and Family Magazine*, indicated that by 1899 farmers were being contacted by no less than 98 mail-order houses across the country. While Ward remained in a dominant market position, Sears Roebuck and Company had made significant inroads into their traditional consumer base. General Manager William Thorne noted that competition with Sears "has made old and less expensive methods unattractive to the buyer, with the result that we are obliged to have a larger and more attractive catalog, more specials, more and better circulars, and are also obliged to follow up all applicants to get satisfactory results."³⁵

Richard Sears, born in Stewartville, Minnesota on December 7, 1863, had no such obligations to established rural sponsors when he formed his "Supply House" thirty years later. But what Sears lacked in market connections he made up for in salesmanship. He parlayed a surplus watch consignment, shipped to the local train depot where he worked as a telegraph operator in 1886, to a watch mail-

order business that he sold for \$100,000 three years later. Sears's success originated with his innate ability to craft enticing, if sensational, sales promotions. Julius Rosenwald and Otto Doering applied organizational and inventory management to Sears's broadcasting skills, leading to the brilliant success of their 1893 venture.³⁶

Sears' prosperity seemed to emanate from his firm's focus on pleasing the individual consumer without regard for communal conventions. He aggressively pressed advertising campaigns that were based on the maxim "Send No Money." Ignoring long held fears by farmers about ruinous debt incurred by rash spending, Sears' policy dared individuals to use consumption as a means to create their own community based on the products various uses, and not to conform to existing standards of merchandise evaluation. Sears advertising manager Louis Asher reported that the "Send No Money" campaign was ended in the spring of 1902, after "the story had ceased to be sensational to the millions who had already read it and who had been educated to the use of [their] catalog."³⁷

At first, Montgomery Ward defended their established practice of using advertising copy to educate rather than persuade rural consumers. An article in a leading advertising journal held that,

During the past eight to ten years, the advertising of Montgomery Ward & Co., ... has developed along lines that make it printed salesmanship of a very high order. In a field distinguished for sensation, appeal to the

imagination and emotions, overstatement and questionable advertising tricks, the house has relied upon common sense arguments alone, using hard headed logic and backing up its advertising statements with technical information, diagrams, definitions of trade terms and comparisons of reliable merchandise with unreliable.... The article ... [supported] the claim that [Ward's] straightforward talk, giving an argument in a terse and plain manner, gets better results than a more "flowery" style.³⁸

But Sears's rapid success casts doubt that this analysis was accurate. Matching their Chicago rival for scope of catalog, guarantee, and use of the city's advantageous transportation facilities, the younger company used its aggressive marketing ploys to earn over \$48 million in annual sales by 1906. That year Sears publicly offered to forfeit \$10,000 to charity if anyone could prove that the combined sales of any five mail-order houses, including Wards, exceeded the sales of his concern.³⁹

With all such things being equal, the catalogs published between 1894 and 1906 demonstrate that the greatest difference between the two firms was their appeal to individual versus communal conventions. By 1893, Ward had begun to subtly shift away from its close association with the grange, toward a mail-order house devoted to providing quality products to all consumers. For example, Ward's 1875 circular failed to discuss the quality standards of his wares, focusing instead on cost. However, by 1894 their listings invariably featured quality over low price. By 1904 the catalog was prefaced with an introduction that stated,

It seems unnecessary to say anything about the prices

printed in this catalogue, but there are so many shoddy adulterated or generally worthless goods offered for sale nowadays, that we feel compelled to ask our customers to always consider the quality of an article when comparing our prices with those of any other firm, and remember that we refuse absolutely to handle any but the best grades of merchandise.

Don't believe that we are undersold just because other firms sometimes make lower prices on certain articles. It looks bad for us, we will admit, but nine times out of ten an inferior article -- poor stuff that we refuse to handle at any price -- is shipped.

In the next catalog, Ward's stressed that their prices were structured to be low "365 days in the year" but not as the result of "one-time bargain offerings." It was here that Sears was able to differentiate his firm from the venerable Montgomery Ward & Co. Sears used exciting advertising copy to check Ward's warning. Three catalog products, in particular, highlight the struggle between Ward's quality and Sears's marketing.⁴⁰

Bicycles were prominently featured products in both catalogs. Each firm issued special catalogs emphasizing their line of "wheels." The 1895 *Bicycles and Cycling Sundries, Catalogue M* of Montgomery Ward and Sears' *Bicycle Announcement* of 1898 are examples of the style used by both firms to advertise their products. As the Sears catalog played off of the Ward circular, it is enlightening to review Ward's method of advertising first.

Ward's marketing strategy focused on established quality, standard "terms and conditions," and colorless sales copy. They proudly reminded their readers that they were "pioneers in the bicycle business and a sore thorn in

the side of high priced dealers." Through sober management they would "enable thousands of our customers who have long contemplated purchasing a bicycle to do so." Like their other catalog products, Ward's bicycles could not be ordered "cash on delivery." Ward's top-of-the-line model, the "Hawthorne Safety" retailed at \$65.00, the cheapest at \$45.00. Less copy was used to describe the "Hawthorne" models than that allowed for these extensive terms and conditions. Excluding a dry inventory of "specifications" ranging from bearings to wheels, the "Hawthorne" was hailed only as "strictly high grade" and "the equal of any \$100.00 Cycle on the market."⁴¹

Sears's strategy was to underprice the competition, meet their terms and conditions, and then use advertising copy to sway those who were tempted to doubt the Ward claim of superior quality. On price, Sears was unquestionably the leader. Their top model, the "Acme Queen" and "King," sold for \$35.00 and their cheapest a mere \$13.95. Sears gave no mention of their history as pioneers but noted that "our million customers in every state" know them to be "the Cheapest Supply House on Earth." Sears made efforts to explain why their prices were so low, and thereby addressed one of the chief criticisms against their product line: quality. Citing production control, large contracts, and the fact that their "business [was] not confined to Bicycles alone... hence we do not have to look to the profits on

bicycles alone to defray our expenses," they argued that quality was not sacrificed for the sake of price. Quality was assured for all bicycles -- that is, all but one, the "Cincinnati."⁴²

Advertising for the "Cincinnati" demonstrated Sears' cunning sales technique. The firm baldly claimed that "the fact is, this bicycle is worthless." The Sears's "Cincinnati" model was included in the catalog ostensibly to warn their patrons of the "scheme trade" in poor quality goods by other firms. Without knowing Sears's intentions regarding the "Cincinnati," two things are evident from the catalog. First, Sears reinforced their role as an honest broker by openly describing why the "Cincinnati" was a poor quality product. For example, they admitted that "Quality and Durability is Sacrificed for Price and Appearance. Notwithstanding, we tell you just what the bicycle is." In the description of the bike Sears professed that "we sell them for what they are," and do not pretend to pass poor quality off on unsuspecting consumers. Second, on a separate page from the "Cincinnati," Sears suggested that one "can Make Big Money Selling Our Bicycles." Unlike Montgomery Ward's fleeting policy never to allow agents to mark up and resell their goods, Sears openly offered a "worthless" bike "sold by others at \$18.00 to \$25.00 and by many at even more" in the same arena where they suggested such resale opportunities.⁴³

Sears offered similar terms and conditions for their bikes as Ward -- one year guarantee, cash discounts -- yet differed significantly on descriptive copy. Where Ward's best bicycle was "the equal... of any \$100.00 Cycle," Sears had "The Most Perfect Bicycle Ever Made." Furthermore, the Sears ladies' "Acme Queen" was shown with four pages of descriptive text, two views of the bicycles, and extensive use of printed graphics such as underlining, bold type, borders, and icons. A brief qualitative comparison of the descriptions used for Sears's "Acme Queen" and Ward's "Hawthorne Safety" illustrates this difference (See TABLE 13).

TABLE 13.
COMPARATIVE SALES COPY, WARD'S AND SEARS'S BICYCLES

Item	Ward's "Hawthorne Safety"	Sears's "Acme Queen"
Wheels	28 inches	28 inch; front wheel 32 spokes, rear wheel 36 spokes. We believe we furnish the strongest, best built and most perfect bicycle wheel used...
Tires	Morgan & Wright Pneumatic, 1895 Model	...Your choice of Morgan & Wright double or single tube, or Vim single tube, or our own special single tube, and unless otherwise specified we reserve the right to use our own special tire, for we consider it the best tire on the market...
Hubs	Very Light and of Special design, turned from bar steel and fitted with best tool steel cups, carefully tempered and accurately ground.	...We believe we furnish the best hubs made. They are turned from bar steel, highly polished and finished, and are fitted with the latest improved ball retaining device, such as you will not find on the cheap wheels...
Cranks	Round Pattern, detachable, 6 inch throw, drop forged from carbon steel...	Two pieces... made from drop tool steel forging, heavily nickel plated and highly polished. This two-piece crank is the latest 1898 feature in the highest grade bicycles. It is the best crank on the market...
Finish & Color	Finest black enamel, hand rubbed and polished, all bright parts polished, coppered, nickel plated.	Our Acme Queen is given the highest and finest finish put on any bicycle. It is enameled in four coats, baked on by the manufacturer's patent process, and comes in coach green, royal blue, maroon, vermillion and black. It is handsomely decorated with transfer and line

The final marketing assault by Sears was the most subtle and only applied to those patrons who had both Sears's and Ward's catalogs in their homes. Within the text Sears noted to unwary consumers that "if you do not know this [Cincinnati to be a bad bike] you may pay \$18.00, \$20.00 or even \$30.00 or \$40.00... to small advertising firms, auction houses, cheap department stores, newspaper premiums, etc." Yet a cursory comparison between this and Ward's catalogs, hardly an "unknown house," reveals that the "Cincinnati" looks remarkably similar to the upscale "Hawthorne Safety." While such images may have been fleeting, Sears's bicycle advertising suggested that they followed a radically different marketing path than their Chicago rivals.⁴⁴

Sewing machines offer additional proof that Sears's and Ward's catalogs addressed American consumers in disparate ways. By way of comparison, the 1902 Sears Roebuck *Consumer Guide* and the Montgomery Ward *Catalogue No. 73* of 1904 give a complete inventory of the techniques used by both firms during this period. One of the most popular products ever sold via the catalog, Sears shipped over 100,000 sewing machines in 1902 alone. They claimed that "even our competitors will have to admit that we are the largest dealer in sewing machines in America." Predating their 1906 challenge, Sears professed that they sold as many machines as their four closest competitors combined.⁴⁵

Catalog terms and conditions of sale show Sears and Ward were not too dissimilar. Sears's 1902 sewing machine line consisted of six models, ranging from \$10.45 to \$23.95. Ward also offered six designs, from \$13.50 to \$23.95. Both firms manufactured their own machines, or consigned others to manufacture specifically for their use. Each offered a three month money-back trial for those who purchased their machines with cash. Ward offered a five to ten year unconditional guarantee on their machines while Sears promised a twenty year guarantee, yet nowhere in the sales copy did they detail the extent of this pledge.⁴⁶

Yet Sears, unlike Ward, sprinkled advertising copy throughout these administrative sections. The use of testimonials and word-of-mouth advertising suggested that Sears hoped to use all available copy space to promote sales. For example, between their description of prices, features, and ordering procedures, Sears included this request;

Ask your neighbors about our sewing machines, for the best proof of quality is the actual test. There are some of our sewing machines in your town, in your neighborhood. Possibly a friend, a relative, maybe your next door neighbor, has one of our machines.... **Ask them how much they feel they have saved by using their sewing machine from us. All we ask is that you make this little investigation before buying a sewing machine from your dealer at home or ordering one elsewhere.**

The active involvement of the reader in the copy is a recurring theme missing from the Ward catalog.⁴⁷

As with bicycles, a comparison of the least and most

expensive models of both distributors gives the widest possible scope to the advertising schemes used in each catalog. The Sears "New Queen" and Ward "Amazon" models were examples of each firm's entry level model. However, the presentation of pricing information greatly favored Sears. Listed at \$10.45, the "New Queen" offered "all the up to date points" needed on a sewing machine. Comparing the Sears model to the Ward "Amazon," it is important to note that Sears separated the \$.70 charge for attachments that Ward had built into their advertised price of \$13.50. Ward wrote that "[i]n our former catalogue we quoted this machine without attachments... . Our reason for making this change is that... nearly every purchaser... desires a complete outfit so that every kind of work can be successfully handled." The Ward catalog recognized that they were in a price war for the low end market, citing the "\$15.00 to \$18.00... machines which, from any standpoint, are of no better value." Yet the casual observer of both catalogs would conclude that Sears' lowest price was \$3.05, or 22 per cent, cheaper than Ward's price when in actuality they were much closer.⁴⁸

The advertising copy was equally biased in favor of Sears. The Ward catalog, as with their bicycles, preferred to highlight the technical achievements of their sewing machines. In this way they described the "needle bar" as "covered and protected by a handsome nickel plated cap,

which insure cleanliness of the bearings, and does away with the unpleasant rapid movement of the upper end of the needle bar above the face plate," and fittings of "anti-friction ball bearings." Conversely, Sears spent little room on technical descriptions, preferring instead to focus on the attractiveness of the piece as furniture and common usage of the machine "in your neighborhood." Stressing an involvement by the reader, Sears showed two views of their machine -- one open for sewing use and one closed for use as furniture.⁴⁹

The copy for the most expensive models, Sears's "Minnesota" and Ward's "Damascus," mirrored these less expensive machines. Ward's list price again included the set of attachments that Sears omitted. In this case, the "Damascus" appeared to be more expensive when in reality it was priced the same, at \$23.95, as the "Minnesota". While Ward dressed up their prose, they kept such stilted descriptions as,

The drive wheel and pitman connection are on roller bearings which make it run as easily as any of the other styles. The head... has the eccentric action, absolutely positive feed motion, independent take-up, automatic tension liberator, together with all other valuable improvements found on any other good machine.⁵⁰

Conversely, Sears used their space to highlight the beauty, pleasure, and ease found in operating the "Finest Sewing Machine Cabinet made." They suggested to those interested in the technical description of the "head,

mechanical construction, attachments, etc., etc.," to turn to other pages. Using three views instead of two, Sears involved the viewer rather than attempting to educate them.

Montgomery Ward's catalog examined above was issued two years after the Sears offering, yet still lagged in merchandising savvy. While price difference was in reality very small, Sears presented their product as the least cost alternative. Whereas Ward's copy was filled with technical information, it is probable that the use of pictures, active descriptions of operation, and repeated references to one's personal prestige would weigh equally in importance on the average purchasers' mind. Sears's sewing machine copy offered a product appealing to both the technically erudite and the visceral buyer. In a comparison of patent medicines, it is clear that this split in catalog marketing style was complete.

In *Among Ourselves*, Montgomery Ward described their "drug division" as "wholly without solicitation.... a real pharmacy or apothecary shop. It is not a depot for nostrums." In comparing Sears's drug catalogs of 1897 and 1903 to Ward's circulars published in 1894 and 1902 it is evident that Sears had no such limits on the marketing efforts of their drug department. Ward's earlier effort listed 94 pages of every kind of medicinal product, from "Acids, Drugs, and Chemicals" to "Plasters, Cotton, and Gauzes." In a line by line listing, Ward proceeded through

their inventory providing price information only. The sole bit of marketing came on the back page of the circular, mildly suggesting one to "anticipate your needs... keep a supply of medicine in the house because when you want it you will not have time to get it. You cannot afford to take any risk."⁵¹

Sears's offerings in 1897 were quite different. While Ward offered one page of limited descriptions of patent medicines, Sears offered dozens. Whereas Ward's "Bromo-Caffeine... is an almost certain remedy" for headaches, indigestion, hangovers, and the symptoms of "neurasthenia," Sears boldly stated that "Dr. Chaise's Nerve and Brain Pills... **WILL CURE YOU** if you feel generally miserable or suffer with a thousand and one indescribable bad feelings." Sears offered products that claimed to cure obesity, tobacco and alcohol addiction, lethargy, baby coughs, and the common cold. They were fashionably titled with names such as *Pink Pills for Pale People*, *Dr. Pasteur's Microbe Killer*, *Neutralizing Cordial*, and *Dr. Beaumont's Pennyroyal Female Pills*. While the catalog's advertising copy was markedly different, it was the size devoted to the plug and the pictures that were used to confirm the products' efficacy that evinced a real difference. For example, Ward provided a small picture to help spur the sales of "Ayer's Hair Vigor" at \$.68 a bottle. Yet Sears offered "Princess Tonic Hair Restorer" at \$.57 a bottle. The ad was augmented

by a picture of a woman with flowing strands of hair and the claim that it was "not an experiment, not an untried, unknown advertisement for sale" but rather a cure as guaranteed as their bicycles or sewing machines.⁵²

Sears continued to issue catalogs with such spurious claims throughout the era. Ward's 1902 circular demonstrated their refusal to copy the more free-wheeling style of the competition. However, the back page of this catalog suggested that Ward intended to reassert their advantages;

Don't be Stampeded by the "Lowest Prices on Earth," "world beating bargains,"... All is not gold that glitters. Price and quality go hand in hand... We know all the tricks of the trade, but we have no desire to be tricky... We have been in business 30 years -- upright, honest business treating our customers as we ourselves would like to be treated... They know us and know that we want the trade of their children when our children are in command of this business. **Our Word is Sufficient.**

The pointed reference to Sears's motto and then the retreat to their "pioneering" history suggests that by 1902 Ward recognized that the upstart company had in fact surpassed the master.⁵³

On the back page of Ward's 1903 "Price List of Groceries," the distributor reaffirmed their business goals for all to read. "*As Progressive Merchants:* We recognize the worth of the proper study of mankind. We believe that a careful study of men and women, their needs, tastes, points of view and habits of thought and life, is essential to the success of a great house such as ours." Their catalogs reflected the Granger and Progressive view that businesses,

such as mail-order houses, existed to provide the people a service, such as distribution, to meet these scientifically "studied" needs. Historians of advertising have shown, however, that the modern consumer age was being ushered in contemporaneously to these Progressive ideals.⁵⁴

Ward's claim to make a "careful study" of their customers begs several questions of the product advertisements presented in the two catalogs. Specifically, how did the individual advertising techniques differ and did these techniques reflect a challenge to rural consumerism? First, in all three examples, the Sears's catalog bombarded readers with more illustrations and diagrams than their competitor. Louis Asher, of Sears, wrote to his boss that their "simple, plain, [and] easily read" descriptions coupled with vibrant imagery sold "double to four times... that our usual advertising write-ups sold." Historians like Neil Harris have suggested that the compressed imagery of pictures was an important element of the new advertising age. The publication of periodicals in the late 1880s that increasingly relied on this graphic style -- including *Cosmopolitan*, *McClure's*, and *The Ladies Home Journal* -- and their instant success heralded a new advertising method. In its catalogs, Sears was clearly more willing to rely on pictures to deliver their message than was Montgomery Ward.⁵⁵

Secondly, Sears was also among the first to

deliberately and consciously seek to create demand for their products. From the descriptions of the three commodities examined, the copy styles of Sears and Ward were in sharp contrast. David Potter once proposed that the attempt to generate consumer desire was a key component of the modern advertising age. This "reason why" advertising suggested a change to the buyer's life from the purchase of the product. For example, the quality of a bicycle became less important than the image projected by that bicycle through its color, price, or features. Ad copy moved away from the product and towards the intended affects. As noted above, in 1905 Montgomery Ward and Company admitted that it hoped to "eliminate the enthusiasm" of their buyers in writing the description of various articles. Sears Roebuck and Company demonstrated none of this restraint, and probably garnered additional market share for their stance.⁵⁶

A third technique further differentiated Sears from Ward. As noted by T. J. Jackson Lears, modern advertisers attempted to emotionally involve the reader. Much like "reason why" advertising, this method hoped to gratify the psychological needs of many Americans for meaning and attachment in their lives. For example, Sears's bicycles suggested life as a profitable dealer and distributor, owning one of their sewing machines made one a community leader, while a patient was reformed through the use of their medicines. In each example, Sears showed how their

product would make a change in the consumer's life. Ward's ads offered no such changes. Roland Marchand shows this trend to be the central tenet of modern advertising, beginning in the 1920s. These campaigns presented life "as it should be" through the use of specific products. Rather than using their own, pre-existing notions of community to direct their purchasing decisions, consumers were increasingly being persuaded to "join" sects of individuals who were similarly swayed by these compelling images.⁵⁷

The significance of these changes to this Midwestern population was that the development of modern advertising directly obstructed the goals of the rural consumer ethos. Most immediately, suppliers such as the mail-order firms became guardians over the coveted goods displayed in their ads. Rather than providing efficient access to the merchandise demanded by a unified clientele, wholesalers acted simply as large retailers by persuading individuals to cast their own membership in a community of style and conspicuous consumption. Paradoxically, the use of the guarantee only aided in this transformation of demand-based control by enabling shoppers to experiment more freely with newer and more exotic goods.

Rather than continue the grass-roots reform of the distribution network the mail-order houses became active participants in the practices that captured their customer base. Much like the picture windows and colored lights

employed by urban retailers, Sears and Ward fashioned their catalogs into portable facsimiles of these consumer enticements. A modern critique of the catalogs by a Montgomery Ward Executive conforms to this point of view. With their new custom of placing colored prints on both front and back pages, the manager noted, "Like the stores that have two fronts, the new catalog now has two sets of 'show windows,' two sets of 'front covers.' This gives opportunity for better display of more major lines. Everything's up front now, nothing in the back part of the store."⁵⁸

Finally, as alluded to earlier, the very nature of "reason why" advertising and demand creation reconstructed the needs of the individual in ways that were antithetical to communal experiences. The historiography is brimming with studies that indicate that modern advertising took advantage of the profound economic and social changes at the turn of the century to promote products. Most notably, the use of brand names -- even for the most mundane and indeterminate goods -- by corporations soared in the last decade of the nineteenth century.⁵⁹

Nor were farmers immune to the allure of these pitches. The study commissioned in 1899 by the advertising manager of the farm journals *Farm, Field and Fireside* and the *National Rural*, polled 2,143 planters, predominantly in the rural Midwest. The manager, R. S. Thain, expected to find that his

readers were in fact swayed by the spots placed in his publication -- a natural position to take as the man responsible for selling space. Yet Thain confessed that "the showing in many instances has proven a surprise [even] to us. We were quite confident that our subscribers were liberal buyers of the best, both of necessities and the luxuries of life, but now we have proven beyond the controversy that this is true."⁶⁰

The study confirms two facts about rural buying patterns at the turn of the century. The first was that farmers were still active consumers of all manner of wares. While traditional and basic goods, such as reapers and flour for example, were in great demand, luxury items were also bought with regularity. More than half of the respondents owned either a piano or organ and a quarter owned bicycles. Moreover, 96 per cent of those surveyed reported that they had purchased a sewing machine, and the 2,143 respondents reported that they owned 2,668 watches!

Secondly, farmers were indeed greatly affected by the new enchantments of product advertising. By 1899, brand loyalty for even the most insipid merchandise was already well established. For example, while 147 brands of hand-soap were mentioned by those polled, four varieties (Ivory, Kirk's, Lennox, and "Grandpa's Tar" soap) commanded more than two-thirds of the market. The manufacturers of Gold Dust, a washing compound for general cleaning around the

farm, found that after three years of advertising in farm journals they had captured more than a quarter of the market. Similar examples can be found for scouring soaps, baking powder, and stove polishes, where Thain remarked, the "results of judicious advertising are very apparent here. Sixty-seven kinds of Stove Polish, named by 1,988 of our subscribers, and yet two kinds advertised in our columns control over eighty-five per cent of the trade."⁶¹

Comparison of selected catalogs reveal that Montgomery Ward slowly changed its advertising style to meet this modernizing trend. Ward himself gave the last defense of this practice upon his retirement. He wrote in 1895 that,

If a person, through either ignorance or poor judgement, desires to invest in shoddy, second rate merchandise, it becomes the duty of my firm to protect him.... I cannot sanction my firm catering to their trade, and much as I dislike to lose a customer, I know that in the end they will see the folly of their methods and in time will restore their patronage to my firm.⁶²

Yet soon after Ward's departure, company managers piloted the firm toward the beacon which was modern advertising. Twentieth-century catalogs prided themselves for jettisoning the "time honored practice of opening the book with a 'President's Letter' and a lot of institutional ballyhoo." Much of this "ballyhoo" was devoted to responding to the rural communal concerns which have been discussed in this chapter. One chronicler of the corporation described how the Ward's catalogs also turned to the "full pages illustrated in color, displaying last-minute styles" made

familiar by Sears. Wards further allowed their consumers to buy on credit, and discarded the "Old fetishes of art typography and printing" in favor of Sears's more flowery style. In short, the author observed, "The public witness[ed] a new mail order era" by these changes "and seem[ed] to like it."⁶³

At the Seventh Annual Conference of Executives, held in November, 1928, the firm's research department noted the changes that had taken place over the previous decades. They asked:

Has our buying public... been educated to the point where they no longer regard price and serviceability as the outstanding points? Are they inclined to buy more to gratify their desire for style and novelty? If the trend is in this direction, what must be our future catalogue policy?

Sears's relative success "educating" rural patrons, and the conversion by Ward to their rival's more aggressive marketing style, suggests that this repudiation of the traditional farm purchasing patterns was met with equanimity in the farm population.⁶⁴

The commercialization of rural consumerism progressed along three tracks. First, Ward relied upon his rural clientele for the organizational and intellectual foundations of his firm. Secondly, the grand success of his venture liberated him from the need to appeal to all of the tenets of agrarian consumerism -- most notably, that of

individual consumer accountability to a larger, like-minded population. Finally, as Sears gained market-supremacy over their more seasoned rival, the advertising styles of the mail-order firms showed significant, if subtle changes to content and style.

The intertwined evolution of Montgomery Ward and the rural consumer ethos is a rare opportunity whereby historians can gauge the potential for individual alienation caused by modern mass consumption. Men such as Henry Griswold must have been disillusioned by these developments. As a long-time commercial farmer, founding member of the "Social Grange" in White Hall, Illinois, and loyal client of Montgomery Ward, Griswold saw his community's efforts at establishing customer controls over the access to goods crushed by the dawn of the twentieth century.

ENDNOTES

List of abbreviations:

- AHC American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming, Laramie, Wyoming.
 CHS Chicago Historical Society, Chicago, Illinois.
 ISHL Illinois State Historical Library, Springfield, Illinois
 InHS Indiana Historical Society, Indianapolis, Indiana.
 InSL Indiana State Library, Indianapolis, Indiana.
 SHSW State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin.
 UI University of Illinois Library, Champaign-Urbana, Illinois.

1. *Chicago Tribune*, 8 November 1873, 3. The pointed reference to their Grange readers suggests that, at least by 1873, the *Tribune* believed that their publication was widely circulated and read by many Midwestern farmers. The use of the comma in "Montgomery, Ward & Co." is correct in the original version.

2. *Chicago Tribune*, 24 December 1873.

3. Most notably, see Daniel Boorstin, "Ward's Catalog," *Chicago History II* (Spring-Summer 1973): 142-152; and *The Americans: The Democratic Experience* (New York: Random House, 1973), 121-124; and William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (Chicago: W. W. Norton & Co., 1991), 333-335. For the Grolier Club, see Montgomery Ward, Collection Number 8008-87-01-30, Box 45, Folder "Catalog History", AHC.

4. For Roosevelt's speech, made on 22 February 1911, see Montgomery Ward, Collection Number 8008-87-01-30, Box 13, Folder "Manuscript, Alfred Lief", AHC, 67; and Montgomery Ward & Co., *The History and Progress of Montgomery Ward & Co., "The Oldest Mail Order House," The Romance of the Golden Rule and Some Interesting Facts About the Mail Order Business* (Chicago: Montgomery Ward & Co., 1925), 35. For McCreery, see *Ibid.*, 36.

5. Poem see *Flyer No. 58, Fall and Winter 1895*, in Montgomery Ward, Collection Number 8008-87-01-30, Box 1, Folder "Advertisements", AHC. For second quote, italics mine, see Montgomery Ward and Company, *Our Silver Anniversary. Being a Brief and Concise History of the Mail Order or Catalogue Business, Which Was Invented by Us a Quarter of a Century Ago* (Chicago: Montgomery Ward & Co., 1897), in Montgomery Ward, Collection Number 8008-87-01-30, Box 27, Folder "Newspaper and Magazine Clippings, 1849-

1959", AHC.

6. *Chicago Tribune*, 24 December 1873.

7. *Prairie Farmer*, 27 December 1873, 412. For problems with urban supply-houses, see Illinois State Grange, *Proceedings of the State Grange of Illinois, at the Third Annual Session held in the City of Springfield, January 12, 13, 14, 15, and 16, A. D., 1875* (Chicago: Harry Fish, Book and Job Printer, 1875), 19; Wisconsin State Grange, *Proceedings of the Fourth Annual Meeting of the Wisconsin State Grange, Patrons of Husbandry Held at Milwaukee, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday, January 4th, 5th, 6th and 7th, 1876* (Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Sentinel Co., 1876), 15; Indiana State Grange, *Proceedings of the Sixth Annual Session of the Indiana State Grange, Patrons of Husbandry* (Muncie, Indiana: Hoosier Patron Steam Printing House, 1876), 17; and Wisconsin State Grange, *Proceedings of the Ninth Annual Meeting of the Wisconsin State Grange, Patrons of Husbandry Held at Milwaukee, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday, January 18, 19, 20, and 21, 1881* (Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Trayser Bros., Book and Job Printing House, 1881), 36.

8. *Prairie Farmer*, 13 December 1873, 395. For other references to Hall, see *Ibid.*, 1 March 1873; 26 April, 1873; and 1 November 1873. By comparison, Montgomery Ward was only *first mentioned* in this influential periodical on 27 September 1873. For flyer from Hall distributed to regional granges, dated 13 April 1874, see Box XI, Folder 4: "Circulars and Advertisements, 1873-1878" in Isaac and Benjamin B. Beeson, *Papers, 1870-1897*, InSL.

9. Ward's diary, cited in several secondary works, has not been found despite a thorough search by this researcher. For Ward's early accounts, see Alfred Leif manuscript in Montgomery Ward, Collection Number 8008-87-01-30, Box 2, Folder "Biographical File: Aaron Montgomery Ward", AHC.

10. *Forward*, (July-August 1928), 4.

11. Montgomery Ward, Collection Number 8008-87-01-30, Box 2, Folder "Biographical File: Aaron Montgomery Ward", AHC. For quote, see *Catalogue No. 14, Wholesale, Fall and Winter 1875-1876*, 5.

12. An interesting, but purely speculative notion arises from the timing of events following the fire. Ward came to the Partridge firm in 1871 following a successful run of employment with various wholesalers. As a senior agent, Ward may have held a desire to advance to partner of the firm. Ward's allegiance to Partridge during the fire suggests that

he was willing to lose his personal assets in order to save those of his employer. In 1873, however, after C. W. & E. Partridge reorganized under the name of The Boston Store, and gave an interest of the firm to a twenty-year-old Charles Netcher. Netcher worked for Partridge at the age of 12 in Buffalo as a bundle carrier, and later acquired control of the firm. This same year, 1873, Ward officially left the firm to start his own venture. Unfortunately, no evidence exists to validate this theory that Ward's initial interest was in operating this established firm, not in directly accessing rural consumer dollars.

13. Letter from Leo A. Dillon, Severn, Maryland, 24 June 1889, in Montgomery Ward, Collection Number 8008-87-01-30, Box 4, Folder 1 "Correspondence, 1889-1969" AHC; see also Montgomery Ward, Collection Number 8008-87-01-30, Box 13, Folder "Manuscript, Alfred Lief", 13, AHC. Internal document from F. W. Jameson (Secretary) to Charles Fullerton, General Attorney, 28 June 1938, in Montgomery Ward, Collection Number 8008-87-01-30, Box 4, Folder 1 "Correspondence, 1889-1969" AHC. Part of the mystery thrust upon contemporary historians comes from the fact that most of the internal documents of the company were destroyed by order of corporate president Sewell Avery during his tenure from 1932 to 1955. See Montgomery Ward, Collection Number 8008-87-01-30, Box 46, Folder "Subject File: A Century of Service", AHC; where one employee noted that the company archives were meager as "most of which were cleaned out in the Sewell Avery sweep in the 1940s." For more on Avery, see Frank M. Kleiler, "The World War II Battles of Montgomery Ward," *Chicago History* Volume 5, No. 1 (Spring 1976): 19-27.

14. For Cobb's and other, much shorter testimonials, see *Catalogue No. 13. Spring and Summer, 1875* (1875), 59-63.

15. *Prairie Farmer*, 1 November 1873, 348. For renowned leaders see *Catalogue No. 15, Winter and Spring, 1876* (1876), 150. For Jones' letter, dated 20 June 1874, see Montgomery Ward & Company, *Catalogue No. 13.* (1875), 59-63.

16. The first money-back guarantee was issued in the 1875 catalog and continued from then on. See *Catalogue No. 13. Spring and Summer, 1875* (1875), inside front cover.

17. For this false assumption, see Daniel Boorstin, "Ward's Catalog," *Chicago History* II (Spring-Summer 1973): 143-4; where he states that "Only the creation [by Ward] of vast new communities of consumers could fully exploit the peculiarly American opportunities," when in fact these communities already existed. For citation, see Montgomery Ward & Co. *Catalogue No. 15, Winter and Spring, 1876* (1876), inside cover. For retraction of alcohol sales, see Grolier

Club announcement, in Montgomery Ward, Collection Number 8008-87-01-30, Box 45, Folder "Catalog History", AHC.

18. For early policies, see *Catalogue No. 10* (Chicago: Montgomery Ward, & Co., January, 1874), front page. For first quote, see *Catalogue No. 12, Fall and Winter 1874-1875* (Chicago: Montgomery Ward & Co. 1875), front inside cover. For second quote, see *Catalogue No. 15, Winter and Spring, 1876*, back inside cover.

19. For quote, see flyer dated 1893, no title, in Montgomery Ward, Collection Number 8008-87-01-30, Box 1, Folder "Advertisements", AHC.

20. For trial order information, see *Catalogue No. 28, Fall and Winter 1880* (1880), 3. For quote, see *Catalogue No. 10*, last page.

21. For cash with order, see *Catalogue No. 19, Fall and Winter, 1877-78* (1877), inside front cover. For grange validation, see *Ibid.*, 2. For blacklist, see *Catalogue No. 12, Fall and Winter 1874-1875* (1874), 3.

22. Both quotes are found in company retrospective on their early efforts, *Our Silver Anniversary. Being a Brief and Concise History of the Mail Order or Catalogue Business, Which Was Invented by Us a Quarter of a Century Ago* (1897), in Montgomery Ward, Collection Number 8008-87-01-30, Box 27, Folder "Newspaper and Magazine Clippings, 1849-1959", AHC.

23. For example, Ward later wrote, "Remember, that we invariably have the goods in stock and are prepared to fill all order for 'bargains' quoted by us. We never have, nor never shall, make a practice of advertising goods at less than cost to catch orders, and then say 'out at present' when orders are received. There are houses that do this. *Look out for them.* They are sure to 'get back at you' in some other way." See *Montgomery Ward & Co.'s Price List of Groceries, No. 252, September 17th, 1888*, last page.

24. First quote in *Descriptive Illustrated Price List No. 31, Spring and Summer, 1882* (1882), back cover. Second quote in *Seasonable Suggestion Series, Vol. 2*, in Montgomery Ward, Collection Number 8008-87-01-30, Box 1, Folder "Advertisements", AHC.

25. Quote from interview at Omaha Exhibition of 1898, in pamphlet written by W. B. Leffingwell, Advertising Manager of Ward in 1898, in Montgomery Ward, Collection Number 8008-87-01-30, Box 3, Books, AHC. Leffingwell pledged that they would never sell via urban retail outlets.

26. For Thayer visit and comments, see Ward internal journal titled, *Among Ourselves* Volume 3, No. 1 (October 1906): 18.
27. For figures, see *Catalogue Nos. 41-45*, inside front covers.
28. Story cited in *The First 100 Years*, a history commissioned by the firm. See Montgomery Ward, Collection Number 8008-87-01-30, Box 13, Folder "Manuscript, Alfred Lief", 30-31, AHC.
29. *Ibid.*, 61.
30. For Nicholson see *Among Ourselves*, Volume 1, No. 7 (April 1905): 313. For other examples, see *Ibid.*, Volume 1, No. 11 (August 1905): 572; and *Ibid.*, Volume 1, No. 12 (September 1905): 639. For Kaufman letter, see *Ibid.*, Volume 3, No. 1 (October 1906): 18.
31. For transactions, see Griswold Family, *Papers, 1814-1943*, Box 1: "Diaries," and Box 4: "Account books, bank books, etc," ISHL. These figures probably underestimate the volume of sales. Griswold noted on 7 March 1892 that he mailed off \$38.61 for barbed wire, but the bank statement did not say Montgomery Ward but only a debit logged to "Self & B. W. Collins for barbed wire." His diary confirms that the order was sent to Wards. He wrote on Sunday, March 6: "sent to Montgomery Ward & Co. for 1100 lbs barb wire \$2.97 per hundred." If Griswold failed to "double-enter" other transactions in both his bank book and diary, then the number of Ward sales could be under-represented. Also note that Griswold's aggregate purchases, from 1889 to 1904, of \$657 was more than he earned for the entire year of either 1873 or 1875.
32. *Catalogue No. 14, Wholesale, Fall and Winter 1875-1876* (1875), 1.
33. For the Thorne's heavy-handed approach -- after all, they were raised as the sons of a well respected Chicago millionaire -- see Leif manuscript, 63-67 in Montgomery Ward, Collection Number 8008-87-01-30, Box 13, Folder "Manuscript, Alfred Lief", AHC; and "Remembrances of T. E. Donnelley" in Montgomery Ward, Collection Number 8008-87-01-30, Box 13, Folder "Manuscript, Donnelley-Ward Association", AHC.
34. For agents, see *Catalogue and Price-List No. 22, Fall and Winter, 1878* (1878), 3. For Milwaukee store, see *Catalogue No. 28, Fall and Winter, 1880* (Chicago: Montgomery

- Ward & Co.), 160. For retraction, see *Descriptive Illustrated Price List No. 31, Spring and Summer, 1882* (1882), inside back cover; stating "Having withdrawn our Milwaukee Retail Store, we would inform our Trade that we have no Branch Stores, and employ no Agents."
35. For questionnaire, see R. S. Thain, *New Light on an Old Subject, No. 2*. (Chicago: Howard & Wilson Publishing Co., 1899), page titled "Question No. 9 - Mail Orders." For Thorne quote, see Leif manuscript, 63 in Montgomery Ward, Collection Number 8008-87-01-30, Box 13, Folder "Manuscript, Alfred Lief", AHC.
36. See Louis E. Asher and Edith Heal, *Send No Money* (Chicago: Argus Books, 1942); Rae Elizabeth Rips, "An Introductory Study of the Role of the Mail-Order Business," Ph.D. diss., Chicago, 1938, 26-27; and Boris Emmet and John Jeuck, *Catalogs and Counters: A History of Sears, Roebuck and Company* (Chicago: 1950), 56-59.
37. Asher and Heal, *Send No Money*, 52.
38. For article, see *Among Ourselves*, Volume 1, No. 10 (July 1905): 502, 540; and *Descriptive Illustrated Price List No. 41, Spring and Summer, 1887* (1887), inside front cover.
39. While Sears claimed as early as 1895 that his company surpassed Wards in sales, it was not until the offer was printed on the back cover of the 1907 catalog that he posted the \$10,000 challenge. See Rips, "An Introductory Study of the Role of the Mail Order Business," 34.
40. For first quote, see Montgomery Ward and Co., *Catalogue No. 72, (1904)*, Index. A methodological note should be made regarding the specific products highlighted in this paper. Expensive goods such as stoves, pianos, and carriages, or products unrepresentative of a broad market, such as parlor furniture, china, or silverware, were not considered. Historians such as Daniel Boorstin, Alfred Chandler, Jr., and Jackson Lears, refer to the popularity of bicycles, sewing machines, and patent medicines. For a specific reference on the desirability of sewing machines, see Boorstin, *The Americans*, 113-129; of patent drugs, see T. J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981), 52-56; of bicycles, see Alfred Chandler Jr., *The Visible Hand, The Managerial Revolution in American Business* (Cambridge Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1977), 230. As these products were both affordable and desirable, they are compared in this paper. Finally, the catalogs that featured these products were available to compare. For these reasons, bicycles, sewing

machines, and patent drugs are three instances used to demonstrate the advertising styles of the two corporations.

41. See Montgomery Ward & Co., *Bicycles and Cycling Sundries, Catalogue M* (1895), 1-4.

42. All references are to Sears Roebuck and Co., *Bicycle Announcement* (1898), no pagination.

43. Italics mine, *Ibid.* Sears wisely offers an alternative bicycle in their example. "Take our Acme Crown, Costs You \$22.50. Don't you think you can sell it for \$35.00? Do you think you could ride it a week before some one would admire it? Just tell them you can get them one like it for \$35.00, and it will be sold. You sell it the day you get it for \$12.50 profit.... you will be surprised the money you can make taking bicycle orders."

44. It was quite common for both catalogs to be in one home. See *Mr. Sears Catalog*, 60 min., *The American Experience*, videocassette.

45. Sears Roebuck and Co., *Consumer Guide* (1902), 721.

46. For the terms and conditions of the various lines, see *Ibid.*, 721; and Montgomery Ward and Co., *Catalogue No. 73* (1904), 11-26.

47. Sears Roebuck and Co., *Consumer Guide* (1902), 721.

48. For both listings, see Sears Roebuck and Co., *Consumer Guide* (1902), 722; and Montgomery Ward and Co., *Catalogue No. 73* (1904), 13.

49. The repeated use by Sears of the terms "neighbor" and "neighborhood" suggests an attempt to use the pressure of conformity or pride to promote sales. As the prices of the various models increased, the focus on the beauty of the cabinet as parlor furniture also climbed.

50. Sears listed the "Minnesota" at \$23.20 and offered the set of attachments for \$.75. For the Sears copy, see Sears Roebuck and Co., *Consumer Guide* (1902), 740; for Ward's see Montgomery Ward and Co., *Catalogue No. 73* (1904), 26.

51. "The Drug Division," *Among Ourselves* Volume 2, No. 1 (October 1905): 27. See Montgomery Ward and Co., *Drugs, Patent Medicines, and Toilet Preparations Catalogue D* (1894-1895); Montgomery Ward and Co., *Drug Catalogue* (1902); Sears Roebuck and Co., *Consumer Guide* (1897); and Sears Roebuck and Co., *What We Furnish for the Asking* (1903).

52. For Montgomery Ward & Co., see *Drugs, Patent Medicines, and Toilet Preparations Catalogue D* (1894-1895.), 91; for Sears Roebuck & Co., *Consumer Guide* (1897), 33. All of the products mentioned can be found on one page, suggesting the vast expanse of their advertising imagination. See Sears, *Consumer Guide* (1897), 27. Many other examples exist in the catalogs of these types of claims, including the Women's "Bust Developer and Bust Cream and Food," which combine fanciful claims, grand assurances, and pictures of "cured" individuals as evidence.

53. Montgomery Ward and Co., *Drug Catalogue* (1902), back page.

54. Montgomery Ward and Co., *Catalogue No. 482, Price List of Groceries* (July-August, 1903), back cover.

55. Asher and Heal, *Send No Money*, 36. Neil Harris, "Introduction," in *The Land of Contrasts: 1880-1901*, ed. Neil Harris (New York: George Braziller, 1970), 7-9.

56. David Potter, *People of Plenty: Economic Abundance and the American Character* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954), 170-171; for a brief understanding of "reason why advertising," see Lears, "From Salvation to Self-Realization," in T. J. Jackson Lears and Richard Wightman Fox, eds. *The Culture of Consumption: Critical Essays in American History, 1880-1980* (New York: Pantheon, 1983), 18. Ward quote in *Among Ourselves* Volume 1, No. 10 (July 1905), 540.

57. See Lears, "From Salvation to Self-Realization," 6-11; and Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920-1940* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), xvii-xviii.

58. For quote, see "Modern Development," n. d. (c. 1947), in Montgomery Ward, Collection Number 8008-87-01-30, Box 45, Folder "Catalog History", AHC.

59. For the development of brand names, see Susan Strasser, *Satisfaction Guaranteed: The Making of the American Mass Market* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1989); Thomas Schlereth, *Victorian America: Transformations of Everyday Life, 1876-1915* (New York: Harper-Collins, 1991); and Richard S. Tedlow, *New and Improved: The Story of Mass Marketing in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1990).

60. Fifty-six per cent of the respondents were from the states of Illinois, Michigan, Iowa, Indiana, Ohio, and Wisconsin. For study see Thain, *New Light on an Old Subject*.

61. "Question No. 7 - Stove Polish," in *Ibid.*
62. For Ward quote, see Montgomery Ward, Collection Number 8008-87-01-30, Box 13, Folder "Manuscript, Alfred Lief", 43, AHC; see also *Among Ourselves*, Volume 1, No. 6 (March 1905), 240-241.
63. See "Modern Development," n. d. (c. 1947), in Montgomery Ward, Collection Number 8008-87-01-30, Box 45, Folder "Catalog History", AHC.
64. For Seventh Annual Conference of Executives, italics mine, see Montgomery Ward, Collection Number 8008-87-01-30, Box 37, Folder "Anniversary Dinners", AHC.

CHAPTER 8

CONCLUSION

The computer revolution of the 1980s and 1990s has fundamentally altered the way many Americans now communicate. Via the Internet, the World Wide Web, and a host of networking sites, individuals with the technical skills and resources can access an expanding array of information and merchandise. A beneficiary of this movement, CEO and chairman of Microsoft Corporation, Bill Gates wrote that this connectivity will fundamentally alter the way citizens purchase goods in the near future. James Fallows, in a recent article observed that, according to Gates, "'imperfections' and inefficiencies of the market... will virtually disappear... when we are all wired. Total communications will give us... 'friction-free capitalism,' in which nothing will stand between willing buyers and sellers making the best possible deal."¹

Historical comparisons are often anachronistic and misleading, yet the similarity between Gates' forecast and that of rural consumers in the nineteenth century is more than coincidental. In the Gilded Age technologies led to greater and more abundant consumer goods accessed through new and easier methods. These changes made it possible for

Americans to re-evaluate their association to material goods. As a result, rural patrons expressed a well-articulated vision of their desired position in the modern consumer culture.

Territorial agents, as a class of businessmen, provided the mechanism by which this shift was realized. Independent agents and wholesalers pressed small town merchants to adopt a new conception of their stores, increased the involvement by manufacturers in the wider distribution of their goods, and related to others along the distribution network the transportation limitations of the region. Agents circulated news of credit and market conditions in an effort to stabilize the consumer economy. All of these were attempts to lower the risk which they assumed in order to get goods into the hands of rural consumers.

As a result, wholesalers empowered farmers by providing them with meaningful consumer options. By 1861, escalating competitive pressures and the increased availability and awareness of goods ended the opportunity for rural merchants to maintain local monopolies. Supply gave way to demand as the governing force in the consumer economy. By diluting and decentralizing this business force, agents democratized the control over mass consumption.

Rural Midwesterners were able to take advantage of this opportunity because of their unique economic experiences as commercial farmers. From around 1840 to 1873, purchasing

decisions were central to the practice of scientific farming. Agricultural journals and fairs reinforced the important role of consumption in farm life. The tremendous growth in the market brought about by the Civil War, and the critical experiences of this conflict, further linked this population to materialism. The economic collapse of 1873 coalesced this education into a shared consumer vision that was expressed through Farmers' Clubs and the Grange.

The rural consumer ethos forged by farmers was an assertive policy that reflected the unique character of this Midwestern population. Codified by the purchasing agency of the Patrons of Husbandry, agrarian consumerism was lifted from the prairie soil and applied to the sweeping changes that were taking place following the war. As such, it contained the very paradoxes and prejudices that are associated with homogeneous societies. While farmers wanted their consumer demands met by suppliers, they were less concerned about the mechanisms used to achieve this goal. Communal solidarity was employed as a recruiting tool for many rural cooperatives, yet sating individual wants proved to be more critical to the ultimate success of these operations. This Janus-faced disposition -- as individual commercial farmer and as a member of the rural community -- was never fully addressed by the farmers' consumer ideal.²

By contrast, urban and small town consumers expressed much less concern about the control over modern

merchandising. The experience of shopping was the focus of consumption in small Midwestern towns. Their consumer ethos, if it existed at all, was almost completely individualistic. The lone voice of concern coming from towns in the heartland were from those who feared the retail competition from large urban centers such as Chicago and St. Louis. Small town advertisements addressed an undifferentiated and largely neglected retail audience, not one concerned about the direction and control of modern consumerism. Aided by professional advertising campaigns and the growing size of local retailers, small town consumers placed themselves at the disposal of the expanding distribution system.

Nor did Chicago retailers reach out to address this rural vision. While farmers clearly articulated a new demand driven consumer ideology through the purchasing agency of local granges, their urban neighbors supported a distinctly opposing viewpoint. The *Tribune's* focus on local retailing, agents, and manufacturers meshed with the emerging urban consumer culture as exemplified in the department stores of all Midwestern towns. During these years, Midwestern farmers found that they were without allies in their effort to perfect a consumer controlled purchasing system.

The Patrons of Husbandry proved unable to manage the operational complexities or balance the ideological tensions of the rural consumer ethos. The institution was founded as a fraternal association yet its growth was based on its

application of this individualistic economic ideal. From 1873 to the end of the decade, the state and national bodies deliberated the relative strengths of the various options. Falling membership convinced many that the Order needed to retrench its economic policy around the more stable and communal Rochdale plan. The resulting collapse of the State and Local agencies, seen in this light, is neither an indication of the failure of the Grange nor of an inadequacy by rural Midwesterners to articulate a clear plan of action to realize their consumer desires. The failure of the purchasing agency concept left an inefficient and redundant marketing arm within the Grange. Rural Americans turned to the private sector to satisfy their continuing consumer wants.

Rural consumerism was rapidly integrated into these market forces. The mail-order firm of Montgomery Ward and Company, from their inception in 1873, was closely linked to the rural ideology and buying patterns developed at the grass-roots and later forcefully demonstrated through the Patrons of Husbandry. Aaron Ward's marketing genius was not in developing a new and unique method by which urban suppliers could capture this farm population, but rather in his compliance with the manifest demands of these Americans. However, his bold success drew competition that was not rooted in these practices. In particular, Richard Warren Sears's 1893 establishment employed the latest marketing and

advertising ploys in an effort to convert these patrons over to the new, individualistic doctrine of consumption. Sears's modernization changed the industry, and by the turn of the century even Ward's was forced to follow in this new direction. Commercial pressures on consumption negated communal mores demanding control over the access to high-quality goods. In its place emerged a doctrine devoted to uncompromising individualism, style over substance, and the perceived exclusivity of the various merchandise consumed.

Modern advertising was the lever used by twentieth-century suppliers to overturn the traditional and shared beliefs -- customs which treated the process of consumption with skepticism and circumspection -- of many rural consumers. As promoters created new necessities of modern living, from fresh breath to the three-buttoned blazer, the general public lost its ability to direct the supply and demand relationship. Further, as more and more firms yielded to this recent marketing style the distribution network became less and less pliable to internal reforms. Finally, notions of virtue and responsibility -- which for decades had informed the farmers' purchasing decisions -- melted away as suppliers increasingly catered to the individual needs of their patrons.

As with the historiography of rural unrest, this rural consumer angst adds a poignant backdrop to the broad syntheses of the era. Robert Wiebe, Samuel P. Hays, Jackson

Lears and others have noted that the middle-class experienced a loss of cultural control during this era. The consumer experience of rural Midwesterners must be considered a central cause of this detachment.³

The pioneering study of Muncie, Indiana, by Helen and Robert S. Lynd confirmed that, by 1924, modern consumerism acted like a cancer on rural communal values. The institutionalization of buying transformed even the very essence of what it meant to be middle-class in America. Rejecting notions of freedom, virtue, and even democracy, the Lynds showed how the children of Indiana's farmers now worked to obtain and spend money rather than to advance their society. More insidiously, modern consumerism left nothing to replace the traditional ideology upon which it fed. Shoppers could only buy more goods, being promised that "Brand X" would reinfuse meaning into their lives. The resulting confusion in the minds of many only fueled the growth of modern advertising firms, as shoppers sought information and reassurance.⁴

The defeat of rural consumerism -- promulgated by a large section of white, native-born farmers in America's heartland -- indicates the strong grip that modern materialism holds over the cultural practices of this country. Midwestern farmers expressed their purchasing preferences and acted to see them executed. Unfortunately, the institutions employed for this purpose proved incapable

of sustaining a subtle balance between community and the individual. This tension, first demonstrated by Midwestern farmers, remains at the heart of our modern consumer culture.

ENDNOTES

1. James Fallows, "Caught in the Web," *The New York Review of Books* XLII, No. 3 (15 February 1996): 14-18.
2. The Internet suffers from this very same paradox. While some still hope that this innovation will create a "global village," in reality users seem even more isolated. One merely need witness the computer center of a major University, where operators "interact" with their video screens while remaining insulated and physically cloistered within individual cubicles. This powerful image of connectivity -- while making allowances for the fact that people need their private work-space -- highlights the challenges of total access to information. We are more comfortable with ideas that conform to our own preconceptions, and the thousands of home pages available make it easy to find the few that accommodate us. The inevitable result is an erosion of shared experiences. See *Ibid.*
3. For syntheses and interpretation on the restlessness of America's nativist middle-class, see Robert Wiebe, *The Search For Order, 1877-1920* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967); Samuel P. Hays, *The Response to Industrialism, 1885-1914* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957); and Lears, *No Place of Grace*.
4. See Robert S. and Helen M. Lynd, *Middletown: A Study of American Culture* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1956); and *Middletown in Transition: A Study in Cultural Conflicts* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1937).

APPENDIX 1

QUANTITATIVE METHOD

The database is taken from randomly selected issues of the following periodicals and during the years indicated.

Regional Newspaper	Inclusive Dates	# Advts.
Chicago <i>Tribune</i>	2/1866-11/1874	2,214
Indianapolis <i>Journal</i>	2/1870-10/1874	395
Milwaukee Daily News	11/1863-2/1869	393
Ripon Free Press	1/1874-5/1878	332
Oshkosh City Times	11/1867-5/1877	783

I focused on the months of February, March, May, June, September, October, and November. During these months one was likely to find farmers with disposable income from their seasonal sales or capable of spending time reading newspapers. All other months were either extremely labor intensive or periods before harvesting and sale of their surplus. Once an issue was randomly selected from these seven months I cataloged every advertisement found within the periodical for that day.¹

¹ For seasonal activities, see Robert M. Finley, "A Budgeting Approach to the Question of Homestead Size on the Plains," *Agricultural History* XLII, No. 2 (April 1968): 109-

INFORMATION CAPTURED:

- 1) Location of Advertiser (City, State).
- 2) Name of Advertiser.
- 3) Type of Product.
- 4) Specific Consumer Targeted in Advertisement.
- 5) Date of Issue.

ADDITIONAL MATERIAL CAPTURED BUT NOT USED IN THIS STUDY:

- 5) Advertising content: If ad used picture, particularly innovative ad style, graphics, etc. If product or service was unique, unusual, etc.
- 6) For the Chicago sub-set, I noted the "allure" of the ad, i.e., how a product was promoted: cost, novelty, etc. giving the description of pictures or graphics, relative size of the ads, and page number within the issue.

CODING PROCEDURES AND EXAMPLES:

- 1) Location of Advertiser. (City, State)

Hometown: If the stated location of the advertiser was the same as that of the publication.

Chicago: If the stated location of the advertiser was "Chicago."

In-State, but not the hometown: If the stated location of the advertiser was within the same state as that of the publication.

Out of State, not Chicago: All others not listed above.

2) Type of Advertiser. Taken explicitly or implicitly from the name of the firm, the type of product(s) offered, and the descriptions within the advertisement.

"Retailer:" Advertiser services that were undifferentiated to the mass audience within the advertisement, offering products readily utilized by all patrons, and available in individual units for the lone consumer. Best examples include department and clothing stores, groceries, livery stables, "Dry Goods Emporiums" and the like. In the 1 November 1863 issue of the *Milwaukee Daily News* are three samples: W. L. Candee and the Oak Hall Store provided Dry Goods; H. C. Bradley & Co. offered paper and "Yankee Notions" to the general public.

"Manufacturers:" Advertiser's that offered a specific physical good directly from the factory to the public, often of a technical or specialty variety. Good examples include sewing machines, woodworking equipment, and devices such as "German Pumps"

(*Milwaukee Daily News*, 14 March 1863), and industrial scales. One large segment of this population was suppliers of patent medicines. While obviously not industrialists, these firms often sold their wares directly to the end user, rather than relying on retailers or agents. When these national advertisements were specifically placed by local retailers or agents for local distribution they were *not* considered "manufacturers" in this study.

"Agents:" Advertisers that listed themselves as agents, brokers, or wholesalers of large volume or particularly expensive goods. Examples include insurance, wholesale agricultural surplus, investment properties (generally more than one site or a location away from the nearby region), and brokers of large quantities of manufactured goods. See for example, the *Indianapolis Journal*, 9 October 1874, Smith & Hannaman, Loan Brokers; Hendricks, Edmunds & Co, wholesale dealers of boots and shoes or, 10 May 1871, George Evans, commission merchant, "dealer in all foods."

"Others:" Those not included above, such as publishers of books or city directories, educational opportunities, transportation services, hotels, concert halls, entertainment, and gift enterprises. See Oshkosh

City Times, 5 November 1867; 2 June 1868; and 13 September 1871 for numerous examples.

3) Type of Product. Listed the specific product mentioned within the ad.

4) Consumers targeted within the advertisements were determined by a combination of the type and quantity of product offered, the information stated within the advertisement, and the likelihood that such products or services were intended for a mass audience.

"None:" Consumers were unspecified and the products offered were standard, readily utilized goods. This category was the default option if no information contradicting a broadly cast advertisement was evident. Patent medicines, wallpaper, jewelry, general retail goods, dry goods, books, transportation, and educational information generally were offered for all to purchase. Even such odd products as "Plastic Slate Roofing," offered by Whitacre & Raymond in the *Chicago Tribune*, 5 November 1866, while unconventional, were not targeted to a specific user (assuming one doesn't reduce the category to absurdity by noting the need for a roof).

"Manufacturer:" Manufacturers were seen to be targeted when advertisements offered goods specifically aimed at the manufacturing process, or indicated through its references that the good was primarily intended for industrial use. For example, in the *Chicago Tribune*, 18 June 1867, Chase, Hanford, & Co. presented their Wagon Axle grease to brewers, millers, distillers, and lumber mills. 22 November 1868, Louis Pfau of Quincy, Illinois announced his "Tinner Machinery." Finally, commission merchants Wyeth & Vandervoort sold their barley and rye malt to "brewers and distillers," 6 February 1869. All of these products *could have been* purchased by any number of individuals, but their sponsors placed these advertisements with the direct intent of attracting manufacturers.

"Agent:" A targeted consumer was coded as an agent when the advertiser specifically referenced middlemen, or the goods indicated the need (whether due to volume or expense) for a broker. In the *Chicago Tribune*, 9 February 1866, Stine, Kramer & Co. offered "Notions, Hosery, Fine Goods, [and] Men's Furnishings" directly to "Importers and Jobbers." E. C. Partridge, 2 February 1867, stated that "Extra Inducements offered to Agents... canvassing wanted for the whole northwest" in order to promote their sewing machine castors (which

made the immovable devices mobile within the home). Clement, Ottman & Co., 22 November 1868, made a 30 day offer to "wholesale customers... \$300,000 worth of goods that we do not propose to carry over into next year." Agents were sought for land sales, new manufacturing and retail goods, and for limited partnerships.

"Other:" These ads targeted consumers with specific needs not defined by "agents" or "manufacturers." For example, Chicago *Tribune* advertisers targeted libraries, artists, auction houses, and other specific specialties that were not considered part of the general consumer population. In the 19 November 1872 issue, the Western News Co. offered a "Drama for Sale - - 'The Coming Man, or Fifty Years Hence'... cleverly depicting the state of affairs when women have attained their full rights, as demanded by the most ultra of the Women's Rights Party."

DATA PROCESSING:

For frequency tables and cross-tabulations, I used the FOXPRO, Version 2.5, relational database software. For the regression analyses, I recoded the dates functions and ran the database using the SPSS statistical package.

The raw data is available to anyone who would like it.

Send your name, address, return postage, and two formatted

1.44 MB diskettes to following address:

David Blanke
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REFERENCE LIST

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March 29, 1996

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