

Sowing the American Dream: How Consumer Culture Took Root in the Rural Midwest

David B. Danbom

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mirror whereby they could examine their shared values. Finding the Mormon worldview at odds with their own, opponents organized to drive the infidels out. Near the close of her book, Rugh introduces the appeal of evangelicalism in much the same way, concluding, "people who felt uneasy about the social dislocations of prosperity and out-migration sought security in the institutional safety of a church" (166).

Rugh's ordinarily deft focus on historical contingency, conflict, and continuity seems to fail, however, when she addresses the concept of rural republicanism in larger institutions. Defined here loosely as independent farm ownership and economic agency, the ideology appears in the text as a means to explain why farmers acted as they did when forming institutions or when participating in politics (although it is also used to explain other qualities as well). Although her treatment of republicanism is well justified, given the ample historiography, there is rarely a sense of how Hancock County farmers defined the concept on their own terms. Rather, economic conflict appears in a stark, menacingly deterministic fashion, with industrial "culprits" and "village leaders valiantly attempt[ing]" to prevent change to a community that was merely "a sinking ship" (160). External institutions are used to support this dichotomy. The Grange appears here as an elite rural organization intending to bring about railroad and granary reforms (the Granger Laws). The complexity of the Granger movement is lost in Rugh's efforts to identify the shifting ideologies of Hancock County farmers. She does not need to interject such a cursory analysis of rural republicanism to show, as I believe this book does, that "people are not the victims or objects of larger structural changes" (185).

These individual criticisms should not detract, however, from what is an excellent book, finely written, and a significant contribution to our understanding of rural populations. Through the stories of Fountain Green's farm families, *Our Common Country* shows how the Midwest was born.

Sowing the American Dream: How Consumer Culture Took Root in the Rural Midwest, by David Blanke. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2000. xiii, 282 pp. Notes, tables, appendixes, index. \$59.95 cloth, \$21.95 paper.

Reviewer David B. Danbom is professor of history at North Dakota State University. He is the author of *Born in the Country: A History of Rural America* (1995).

In *Sowing the American Dream*, David Blanke analyzes the "consumer culture" that developed in the nineteenth century among farmers in the Midwest, defined as Iowa, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Ohio, and Wisconsin. In keeping with the conclusions of all but a handful of ro-

matic scholars, Blanke believes that nineteenth-century midwesterners were enthusiastic rather than reluctant consumers; that they sought to shape markets according to their needs and desires, rather than serving as passive victims of market forces; and that the theoretical contradiction between individual consumption and community needs seldom troubled farmers in any practical ways. Blanke makes his greatest contribution by moving beyond these generally accepted ideas to the conclusion that farmers were conscious of themselves *mainly* as consumers rather than as producers, and that their willingness to act as conscious consumers shaped the distribution of goods in this country in fundamental ways.

Blanke roots rural consumerism in the actions of those he calls "scientific farmers"—members of agricultural clubs and readers of farm newspapers who were active purchasers of producer goods for their farms and homes and consumer goods to make the lives of their families more pleasant. Knowledgeable about the existence of products, these consumers were frustrated by the narrow range of goods offered by local retailers, whose lack of effective competition in many areas meant that they had little incentive to meet consumers' needs. The distribution system and the availability of desirable goods improved in the 1840s and 1850s as agents, jobbers, and other middlemen offered farmers more sources of consumer goods as well as alternative outlets for their products. These middlemen, systematically excoriated by most agricultural historians, are among Blanke's heroes, and he demonstrates a sensitive understanding of the challenges they faced and the services they provided.

In the hard times that followed the Civil War, however, farmers turned on the middlemen who had served as their benefactors and cast about for alternatives that would better meet their needs as consumers. The Grange, which became the vehicle for the protests of midwestern farmers, offered two possible cooperative alternatives. One was to hire its own agents who would fill farmers' orders with a variety of manufacturers, passing the savings on to consumers. The other was to create cooperative retail outlets according to the Rochdale system, under which stores bought from established suppliers and charged full retail prices, distributing profits to their cooperating owners at the end of each fiscal year. Because this latter plan comported so well with rural understandings of community, most state and local Granges adopted it, but it failed, Blanke believes, because it did not offer consumers the choice to which they had become accustomed.

Into this breach stepped mail-order houses, especially Montgomery Ward, which offered rural consumers a wide range of goods under the

terms of honesty, integrity, and fair dealing that obtained within the rural community itself. Montgomery Ward succeeded, Blanke believes, not because it manipulated rural consumers, but because it was attentive to their values and effectively met their desire for variety and quality in the goods they consumed.

There will be critics of this book, and some of their criticisms will be justified. I am dubious about Blanke's use of the term *scientific farmers* and his assumption that they were numerous. I am also troubled by his tendency to make unsupported assumptions, especially about the behavior and motivations of middlemen and consumers. And I find his handling of the relationship between the behavior of individual consumers and community mores to be murky and vague.

Still, this is an important book that tells us a great deal about rural consumers, the development of markets, the nature of distribution, and the evolution of organizational structures in business and agriculture in the nineteenth-century Midwest. Most important, it offers us a dramatically different picture of the nature and motivation of midwestern farmers than those with which we are familiar. *Sowing the American Dream* is an important book, and David Blanke is to be congratulated for it.

The Haymakers: A Chronicle of Five Farm Families, by Steven R. Hoffbeck. St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2000. 213 pp. Illustrations, maps, notes, bibliography, index. \$24.95 cloth.

Reviewer Pamela Riney-Kehrberg is associate professor of history at Iowa State University. Her current research focuses on children and families in rural communities. Her latest book is *Waiting on the Bounty: The Dust Bowl Diary of Mary Knackstedt Dyck* (1999).

The Haymakers: A Chronicle of Five Farm Families, by Steven R. Hoffbeck, is a book about more than the changing technology of making hay. It is the story of a century and a half of change on Minnesota's farms and how that change has affected the ability of farm families to survive and thrive in their way of life. It is also the story of the author's own family's farm, a heartbreaking tale of lives and a farm lost to fatal entanglements with farm machinery.

The Haymakers is, in many ways, two books. One of those books traces the haymaking endeavors of five Minnesota farm families since the Civil War. The families involved are largely of immigrant origin: Swedish, German, Norwegian, and Danish. Hoffbeck discusses the technology used, the labor required, and the community relationships formed around the process of making hay. He also examines the way

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