

well into the 1920s in movements such as the cooperative movement.

Taken altogether, these essays demonstrate that the socialist experience in America in the first quarter of the century was a complex and varied one and that further studies of the kind will no doubt prove the inadequacy of any single, overarching explanation for the decline of the Socialist party.

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Threshing in the Midwest, 1820–1940: A Study of Traditional Culture and Technological Change. By J. Sanford Rikoon. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988. Pp. xiii, 214. Illustrations, figures, tables, appendixes, notes, bibliography, index. \$35.00.)

Technological change in American agriculture has long been the domain of economic historians who have sought to understand patterns of diffusion and adoption of innovations and to explain the effect of the adoption of a new technology on agricultural productivity. Complimenting these studies have been works by historians of technology that have examined the internal development of particular technological systems.

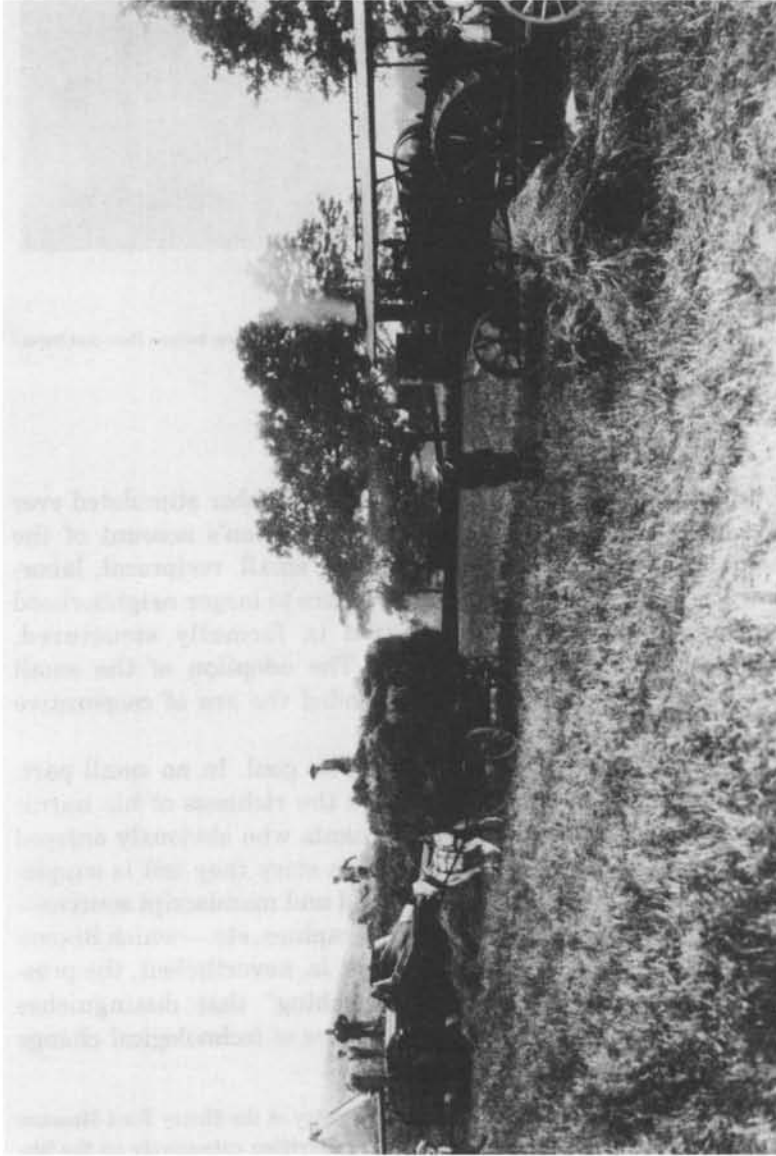
J. Sanford Rikoon's *Threshing in the Midwest, 1820–1940* offers a different portrait of technological change in the rural Midwest. Approaching his topic from the perspectives of folklife and rural sociology, Rikoon studies how rural midwestern society and culture responded to changing technologies. As he states:

Actual on-farm practices are emphasized over mechanical details and technological designs because of an assumption that the evolution of any new technology, whether hand-tool or machine, is not necessarily synonymous with either its use or its method of employment. . . . But people adapt as well as adopt. They alter their lifestyles before, during, and after adoption of a new device (p. xi).

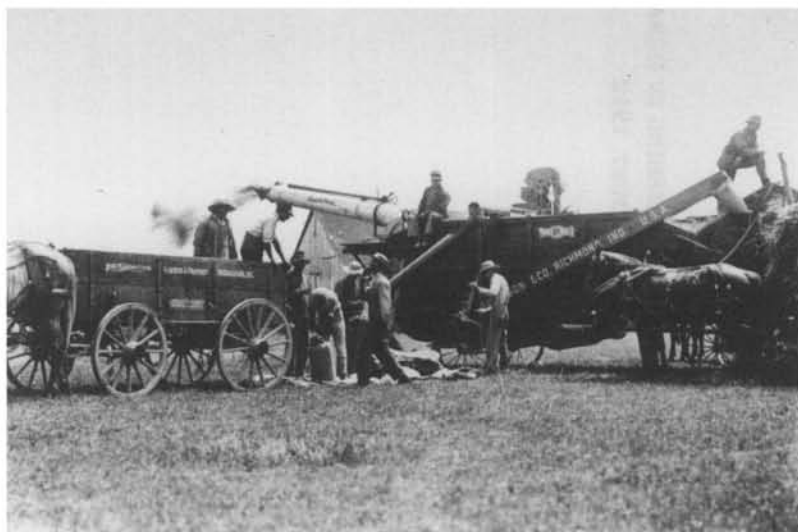
Parenthetically, the only factual errors which were noted in the book were in rather minor details of technical description.

More than many occupational practices on the farm, threshing was charged with sociocultural meaning to rural midwesterners. "People don't farm like they used to," Rikoon quotes an Ohio farmer (p. x), and "they don't thresh together anymore." *Threshing in the Midwest*, however, refutes the popularly held belief that it was mechanization *per se* that transformed traditional, cooperative farm communities into individualistic agribusiness enterprises. Manual threshing techniques—flailing or horse treading—practiced by individual farm families during the first half of the nineteenth century required little inter-farm cooperation. The increasingly complex mechanization of the threshing process, the cost of equipment, and

THRESHING IN INDIANA,
AUGUST, 1912



Courtesy Bass Photo Company Collection, Indiana Historical Society.



THRESHING IN INDIANA

Courtesy Bass Photo Company Collection, Indiana Historical Society.

the concomitant demand for larger amounts of labor stimulated ever greater degrees of cooperative behavior. Rikoon's account of the mechanization of threshing leads us from small, reciprocal, labor-sharing arrangements among a few farmers to larger neighborhood "threshing rings" which culminated in formally structured, business-like threshing cooperatives. The adoption of the small tractor-drawn combine in the 1930s ended the era of cooperative threshing.

Threshing in the Midwest achieves its goal. In no small part, the strength of Rikoon's argument and the richness of his narrative rest on his extensive use of informants who obviously enjoyed "talking threshing" with the author. The story they tell is supplemented by a range of firsthand published and manuscript sources—farmers' diaries, account books, autobiographies, etc.—which Rikoon has thoroughly mined for information. It is, nevertheless, the presence of the old farmers "talking threshing" that distinguishes *Threshing in the Midwest* from other studies of technological change in American agriculture.

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