



**"KEROSENE ANNIE"**

ONE OF THE FIRST RUMELY OIL  
PULL TRACTORS

E. A. Rumely Collection, courtesy Lilly Li-  
brary, Indiana University, Bloomington.

*Bull Threshers and Bindlestiffs: Harvesting and Threshing on the North American Plains.* By Thomas D. Isern. (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1990. Pp. xiii, 248. Illustrations, figures, tables, notes, index. \$29.95.)

Thomas D. Isern has done it again. Just as his *Custom Combining on the Great Plains* (1981) filled a significant gap in regional agricultural history, so this volume dealing with harvesting "before the combine" fills another part of the engaging story of technology, capital, labor, culture, and lore of the plains of the United States and Canada. Like the earlier study, this one is an admirable combination of thorough research, finely crafted narrative, and instructive illustrations. It meets the standards of professional historians and appeals to the larger public's abiding fascination with threshing machines.

The history of harvesting technology and detailed explanations of how equipment was used, including power and labor, provide the background for harvesting and threshing practices on the plains. Prior to the development of the combine, which *combined* both tasks, harvesting referred to the cutting of the crop and storing in shocks or stacks, and threshing was the separation of the grain from the straw and chaff. Some readers, especially collectors and those who follow the antique-threshing-show circuit, will wish for more specific details on name-brand equipment (which is available in other places but could have been incorporated here). The later chapter on combines provides more of this type of information for those machines than is included regarding earlier binders, headers, separators, and engines.

Isern is at his best when describing the workings of threshing crews and the variety of practices related by participants. The division of labor and duties of everyone (including engineers, separator men, water monkeys, firemen, drivers, bindlestiffs, grain

haulers, and cooks) are enhanced with stories and illustrations. The details about the huge migratory labor force involved in harvesting and threshing on the plains include workers, ethnic groups, recruiting, travel, wages, food, lodging, and labor organizations.

Isern is a keen student of the Great Plains, and he provides regional interpretation that reaches different conclusions than J. Sanford Rikoon's *Threshing in the Midwest* (1988). Plains farmers and threshermen adapted readily to changing technology, at least in part because of the chronic shortage of local laborers. The plains environment produced subregional variations, such as winter wheat on the southern and central plains and spring wheat on the northern plains, which affected equipment choices and harvesting practices, such as binders or headers. The adoption of the combine on the Great Plains produced a revolution in wheat farming. *Bull Threshers and Bindlestiffs* stands alone as a scholarly study; it also provides relevant background for the "sequel" that was published first, *Custom Combining on the Great Plains*.

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*Conscience and Slavery: The Evangelistic Calvinist Domestic Missions, 1837–1861.* By Victor B. Howard. (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1990. Pp. xv, 263. Notes, bibliography, index. \$27.50.)

This book, although impressive in many ways, delivers less than its title promises. It is a study of the ecclesiastical politics of the American Home Missionary Society, one of the central elements of the evangelical "Benevolent Empire" in the antebellum United States, from the Old School–New School split among Presbyterians to the onset of the Civil War. *Conscience and Slavery* is admirable in its extensive research and attention to personalities and detail. But when Victor B. Howard attempts to explicate the significance of these events in the context of the times, his central argument is less impressive.

The outline of Howard's story is familiar to scholars of anti-slavery and American religion. The American Home Missionary Society was one of the groups, composed largely of New England Congregationalists and New York Presbyterians and adherents farther west, that attempted to save the United States from the rising tide of barbarism it perceived outside New England and New York after the War of 1812. Central to its mission was a post-millennial vision of reform in which the Kingdom of God would dawn in the United States. To that end, Christians had to take the