

From Prairie Farmer to Entrepreneur
The Transformation of Midwestern Agriculture

By Dennis S. Nordin and Roy V. Scott

(Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005. Pp. xvi, 356. Tables, notes, bibliography, index. \$65.00.)

Occasionally there comes along a book that challenges us to reevaluate long-held assumptions about an area of study. Dennis S. Nordin and Roy V. Scott's *From Prairie Farmer to Entrepreneur* is such a work. In seven compact chapters, the authors dissect a prodigious quantity of research and construct a bold new synthesis of the restructuring of twentieth-century midwestern farming and rural life by the forces of technology, economic change, and government policy. In the process the authors shatter numerous myths and misconceptions rooted in Jeffersonian agrarian fundamentalism.

Nordin and Scott argue persuasively that the period between 1900 and 1920, often called the "golden age" of agriculture because of increasing yields and rising prices, in fact witnessed severe market changes that forced a growing number of small farmers into tenancy while encouraging more astute operators to move into commercial farming. Similarly, they show that the agricultural depression of the 1920s resulted not so much from overproduction as from reduced spoilage, a change attributable to improved transportation and refrigeration, declining consumption by urban workers in response to lower wages, and declining exports brought on by high tariffs. Likewise,

New Deal interventionist policies—and those of both the Democratic and Republican administrations that followed—encouraged less skilled farmers to remain on the farm, delaying their ultimate movement into urban, industrial jobs, and making nearly all farmers increasingly dependent on the federal government for financial support. Ostensibly intended to improve the lot of struggling family farmers, these policies primarily benefited the most highly skilled operators who increased efficiency and productivity by embracing technological innovations such as tractors, hybrid seed, and chemical insecticides and fertilizers. Meanwhile, technological innovations such as the radio and rural electrification, the advent of rural mail delivery, advances in public education, and the improvement of country roads significantly reduced rural isolation and steadily improved the quality of rural life during the twentieth century.

For mechanically challenged readers, such as this reviewer, chapter five provides a particularly fascinating and detailed account of how companies such as Case, Ford, International Harvester, Allis-Chalmers, and John Deere transformed agriculture by developing larger, more powerful, and more expensive tractors and implements. Such equipment not

only affected the production of corn, wheat, and other grain crops, but also changed the cultivation of fruits and vegetables by reducing dependence on migrant labor and increasing the scale of production. Ill-timed purchases also forced many marginal farmers into excessive debt and, eventually, out of business.

Meticulously researched and deftly written, Nordin and Scott's analysis is distinguished by a dispassionate tone that neither lauds nor laments the changes they chronicle. Rather than waxing nostalgic, they view the transformation of midwestern agriculture as a logical consequence of technological change and a rational response to a growing nation's need for food. While the authors express concern about the attendant manifestations of rural decay and urban sprawl, they note that many rural families benefited in the long run from opportunities for better education and alternative employment and that complaints about new neighbors "often ended with sales to land devel-

opers at prices well above the prevailing level for farmland" (p. 152).

I do have one factual clarification. The authors state that decentralization of livestock marketing ended the International Livestock Show in Chicago (p. 158). More precisely, when the Union Stock Yards closed, the International Livestock Exposition merged with the North American Livestock Exposition in Louisville, Kentucky, to create the North American International Livestock Exposition, the nation's largest purebred livestock show. But this is a minor quibble. Nordin and Scott's contribution to the literature of midwestern agriculture will have a lasting influence upon our understanding of the history of rural life.

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Chicago Painting 1895-1945

The Bridges Collection

By Wendy Greenhouse and Susan Weininger

(Springfield: University of Illinois Press with the Illinois State Museum, 2004. Pp. 251. Illustrations, notes, checklist of the collection. Paperbound, \$32.95.)

The publication of *Chicago Painting 1895-1945: The Bridges Collection* follows a 2000-2001 traveling exhibition organized by the Illinois State Museum and displayed in Chicago as well as in three of the museum's

ancillary galleries. Produced in collaboration with the University of Illinois Press, the book offers an ambitious overview of Chicago art and artists at the turn of the last century.