

*Hired Hands and Plowboys: Farm Labor in the Midwest, 1815-60.* By David E. Schob. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975. Pp. viii, 329. Notes, tables, map, bibliography, index. \$10.95.)

The historical study of everyday life need not be mundane or spiritless—witness the diverse scholarly contributions in this genre by such historians as Eileen Power, E. P. Thompson, Allan Bogue, and Herbert Gutman. Yet there has been relatively little known about farm labor—the type of work that occupied the vast majority of Americans until well into the late nineteenth century. Farm labor has been a subject largely eschewed even by those historians who study work and workers rather than unions and organization. Agricultural historians have tended to concentrate their attention upon the farmer-owner and the problem of mechanization. And economic historians have tended to consider farm labor mainly in connection with macrolevel problems such as productivity indexes. Even the scholars who have written most about agricultural history in the last few decades have been discouraged by the problem of elusive documentation on farm work and workers. Thus, Paul Wallace Gates asserts in *Agriculture and the Civil War* (1965): “Less is known about farm laborers than any other element in agriculture because, except for those who served as laborers only temporarily, they left few letters, no diaries, and no autobiographies” (p. 190). Consequently, historical studies have been far more informative on the subject of antebellum black slave labor than on the life and labor of white farm workers in the North.

The appearance of this fine book by David Schob changes all that. It is an invaluable, in many respects a definitive, study of wage workers in midwestern farming—a book built on prodigious research in an astonishing range and volume of primary sources. The latter include not only the letters and materials that Gates and other historians have doubted were extant but also a vast wealth of material in the agricultural press, local and county histories, government documents, and newspapers. As Schob reminds the reader, farming was in considerable measure “a complicated operation requiring specialized laborers” (p. 4). Among the specialties to which the author devotes attention in separate chapters are “set-up”

work (land clearing), prairie breaking, teamstering, harvesting, horticulture, and ditching and well digging. For each of them he provides data on wages and contractual arrangements. He also describes painstakingly the technical aspects of the work and how each specialty (whether performed by itinerants or general farmhands) fits into overall farm life and management.

Abundant quotations from contemporary sources such as recollections and instructional literature illustrate the analysis. If the book is faulted, it is perhaps by its occasional overabundance in this regard; but it is a meager price to pay for the resultant richness of detail and for an understanding of complexities and of variation by locales.

Other chapters deal with hired boys, hired girls, legal norms and customs, and leisure and recreation. Throughout the book Schob systematically introduces the findings of economic historians such as Stanley Lebergott on wages, Joel Primack on construction costs, and Paul David on adoption of the reaper. Unfortunately the book went to press too late to incorporate Alan Olmstead's important research (*Journal of Economic History*, June, 1975) refuting the burden of David's work on the reaper. Also appearing too recently were important studies of farm productivity by Richard Easterlin and Robert Gallman in *Essays in Nineteenth Century Economic History: The Old Northwest* (David C. Klingaman and Richard K. Vedder, eds., 1975). It will be interesting to have, as one hopes, Schob's evaluation of Gallman's intriguing contention that "the typical agricultural worker—slaves apart—was unable (and perhaps unwilling) to fill his year with work" in the nineteenth century.

Many of today's middle generation of American historians had the advantage of studying with scholars like Harry J. Carman, Gates, or Oscar Winther, who could speak at first hand of farm life and labor in their own early years. As the heritage of agrarian America recedes in time, it is doubly important to have books, such as this one, that rescue an important subject on everyday life from historical obscurity. Thorough, workmanlike, and absorbing, Professor Schob's study is a highly welcome addition to the literature of American agricultural and labor history.

*University of California, San Diego*      Harry N. Scheiber