

CHAPTER III

A CONVERGENCE OF CONCERN: BUSINESS UPLIFT AND AGRICULTURE IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

Introduction

During the Progressive Era, leading agrarian business intellectuals and commercial organizations pursued private and legislative remedies for perceived deficiencies in the rural economy. Self-styled visionary businessmen and numerous other industrial stakeholders were influential in securing public support for legislation to make agriculture into an industrial sector in the United States economy. Efforts by urban propagandists and assorted "uplifters" were driven by concerns about the declining fertility and diminished productive capacity of the nation's soil. Businessmen, fearing the destabilizing political and economic consequences of bread riots, sought to socialize the cost of what were, at that point, largely privately financed agricultural development schemes.

This chapter contributes to a long-simmering debate about the impetus for early twentieth-century American agrarian legislation. It illustrates the logic of business involvement in the reorganization of traditional agriculture and sets the historical context for the survey of the business press presented in Chapter IV. Chapters III and IV confront the central question

of what occurred in the 1910s that defined a new role for business in the future of agriculture. The hypothesis stipulated in Chapter III states that a new urban agrarian legislative impetus manifested in agenda-setting efforts during this period. The chapter revisits a debate over populist and business influences on Progressive Era legislation. In terms of the proximate origin of the FFLA hypothesis (H1), this chapter suggests that the notion that business was pursuing only narrowly defined interests is misleading. There were obvious elements of self-interest fueling business legislative activity. Yet business agrarians during this period framed a complex set of social issues linking urban and rural prosperity in an economic virtuous circle. Support for agrarian legislation constituted a positive sum game in the estimation of the most vocal business reformers. This chapter introduces more urban actors and organizations determined to see expansion of federal government responsibility for the agricultural enterprise.

Further, Chapter III focuses on the integration into the debate of the expression "Country Life." Country Life was a catchall term that became a symbol for the broad agenda of agricultural uplift. The Country Life movement reached its apex during this period. New institutions and press organs emerged designed specifically to convey the principles of this agenda. In support of the rise of agenda-setting hypothesis (H2), Chapter III explores how the report of the Country Life Commission came to exemplify the standard for urban agrarian-reform activities, which in fact were very often little more than systematic press or publicity campaigns. Country Life reformers were propelled by a vision of agricultural self-help

sustained by increased flows of information. Legislation proposed and supported by business arguably constituted the first organized "cheap food" campaign in American history.

Though historically minded scholars rarely agree on the exact influence of business, several prominent studies focus our attention on the legislative activity of early twentieth-century commercial organizations. One influential scholar, Gabriel Kolko, asserted that the "basic causal factor behind national progressivism was the needs of business and financial elements."¹ Another writer sympathetic to the business-dominance view, Robert Wiebe, pointed out that in "a nation of joiners, businessmen had always excelled," even if they were riven by various schisms that blocked development of a uniform business consciousness.² A refinement of the Kolko-Wiebe business-dominance thesis looks at "persuasion as a method of control . . . by business, governmental, and political leadership directed at ordinary citizens who do not themselves easily command, as leaders do, the services of printing."³ Each of these writers suggests that business actors in a capitalist economy pursue their policy goals

¹Kolko, 285. For a more nuanced account of ruling-class attitudes toward the necessity of financial reforms, see James Livingston, Origins of the Federal Reserve: Money, Class, and Corporate Capitalism, 1890-1913 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986).

²Wiebe, 15-18. See also W. W. Waite, "Organization," Moody's Magazine 13, no. 1 (January 1912): 41-42. Waite, the associate editor of the Journal of the American Bankers' Association, concluded that "probably no other profession or business extant in the world to-day . . . is more benefited by organization than that of banking." An important aspect of that work he described as the successful completion of legislation serving general needs.

³Charles E. Lindblom, Politics and Markets: The World's Political-Economic Systems (New York: Basic Books, 1977), 202.

with tenacity and considerable resources, and therefore deserve close attention when the origin of legislation is at issue.

The notion, however, of businessmen acting in a coherent manner to pursue agriculture policy in an era of intense competitive pressures between industrial firms and sectors leaves many historians unsatisfied. A number of scholars have focused instead on the continuities between late nineteenth-century Populist-agrarian demands, and the legislation of the Progressive Era. Historians, in this instance, nevertheless find it ironic that Populist ideals and platforms triumphed in the guise of Progressive Era farm legislation, despite the trampling of Greenbackers, Farmers' Alliance, and People's Party hopes at the polls. Viewed this way, with Progressive Era finance laws as the belated descendants of radical Populist schemes, the legislative outcome remains a paradox after a century of analysis of the Populist influence on agriculture, or larger American political and academic debates.⁴

One influential interpretation of Populism held that, despite its electoral defeats, it had lasting influence on Progressive Era farm legislation. The historian Richard Hofstadter suggested that Progressive reforms provided "evidence of the long-range power of Populism."⁵ Indeed, many of the electoral-reform proposals articulated by the Populist

⁴Sheldon Hackney, ed., "Introduction," in Populism: The Critical Issues (Boston: Little, Brown, 1971), xiv; Don F. Hadwiger, "Farmers in Politics," Agricultural History 50, no. 1 (1976): 156-69; Theodore Saloutos, "The Professors and the Populists," Agricultural History 40, no. 4 (1966): 235-54.

⁵Hofstadter, 95.

movement, such as direct election of Senators, initiatives, and referenda, did prove to be more viable in the legislative period of the early twentieth century. "Populism was the first modern political movement of practical importance in the United States," concluded Hofstadter, "to insist that the federal government has some responsibility for the common weal . . . [and the] prophetic denunciations . . . startled many conservatives into a new flexibility."⁶ Even though Progressive Era financial reforms proved to be substantially different than what the Populists had originally called for--indeed some aspects of financial reform were stridently anti-Populist--the argument nevertheless persists that core nineteenth-century Populist ideas "became a source book for political reforms spanning the next fifty years."⁷

Yet another view suggests that a town-, college-, and city-based "urban agrarian" movement for the uplift of the farmer had a significant impact on legislation during the first decades of the twentieth century. A convergence of concern articulated by urban agrarians gave new and influential impetus to the political debate about long-standing rural problems in the United States. David Danbom's study of urban interest in the industrialization of agriculture suggests farmers were relatively quiet politically in the post-1897 period of rising prices and land values. At the same time, the interest of urban agrarians in rural problems reached new heights. For Danbom, "farmers in the first twenty years of the twentieth century

⁶Ibid., 60-61.

⁷William Greider, Secrets of the Temple: How the Federal Reserve Runs the Country (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987), 243-44. See also Saloutos, 243.

did not comprise an interest group capable of planning or acting on its own behalf on the national level."⁸

Instead, it was the leaders of the "Country Life" movement--academics, government officials, journalists and businessmen--who were mobilizing organizational resources to recast the business practices of the sector. "Country Lifers" associated steadily rising food prices with rural inefficiency. This convergence of concern among activist business leaders was not an early model of a grassroots social movement. Yet, the Progressive Era witnessed an outpouring of time, money, institutional resources, and perhaps most important, large quantities of print-press coverage, all of which aimed at the realization of a "New Agriculture." In the hundreds of articles describing the efforts on the part of the nation's agricultural uplifters, the term "movement" was frequently invoked.⁹

In response, efforts were made to use federal legislation to institutionalize scientific, cooperative, and businesslike agriculture. "Earlier movements," concluded Danbom, "which attempted to address rural problems had risen in the countryside [targeting the cities], but the

⁸Danbom, vii-12. This argument about the influence of farm organizations is developed in Chapters VII and VIII.

⁹See Liberty Hyde Bailey, The Country-Life Movement in the United States (New York; Macmillan, 1913); "The Great Country Life Movement," The World's Work 23, no. 6 (April 1912): 616-19; Andrew M. Soule, "Education and Agricultural Development," in The Commercial and Financial Chronicle: Proceedings of the Convention of the American Bankers' Association Held in Detroit, Michigan, 10-13 September 1912 (New York: William B. Dana, 1912), 119. One writer remarked that much literature on country life was written by city people. See W. L. Nelson, "The Farmers On Farm Life," The World's Work 23, no. 1 (November 1911): 77-79.

Country Life Movement rose in the cities and was directed at the countryside."¹⁰ According to Danbom, the unofficial birth of the Country Life movement as a prominent national force dates to the completion of work by Theodore Roosevelt's Country Life Commission (CLC). He describes the group as a "remarkably urban" commission, with no actual farmers represented.¹¹

As movement contemporaries frequently noted, the work preceding the appointment of the CLC built up for over a decade of steadily rising food prices between 1897-1907. In a cover letter presenting the CLC report to Congress in 1909, President Roosevelt borrowed a slogan from Ireland's leading agrarian, Sir Horace Plunkett, suggesting three lines of development in which farmers would have to learn to help themselves: "better farming, better business and better living."¹² Having noted that industry and commerce organized for mutual economic advantage, the President insisted farmers in the United States should do the same.

¹⁰Danbom, 44-46.

¹¹One business magazine observed the farm press met the report of the CLC with "more or less resentment or quizzing." See "The Farm Commission," The Independent 65, no. 3126 (29 October 1908): 1012-14. While giving voice to hearty skepticism all along the way, The Independent finally conceded the report was in fact an "admirable treatise that should be widely circulated." Consider "The Final Report of the Country Life Commission," The Independent 67, no. 3167 (12 August 1909): 374-76. Editor of the The World's Work and CLC member Walter Hines Page, not surprisingly, provided the warmest possible editorial reception in "What Country Life May Become," The World's Work 17, no. 5 (March 1909): 11380-84.

¹²Theodore Roosevelt, "Cover Letter," Washington, DC, to the Senate and House of Representatives, Washington, DC, transcript in Report of the Country Life Commission, 60th Cong., 2d sess., S. Doc. 705 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1909), 3.

The first priority was "effective cooperation among farmers, to put them on a level with organized interests with which they do business."¹³ In other words, farms should be run as an urban business, rather than preserved sentimentally as a way of life dictated by traditional routines and prejudices.

The CLC made a thorough investigation of rural public opinion. Commission members conducted thirty public hearings across the United States and received approximately 120,000 written responses to a twelve-point questionnaire.¹⁴ Among their findings, the commissioners noted

a multitude of clubs and associations for social, educational, and business purposes; and great national organizations are effective. But farmers are nevertheless relatively unorganized. We have only begun to develop [agricultural] business cooperation in America. Farmers do not influence legislation as they should.¹⁵

The CLC report presented a remarkable list of deficiencies presumed to be directly linked to the prevalence of poorly organized rural society in the United States. Despite the steady upward trends in the prices paid for staple crops, agriculture was not considered as profitable or productive as it should have been.

¹³Ibid., 6.

¹⁴The CLC questionnaire asked about: the conditions of homes, schools, and markets; the level of service of transport lines; the level of organization for buying and selling collectively; the quality of life for renters; the farm labor supply; facilities for banking and credit; sanitation; and the institutions of social organization.

¹⁵Bailey and others, 18.

CLC remedies for preindustrial rural society foreshadowed many of the main planks of the urban agrarian push for legislative reform of agriculture. What was recommended by the commission, however, did not include a push for new federal legislation. In 1909, it was not yet deemed appropriate or necessary, at least by the consensus view of the CLC, for the federal government to do more than point out the problems using a "broad campaign of publicity . . . on the whole subject of rural life." This alone, the report argued, would ignite "a quickened sense of responsibility in all country people, to the community and to the State, in the conserving of soil fertility, and the necessity of diversifying farming in order to conserve thi fertility and develop a better rural society."¹⁶

Business and Agricultural Development

Urban agrarian activity hit an organizational apex just prior to the passage of a rural credit reform that the New York Times denounced as "A Dangerous Measure." The Times found the Hollis-Bulkley compromise bill to be a "crude adaptation" of the European rural credit systems, and derided its "economically alien" approach to finance, which was likely to inflate credit for those who "confuse solvency with politics and who are not notoriously the most prudent borrowers in the world."¹⁷ Commercial organizations, nevertheless, had

¹⁶Ibid., 16.

¹⁷"A Dangerous Measure," 10.

vigorously supported and participated in the process of framing the national debate over the years leading up to the passage of rural credit reform in 1916.

Business actors, it could be argued, were particularly responsible for making the FFLA a "crude adaptation" of European experience with cooperative rural finance. While the diversity of viewpoints among business actors meant they never entirely agreed on either their goals or means, they nevertheless made a significant contribution to the agenda-setting, policymaking, and final policy legitimation process. Members of Congress were aware of rising business interest in agrarian legislation early in the policy process.¹⁸ One important member of Congress, arguing in the urban-agrarian vein, insisted there was an inherent link between agricultural finance reform, matters of "national greatness," and plans for lasting prosperity.¹⁹

During this period, Frank A. Vanderlip was an archetype of the New York City banker, but he also regularly dabbled in the shaping of public opinion and national policy. Certainly he was well positioned to comment on the role played by business in the national policy arena. Political historian Martin J. Sklar considered Vanderlip an excellent representative of "opinion in the higher circles of corporate capitalism."²⁰ In the midst of the

¹⁸Congress, Senate, Agricultural and Vocational Education and Farm Credits, 63d Cong., 1st sess., S. Doc. 164 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1913).

¹⁹Ralph W. Moss, "Low-Rate, Long-Time Money for Farms," The World's Work 26, no. 6 (October 1913): 623-25.

²⁰Martin J. Sklar, The Corporate Reconstruction of American Capitalism, 1890-1916 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 349.

Progressive Era's intense agrarian legislative activity, writing for an American Bankers' Association audience, he argued,

Do not deceive yourselves that this pressing flood of new legislation is the accomplishment alone of a strong-willed executive, or the work of a radically minded Congress. The cause is back of that. Do not hopelessly believe, either, that the cause of the present legislative movement is to be laid wholly to a public opinion gone wrong, to a majority with its mind set on plundering the successful. The *real roots* of this political movement, with which business is so vitally concerned, are still deeper--and happily so.²¹

For Vanderlip, as for many other reform-minded businessmen featured in the press, there were sound economic and political reasons to promote federal agricultural legislation. New legislation, he maintained, grew out of a new conception of political-economic rights, combined with an altruistic sense of public duty, widely felt and acted upon by businessmen seeking to reform agriculture. Business held an enormous financial stake in the future development of agriculture. In particular, businessmen reacted to their perception of farmers' inability to modernize their practices quickly. This, combined with a market-based disincentive to produce a cheap, overabundant food supply, was linked by business agrarians to the problems associated with the rising cost of living in the cities. The price for food in the cities influenced wage demands across all sectors of the economy. Similarly, businesses large

²¹Frank A. Vanderlip, "A Big Banker on Business and Politics--They Should Mix," The Banker-Farmer 1, no. 9 (August 1914): 9.

and small, centrally located and in the hinterland, generally shared in the economic benefits when rural producers fared well enough to be vital consumers.

During the 1910s, a number of plans were developed for making general farm improvements. Often these schemes, following the lead of the CLC report, relied on assumptions about the efficacy of publicity campaigns, many of which reached the public either directly or through the press. One of the most salient business agrarian campaign themes called for using federal legislation to mobilize long-term, reasonably priced, agricultural credit, and the necessary expert information, to support a transition to more productive and sustainable farming practices. For the most enthusiastic business agrarians, dysfunctional agricultural capital markets represented either a cause or a symptom of farmers' ineffective organization. Cooperative credit associations, businesslike marketing organizations, and practical education on demonstration farms stood out among a list of other proposed improvements attainable through reforms that would encourage American farmers to emulate the success of European farmers. Often designed and funded, or at least championed, by urban agrarians, it was thought these plans would introduce industrial ideals of efficiency into a traditionally inefficient sector of the economy.

According to Grant McConnell, businessmen were key players in the origination and legitimation of private and state-financed, county-level farm demonstration agents.²² Leading

²²Grant McConnell, Decline of Agrarian Democracy (New York: Antheneum, 1969), 23-30. On the work of business and bankers in establishing the county agents system, see "The Banker Helps the Farmer Get a Demonstrator," Banker-Farmer 1, no. 1 (December

commercial organizations, such as the United States Chamber of Commerce, advocated legislation for the purpose of transforming the American farm into a model of prevailing industrial-business practices.²³ The goal, in short, was to make the farm and its land-based assets into a reliable source of affordable, abundant food, and not incidentally, a profitable and secure investment for those with capital looking to buy farm mortgages.²⁴ One leading farm press editorial confidently predicted "the financing of long-time mortgages will be reduced to such a science that American farm bonds may vie with government bonds in stability and security."²⁵ In addition, as McConnell suggested, some businessmen clearly "glimpsed the possibility of enlisting organized agriculture, or rather, re-organized agriculture on the side of capitalism."²⁶

A new policy network founded on the principle of securing rural and economic stability emerged from the work of diverse business reformers. Rural credit reform through

1913): 1-2; and "The Lever Bill," Banker-Farmer 1, no. 4 (March 1914): 13.

²³See, e.g., "Farming Science Spreads in Every Country Section," The Nation's Business 1, no. 6 (20 January 1913): 2; Bruce Kennedy, "Alabama's Agriculture Receiving Attention and Enriching State," The Nation's Business 1, no. 2 (23 September 1912): 4; W. J. McGee, "How One Billion of Us Can Be Fed," The World's Work 23, no. 4 (February 1912): 443-51; and F. R. Stevens, "The Need of Agricultural Development," Moody's Magazine 14, no. 1 (July 1912): 37-38.

²⁴William M. Duffus, "State Loans to Farmers," Business America 14, no. 3 (September 1913): 260-65; Herrick, "Banks for the Farmer," 185-89.

²⁵"Solving Problem of Rural Credits," American Agriculturist, 8 November 1913, 2.

²⁶McConnell, 20.

federal legislation had been denounced as a panacea put forth by the radical populist farmer during the last quarter of the nineteenth century.²⁷ By the 1910s, however, rural credit reform emerged as a possible cure-all for a host of agricultural and political problems, at least in the view of certain bankers, investors, and various other industrialists. This group collectively argued that it was simply a sound business proposition to save the nation, and their own substantial investments, from the rural and urban doomsday prospects associated with increasingly debilitated agricultural conditions. As the survey in Chapter IV shows, agrarian policy recommendations became a staple of the business press as the plans for rural credit reform took shape.

Soil Fertility and the Food Supply

The most compelling idea--an ideological linchpin for the disparate and far-flung urban agrarians--was the belief that existing agricultural practices were so "backward" that they threatened the nation with commercial collapse, and widespread political turmoil caused by an inadequate food supply. The CLC declarations on soil fertility had been strongly worded, suggesting that farming was "exploitational, consisting of mining virgin fertility." This practice was contrasted with the rare instances of scientific agriculture which, according to the CLC, was by definition "self-perpetuating." The commissioners concluded that decreasing soil

²⁷Goodwyn, The Populist Movement; Ostler, 5-9.

fertility in every region was "an acute national danger," and challenged statesmen to devote their "best attention" to finding the urgently needed remedies.²⁸

Nearly everyone writing on the subject agreed soil fertility was rapidly declining due to a set of shortsighted farming practices.²⁹ The idea that improved rural credit was a viable tool for encouraging better farming practices gained considerable prominence. One investment writer warned there was "danger in undertaking to provide the farmer with easy credit, without first teaching him thoroughly how to use his credit scientifically in the direction of the conservation of his one biggest asset--the soil."³⁰ A leading soil scientist, Cyril G. Hopkins, speaking to the annual meeting of the American Bankers' Association (ABA), noted how "profitable systems of permanent soil improvement, contrasted with the past and present systems of soil robbing, land ruin and farm abandonment."³¹ The following year, he warned bankers that the stakes were very high:

²⁸Bailey and others, 38-41.

²⁹See, e.g., Frederick Irving Anderson, "A Bookkeeping Theory of Soil Fertility," in The Farmer of To-morrow (New York: Macmillan, 1913); B. F. Harris, "Saving Your Soil--Like Your Soul--Beset with Sins," The Banker-Farmer 1, no. 6 (May 1914): 4-6; and "Texas Industrial Congress Conserves Soil Fertility," The Nation's Business 1, no. 8 (17 February 1913): 7.

³⁰James R. Merriam, ed., "Investment Department," Moody's Magazine 16, no. 3 (September 1913): 136.

³¹Cyril G. Hopkins, "Soil Fertility--The Greatest Necessity and the Best Investment," in The Commercial and Financial Chronicle: Proceedings of the Convention of the American Bankers' Association Held in Richmond, Virginia, 12-15 October 1914 (New York: William B. Dana, 1914), 107.

It will be accepted as a self-evident truth that impoverished soil yields no profits, either to agriculture, to industry, or to commerce; and consequently, that continued prosperity for the masses in America depends primarily upon the maintenance and improvement of the productive power of our farm lands . . . to ignore this basic truth can lead only to land ruin and ultimately to commercial and industrial suicide.³²

Soil fertility thus became a vital catch phrase for the age, rivaled in use perhaps only by references to the associated perils of the ever-rising "cost of living." Observers pointed to troubling patterns of natural-resource abuse manifested as cultural, environmental, and economic disarray. In diverse sections of the country, yields of staple crops per acre were steadily declining. Millennia of built-up soil fertility routinely became exhausted after only a generation or two of extensive, often single-crop, farming. Many noted the shortsightedness and lack of long-term sustainability associated with the skimming or mining variety of agriculture.³³

Expressed public concerns about the steady loss of soil fertility arose to prominence first during the middle nineteenth century.³⁴ By the 1910s, continuing evidence of soil abuse lent a sense of urgency and missionary zeal to a reform effort that was an integral part of the

³²Cyril G. Hopkins, "Principles and Profits and Soil Improvement," Banker-Farmer 2, no. 9 (August 1915): 18.

³³See, e.g., Kenyon L. Butterfield, The Farmer and the New Day (New York: Macmillan, 1919).

³⁴John B. Foster and Fred Magdoff, "Leibig, Marx, and the Depletion of Soil Fertility: Relevance for Today's Agriculture," Monthly Review 50, no. 3 (July/August 1998): 32-45.

nascent conservation movement.³⁵ Kenyon Butterfield, President of Massachusetts Agricultural College and a founder of the discipline of rural sociology, was an elite urban agrarian in every respect. Speaking before the House Agricultural Committee, Butterfield argued "everyone concedes that there is a serious question before us with respect to the conservation of our soil resources," and he concluded it was a "national issue."³⁶ The only way to conserve soil fertility, Butterfield suggested, was to "conserve" the intelligence of the great mass of people who tilled the soil. Therefore, what was required was a strong push for federal aid targeting the practical education of millions of small farmers who needed to adopt new, soil-conserving methods.

The Contribution of James J. Hill and Agrarian Railroad Sentiment

Of all the businessmen fostering agricultural development during the early twentieth century, none matched the tenacity or resources of the legendary "empire builder" James J.

³⁵F. D. Coburn, "Be An Agricultural Missionary," The Banker-Farmer 1, no. 4 (March 1914): 7; Richard T. Ely and others, The Foundations of National Prosperity: Studies in the Conservation of Permanent Natural Resources (New York: Macmillan, 1917); Samuel P. Hays, Conservation and the Gospel of Efficiency: The Progressive Conservation Movement, 1890-1920 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959); Arthur W. Page, "The Fight for Conservation," The World's Work 21, no. 1 (November 1910): 13607-11.

³⁶Congress, House, Statement of Dr. K. L. Butterfield, President, Massachusetts Agricultural College, on S. 4563 to Establish Agricultural Extension Departments: Hearing before the House Committee on Agriculture, 29 February 1912 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1912), 110-14.

Hill.³⁷ President of The Northern Pacific, The St. Paul, Minneapolis & Manitoba, and The Great Northern, Hill was without question the best known and most influential of the agriculturally inclined, pioneer railroad men. One of his biographers, Michael Malone, noted that Hill's experiment farms, begun during the 1880s, grew into a personal preoccupation. Hill supported an agrarian vision featuring the small, intensively cultivated, and diverse farm as the "backbone of society." Starting in the 1890s, Hill supported an increased federal role in the education of the farmer in scientific methods, and with his own funds set up "the world's largest system of private agricultural experimentation and extension farms."³⁸

Amongst railroad executives and the wider business community, Hill was a leader of the soil fertility movement. During his numerous public addresses, he made remarks from the standpoint of a futurist, visionary, prophet-king figure. Addressing the first White House conservation conference in 1908, Hill forewarned of the impending rise in the population of the United States to 200,000,000 over the next 50 years, and prescribed agricultural remedies to help "escape a future disaster."³⁹ For the builder of railroad empires, the nation's poor management of its material assets was comparable to a case of bad corporate management. "If we fail to consider what we possess of wealth available for the uses of

³⁷Michael P. Malone, James J. Hill: Empire Builder of the Northwest (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1996).

³⁸Ibid., 196-98.

³⁹James J. Hill, "The Natural Wealth of the Land and Its Conservation," in Conference on the Conservation of Natural Resources [Pamphlet] (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1908), 2.

mankind, and to what extent we are wasting a national patrimony that can never be restored," wrote Hill, "we might be likened to the directors of a company who never examine a balance sheet."⁴⁰

Foremost among a long list of other natural resource abuses was the steady depletion of soils under a single-crop method of farming. For Hill, the soil was being robbed recklessly to make short-term gains, again generating a sense of poor business management:

We perceive here the working of a uniform law, independent of location, soil or climate. It is the law of diminishing return due to soil destruction. Apply this to the country at large, and it reduces agriculture to the condition of a bank whose depositors are steadily drawing out more money than they put in.⁴¹

Hill made considerable material contributions to agricultural development. He provided financial support for research and donated land to state colleges. Hill operated practical demonstration and experiment farms. His railroads provided free rail service to spread the knowledge of scientific farming techniques, and transported farmers to demonstrations.⁴² Hill's railroads also promoted the literature of a group of organized businessmen known as the National Soil Fertility League (NSFL). Hill served as chairman of the NSFL Executive Committee, and the group literature was animated by his rhetorical style

⁴⁰Ibid., 3.

⁴¹Ibid., 12.

⁴²Michael P. Malone, 253; Roy V. Scott, Railroad Development Programs in the Twentieth Century (Ames, IA: Iowa State University Press, 1985), 7.

and substance. In addition, Hill provided \$15,000 for the successful Better Farming Association of Minneapolis.⁴³

NSFL president Herbert H. Gross, while testifying in support of federal aid for agricultural extension, made an argument that population was "rapidly overtaking production," and concluded, in the manner of J. J. Hill, that the "wealth of the country lies within 18 inches of the surface, and we felt as businessmen, representing every phase of business life, that it was highly important" to make liberal provisions at the federal level to teach the farmers how to increase the food supply.⁴⁴ Grant McConnell argued that the preeminent task of groups like the NSFL was legislative.⁴⁵ With prominent backers including Champ Clark, President Taft, William Jennings Bryan, and boasting household names like Wallace, Gompers, and Studebaker, the Hill-inspired NSFL was a powerful lobby force seeking "to increase vastly the yield per acre of the farms."⁴⁶ In NSFL literature, again following Hill's lead, the group voiced a doomsayer's message: "If a crisis comes, the wolves of hunger will swarm the city

⁴³Michael P. Malone, 254.

⁴⁴Congress, Senate, Statement of Howard H. Gross, President, National Soil Fertility League, Chicago, Ill., on S. 4563 to Establish Agricultural Extension Departments: Hearings before the Committee on Agriculture and Forestry, 5 March 1912 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1912), 50.

⁴⁵McConnell, 32.

⁴⁶National Soil Fertility League, "The National Soil Fertility League," Wisconsin Equity News 4, no. 18, suppl. (25 January 1912): 1. The subhead to this four-page supplement read: "In Agriculture Is the Hope of the Nation. It Is the Foundation Upon Which Everything Rests."

streets, and not the country lanes. It is time for the provident thinking men and women of the cities to realize the situation and take a foremost part in the campaign for better agriculture."⁴⁷

J. J. Hill's original rally cry to the business leaders of the nation made a significant impact during 1909, with the much-discussed reprint in The World's Work of his speech entitled "Highways of Progress: What We Must Do to Be Fed." In this address, Hill laid out a coherent basis for an activist, agrarian railroad sentiment. He was well-known as an ardent advocate of increasing the public awareness of the relationship between the land and the life of the nation. Hill had helped to popularize the creed, at least among businessmen and bankers, that farming was the basis of all industry. His oratory and writing propounded a vision of a virtuous economic circle linking business and the countryside: "The greater the number of prosperous farmers," suggested Hill, "the greater will be the prosperity of every businessman."⁴⁸

At the center of this convergence of concern was an expressed belief that irrevocable damage to the nation might result from further degradation of the soil. Hill, for one, believed there existed a growing sense among people across the country that national progress was intimately linked to the care of the land: "Every manufacturer, every merchant, every business man, every good citizen is deeply interested in maintaining the growth and development of our

⁴⁷Ibid., 3.

⁴⁸James J. Hill, "Highways of Progress: What We Must Do to Be Fed," The World's Work 19, no. 1 (November 1909): 12243.

natural resources."⁴⁹ During the second meeting of the Conservation Congress in 1910, Hill continued to hammer away at the importance of soil fertility: "The soil is the ultimate employer of all industry and the greatest source of all wealth (applause). It is the universal banker. Upon the maintenance, unimpaired in quantity and quality, of the tillable area of the country its whole future is conditioned."⁵⁰

Hill's answer to his own question--how are we to be fed?--was a rote claim that the money saved by building one less warship could be funneled to agricultural colleges to establish model farms. The result, he claimed, would invariably be rising yields per acre. The peculiar irony of the empire builder and his vision was an abiding commitment to the small, diverse, intensively cultivated, soil-preserving farm as the key to resolving national food supply problems, and the high cost of living that was being so widely experienced. Fertile fields were to be understood as the gold mines of the nation, and the perfect farm was a mere forty to sixty acres. The primary goal would be "utilization and conservation of the soil and the resources drawn from it."⁵¹ The earlier version of this important argument posited "first of all

⁴⁹James J. Hill, Highways of Progress (New York: Doubleday, Page, 1910), 46.

⁵⁰James J. Hill, "Address by James J. Hill," in Proceedings of the Second Conservation Congress at St. Paul, Minnesota, 5-8 September 1910, ed. Secretary L. Frank Brown (Washington, DC: National Conservation Congress, 1911), 182.

⁵¹Hill, Highways of Progress, 51-52.

perhaps in importance, [was] the substitution of the small farm, thoroughly tilled, for the large farm, with its weeds, its neglected corners, its abused soils and its thin product."⁵²

Mary Wilma Hargreaves' study of the "dry-farming" movement between 1900 and 1925 illustrated how national periodicals focused on the activities of the railroads that were issuing large amounts of rural uplift propaganda.⁵³ Roy V. Scott also concluded that freight traffic serving agriculture was the "lifeblood" of American railroad companies during this period.⁵⁴ Dependence on rural freight created heavy pressures for railroads to maximize the flow of business. According to Scott, railroad executives "recognized quite early the need to produce new business, and the traffic-generating activities of railroads have been a significant factor in American agricultural and industrial development."⁵⁵

Originally, railroad-sponsored colonization schemes sought only to increase company profits from freight rates, while ensuring the rapid distribution of real estate garnered under federal land grants. Both activities were considered highly remunerative. Colonization promoters in the late nineteenth century were propagandists, with little practical knowledge about farming. As the new century began, however, the railroads increasingly employed men

⁵²Hill, "Highways of Progress: What We Must Do to Be Fed," 12253.

⁵³Mary Wilma M. Hargreaves, Dry Farming in the Northern Great Plains, 1900-1925 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957), 223-60.

⁵⁴Scott, Railroad Development Programs, 3.

⁵⁵Ibid., 3. See also B. F. Yoakum, "The High Cost of Selling," The World's Work 25, no. 2 (December 1912): 183-91.

trained at the agricultural colleges to encourage settlers to adopt more productive, up-to-date farm practices. In addition, diversified agricultural production, a prerequisite for maintaining soil fertility, was also good for rural freight carriers, largely because of its potential to ease problems associated with seasonal and imbalanced traffic flows.⁵⁶

Other Industrial Stakeholders in Agricultural Development

Railroads were indeed prominently involved in agricultural development schemes during the first decades of the twentieth century. The Hargreaves study also documented the "full extent" of other business interests involved in generating the economic activity of the region, and the dependence of these businesses on the profitability of agricultural settlement. Over the years, a string of individuals and commercial organizations assumed the mantle of leadership, claiming responsibility for victories in agricultural development work and legislative accomplishments. In 1908, Governor Brooks of Wyoming stated what he described as a common view: "Every furrow turned in the State . . . enhances the value of every acre in the State--[and] means more bank accounts and more population."⁵⁷ As the survey in Chapter IV shows, good business sense clearly meant a program which fostered economically vital rural producers with rising consumptive needs and abilities.

⁵⁶Scott, Railroad Development Programs, 7-13.

⁵⁷Quoted in Hargreaves, 260.

There were, however, notable limits on the knowledge base driving this enterprise. Scott noted that when the topic was farming in regions with less than twenty inches of annual rainfall, even the recognized authorities naively suggested the likelihood that "rain followed the plow" once the land was settled and cultivated.⁵⁸ Hargreaves similarly found evidence that out of this developmental enterprise came a flow of information that readily mixed the best of modern farming practices with a propaganda campaign that systematically distorted the truth about climatic uncertainty, offering a "panacea-like philosophy" about confronting the elements:

Reliable and misrepresentative, alike, the publicity efforts of land dealers were mingled in the massed promotional activity of the area. Their pamphlets depicting the region were distributed by railroad companies, commercial clubs, and other interested groups. . . . Dealers were themselves often railway officials, bankers, merchants, newspaper editors, or civic leaders, serving their landed interest in the activities of other groups.⁵⁹

At times, organizational linkages between banking and other business groups working on agrarian promotional or agrarian legislative efforts alienated farmers' groups. For example, in 1914, the periodical Business America reported that the National Grange found the urban interest in agricultural uplift was becoming "obnoxious."⁶⁰ Merchants, nonetheless, apparently

⁵⁸Scott, Railroad Development Programs, 7-13.

⁵⁹Hargreaves, 241.

⁶⁰"Farmer and City Man," Business America 15, no. 6 (June 1914): 536-37. In fact, as shown in later chapters, the view of farm organizations on particular uplift specialists tended to be dualistic, consisting of both revulsion over outside interference from long-time rivals, and

remained undeterred by such disgruntled rumblings on the part of their customers. Manufacturing and retail interests presented yet another important cross-section of the business community actively seeking the development of agriculture. Lumber men working out of the Twin Cities, Milwaukee, and Chicago, for example, financed colonization schemes on cut-over lots. They were spurred on by the earnest recognition that the demand for implements and other supplies would be cultivated as a byproduct of better and more prosperous agriculture. In one typical case, a lumberman's association sponsored agricultural diversification by offering prizes.⁶¹

Farm-implement dealers were exemplars in the wave of business-sponsored agricultural promotion.⁶² They marketed the latest tools as a prerequisite for better farming techniques. Manufacturers, such as Deere and Company, employed soil-culture experts and charged them with the task of issuing volumes such as Soil Culture and Modern Farm Methods (1913).⁶³ An active Agricultural Extension Committee serving the National Implement and Vehicle Manufacturers' Association issued an educational booklet called A Few Facts About Agriculture (1914).⁶⁴ The International Harvester company created a

admiration for the commercial and policy success of the leading business sectors.

⁶¹W. H. Miller, "How a Young Business Man Did Things for His Community," The Banker-Farmer 1, no. 3 (February 1914): 2.

⁶²Hargreaves, 249.

⁶³Ibid., 249.

⁶⁴Ibid., 250.

special department for agricultural research and education, which, prior to 1920, published in excess of a dozen educational pamphlets and short books on better farming, including Farm Power (1915) and Farm Science (1906).⁶⁵ Cyrus H. McCormick, the president of International Harvester, boasted of a business-sponsored turn by farmers to "modern methods" as early as 1909. He optimistically commented that

many who are seeking careers of usefulness and success are turning to the farm as a business enterprise in the same way they would turn to manufactories or mercantile pursuits. Men are now realizing that farming is no longer the haphazard business of a former day, but if properly developed is one of the most exacting, scientific and profitable pursuits . . . the time is not far distant when farming will be held in the same high regard as the so-called learned professions.⁶⁶

According to Hargreaves, there were significant organizational efforts on the part of the grain handlers, who were similarly interested in the profits associated with improving agriculture.⁶⁷ Probably the best known agency was the Corn Improvement Committee of the Council of North American Grain Exchanges (CIC). While grain handlers generally aligned themselves with other commercial organizations on questions concerning agricultural

⁶⁵George H. Alford, Diversified Farming in the Cotton Belt (Chicago: International Harvester, 1916); International Harvester, Farm Power (Chicago: International Harvester, 1915), reproduced at the Wisconsin State Historical Society; Joseph E. Wing and others, Farm Science (Chicago: International Harvester, 1906), reproduced at the Wisconsin State Historical Society.

⁶⁶Cyrus H. McCormick, "The Prosperity of the Farmer," The Independent 66, no. 3137 (14 January 1909): 85-87.

⁶⁷Hargreaves, 250-56.

development, their primary interest was highly specialized; they favored already-established varieties of wheat and were hostile to the new emphasis on crop diversification. Grain handlers represented by the CIC denounced the Secretary of Agriculture for lending support to the idea of rotating cash crops with soil-building legumes. Apparently the notion that fields were being ruined was at first dismissed by the CIC as "gaseous departmental rubbish" used for an excuse to exist by the "faddists that infested the government."⁶⁸ Nevertheless, Hargreaves concluded that even the most bellicose grain handlers belatedly joined the movement for crop diversification, with the impetus provided by the recognition of actual declining yields due to single-crop methods.

Conclusion

This chapter has presented evidence of the high-profile activities of business leaders partaking in the agricultural development schemes of the early twentieth century. Diverse individuals, firms, and organizations assumed the burden of time and considerable expense to launch a national campaign for better agriculture through better rural business practices. Driving this developmental goal was a growing sense that the preservation of soil fertility was linked to fundamental issues of economic and political stability.

⁶⁸Ibid., 256.

Bert Ball, the secretary of the grain exchanges' Crop Improvement Committee, argued that in many localities, agriculture was the chief business, and therefore it needed to be the chief business of the local commercial club. The logic, as he saw it, was straightforward:

He who makes two blades of grass grow where one grew before, in fact, produces two pounds of freight to ship, two checks to deposit, two bolts of goods to buy, two plows to sell, and more important than all, two dollars for the jeans which before had barely one. . . . The business world must provide that the land be handled on business principles. The time will come when it will be a crime in law, as it is in fact, to plunder the soil. The community has a right to compel a man to return to his land whatever fertility he removes and to add a liberal percentage for prosperity.⁶⁹

This convergence of business concern on the issue of agricultural uplift was closely linked to business interest in the creation of an equitable system of rural credit. The urban agrarian impetus for legislation was an outcome of the publicity campaigns associated with the Country Life movement and railroad agrarianism. Chapter III reported on the ways in which business leaders demonstrated the desire and ability to initiate agrarian legislation during this period, activities that support H1. They did so by pursuing agenda-setting in the press, a strategy supportive of H2. While it would be fair to say that in some instances progressive reformers refined ideas which had a genuine populist origin, it is perhaps more accurate to characterize the period as one in which urban reformers proposed new initiatives in response

⁶⁹Bert Ball, "Commercial Organizations and Agriculture," The Nation's Business 2, no. 6 (18 June 1914): 16.

to old problems that dated back to at least the days of the populist uprising; however, the proposals never matured into a viable legislative campaign.

In particular, agenda-setting efforts, such as the one linking soil fertility with the cost of food in the cities, evidenced a new level of appreciation of the nature and implications of the agrarian problem. This linkage emerged as a key issue in the survey of the business press presented in Chapter IV. Similarly, the efforts to link urban and town business viability to the profitability of farming stood out as unique and original contributions from the business sector to the agrarian reform agenda during the 1910s. As the next chapter will discuss, the rhetoric and deeds of railroad agrarians, such as James J. Hill, resonated throughout the business press of the early 1910s. This laid the groundwork for increasing urban interest in the future development of agriculture as a legitimate business enterprise.

As the survey of the business press in the following chapter shows, urban agrarians heralded the dual need for federal intervention in matters of farmer education, and long-term mortgage credit. This came in response to arguments by James J. Hill and others about the rising cost of living, and the perceived threats to the national food supply posed by poor farming techniques. Many of the roots of agrarian development in general, and rural credit reform in particular, can be better understood by documenting this widely recorded convergence of concern among business leaders. In Chapter IV, the most salient issues in the business press coverage of rural credit reform were embedded in the widespread belief that

soil exhaustion was symptomatic of many wider deficiencies in Country Life, which represented a serious threat to the social, political, and economic stability of the nation.