

CHAPTER IV

A SURVEY OF AGRARIANISM IN THE PROGRESSIVE  
ERA BUSINESS PRESS

Introduction

Between 1907 and 1916, the need to improve agriculture grew into a highly visible concern of peak national business organizations. Regional, state, and local affiliates across all sections of the American political map acted upon this concern. Writers publishing in the business press of the Progressive Era frequently noted the activity of influential business individuals and groups that sought to make farming a properly managed, economically viable, and ecologically sustainable business enterprise. New federal laws promoting the interest of the farmer during this period resulted, in part, from the outpouring of policymaking and publicity work sponsored by various organizations of businessmen.

Urban-based activists constituted an elite policy network, one which formulated and presented a remarkably coherent agrarian ideology. Using the print press, this network effectively brought its reform agenda to national prominence. Broadly speaking, the business plan for agriculture was to work toward an early version of the economic "virtuous circle," constituted by a fully national, industrialized economy propelled at the macroeconomic level

by urban industry, consumers, and modernizing rural producers. This ideal was dependent on yet-to-be-established systems of mass production and mass consumption in the food and natural fiber sectors of the economy. Associated some years later with Fordism and economies of scale, initially business efforts at forming a rural-urban alliance around this premise tried to secure the place of the farm as an economically viable, increasingly productive, and sustainable industrial enterprise in the early twentieth century.

It was proto-Keynesian work involving a number of agenda-setting tasks. This included establishing a new level of federal intervention in the agricultural economy, and developing a rationale for expanding the scope of the federal government. To help secure this policy change, writers in the business press conceptually linked the prosperity of city, town, and country dwellers in what would become a government-sponsored movement centered on broad principles of better farming, distribution, and finance systems. Many of the reformers writing for the business press argued that only a series of federally backed agricultural development projects could ensure that enough capital, and expert information, existed to allow farmers to assume the expense and challenge of implementing the modern, scientific, ecological agricultural practices. One finding of the business survey is that the need for government intervention along these lines was widely acknowledged and generally agreed upon. While the particular form and limits of government aid were open to debate, business writers agreed with one another that businessmen were uniquely positioned--whether through

their resource base or accumulated business sensibility--to guide the new forays in the agrarian policy process.

This chapter presents a survey of urban agrarian-agenda-setting efforts based on a sample of the Progressive Era business press.<sup>1</sup> The introduction that follows sets out the major findings presented in the first survey. The body of the initial survey presents analyses of six connected themes that were significant issues in the business press prior to the enactment of the FFLA. Chapter IV presents a body of support for the hypothesis that a business rationale was a driving force behind agrarian legislative proposals. It also highlights the role of an important, yet somewhat neglected, category of print press.

The business periodicals featured in this survey functioned as both a conduit and semi-autonomous actor in the cultivation of Progressive Era agrarian sentiment. As a conduit, the press reported the concerns of business sector leaders, many of whom had influential roles at a number of levels. For example, Walter Hines Page, a prominent editor introduced later in this chapter, was known for his influence as a journalist, businessman, philanthropist, and advisor to the highest levels of national government. Contemporaneously, prevailing principles

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<sup>1</sup>The journals surveyed included three current history reviews with a pro-business orientation (The World's Work, Business America, and The Independent); two bankers' periodicals (The Commercial and Financial Chronicle, and The Banker-Farmer); an investors' monthly (Moody's Magazine); and the bimonthly newspaper of the United States Chamber of Commerce (The Nation's Business). The expressed concerns of an urban-agrarian coalition were given considerable space in these publications. In this study, The Commercial and Financial Chronicle is the title of the collected papers of the annual meetings of the American Bankers' Association. The more regular periodical under the same title was not included in the survey.

of journalistic discretion and editorial control made leading journalists active players in the framing, refining, and endorsement of major legislative reforms.

The central finding in Chapter IV is that rural credit emerged as a viable reform because it was a key component of a larger, well-publicized urban agrarian agenda. Business was an energetic proponent, advocating and designing legislation to improve the agricultural sector. Relevant to the proximate origin of the FFLA hypothesis (H1), this survey lends support to the idea that business leaders favored the idea of reform, particularly one that was in strict accord with business, rather than populist, economic principles. In terms of the agenda-setting hypothesis (H2), Chapter IV presents for the existence of an interconnected set of issues which constituted the undergirding of the urban agrarian agenda. It was the unique way in which these issues were presented by the press that characterized the new period in American political development. Business press writers, who rarely put forth a monolithic viewpoint, did converge on a number of perceived causal relationships that defined the key issues in the urban agrarian agenda. Unique to this period was the use of the press by nonfarm sectors to create a sense of urgency in matters of agrarian reform, and to broaden the significance of the debate over agricultural finance by linking it to matters no less important than the survival of the nation.

In general, writers suggested that questions about the high cost of living and the future of the national food supply were intimately linked to the larger issues involved in improving "Country Life." Issues central to the Country Lifers included rural organization, farm

profitability, cooperation, education, rural finance, and maintenance of the fertility of the nation's soil. Above all else, this chapter reveals how the agenda-setting exercise represented a concerted effort to recast urban-rural class relations. In part, this strategy was part of a positive-sum game, one that sought to make farmers more productive and reliable businessmen. Yet it also included considerable efforts to legitimize the views of urban elites in the shaping of rural public opinion, agricultural practices, and agrarian policy at the federal level. The dynamic urban-rural relationship, generated by the perceived need to overhaul the agricultural sector, registered as one of the most salient issues in the survey of the business press.

For bankers, railroad men, investors, implement and fertilizer dealers, lumber men, and merchants, to name just a few, there were significant financial incentives for securing the prosperity of the farmer, and the all-important commercial hub, the country town. Philanthropy and good business sense often mixed, as it did for mail-order tycoon Julius Rosenwald of Sears, Roebuck & Company, who in 1912 offered \$1,000 (up to \$100,000) to any county in the United States able to raise the rest of the funds to pay for a trained agricultural expert.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>M. R. Werner, Julius Rosenwald: The Life of a Practical Humanitarian (New York: Harper, 1939). On the interests of the largest industrial firms and their expensive campaigns, see "Cooperation by Corporations," The Banker-Farmer 1, no. 2 (January 1914): 10. Another prominent business agrarian with a financial interest in the economic well-being of farmers was the mail-order king of the Western United States, David Lubin. See Chapter II.

Journalists working for the business press recognized the aims of agricultural development work as sound, even if many writers did express skepticism about philanthropic illusions that were not firmly grounded in a fully businesslike sensibility. As one editorial dryly put it,

It is not wholly out of love of agriculture that such presidents of railroads as J. J. Hill of the Northern Pacific Railroad, President Yoakum of the 'Frisco lines, and President Brown of the New York Central, have spoken and planned for larger and better farming. The more wheat and corn, the more freight for the railroads.<sup>3</sup>

An average agricultural enterprise in the first decades of the twentieth century faced omnipresent threats brought on by pests, drought, floods, tainted seed, poor farming techniques, and an unreliable even exploitative system of agricultural credit. All these conditions posed significant risks for farming operations, as well as for their up- and downstream suppliers, shippers, financiers, and merchants, each of which looked to steady yields on the farm for their own economic survival. Attempts to educate farmers, much like the parallel effort to create institutions which would liberate the potential of land-based capital for farm improvements, were seen by many writing in the business press as good investments in a demand-driven economic system. It was argued that time and money invested by business in practical farming demonstrations, publishing agricultural materials, lobbying for legislative reform, or any other of a host of activities geared to increasing the ability of the

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<sup>3</sup>"For the Business of Farming," The Independent 72, no. 3360 (24 April 1913): 398.

farmer to farm sustainably and productively, would be returned in increased profits from generally improving rural business conditions.<sup>4</sup>

In short, business sought to develop agriculture as a way to ensure the stability of capitalist economic relations. There was, however, more at stake than simply a positive-sum game, in which businessmen planned for more reliable material gains on the impetus of a rising economic tide that lifted all ships. Money spent by business on agricultural development schemes, it was hoped, would also pay off in political returns. Some businessmen clearly "glimpsed the possibility of enlisting organized agriculture, or rather, re-organized agriculture on the side of capitalism."<sup>5</sup> Changing the tone of the longstanding and bitter urban-rural relationship was described, at times, as nothing less than a prerequisite for maintaining the basic capitalist economic relations. For example, Douglas A. Fiske, the president of the Minneapolis Civic and Commercial Association, linked the altruism of agrarian activism on the part of business to a practical political goal: "When the time comes that men of affairs generally take an active part in civic organizations and become interested in community

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<sup>4</sup>For example, a Princeton professor of economics noted that the rural credit situation presented a hardship not only for many farmers, but also national banks, and communities. See E. W. Kemmerer, "National Banks and the Farmer," Business America 14, no. 4 (October 1913): 347-51.

<sup>5</sup>McConnell, 20.

problems, there will no longer be danger from Socialism, from Syndicalism, and from Anarchy."<sup>6</sup>

Working under the burden of poor management practices, and often paying unbearable rates for hard-to-find capital, financially troubled farmers at the start of the new century increasingly became poor tenants. Many migrated to join those already beginning to be seen by wary observers as a crowd in the cities. Writing on the issue of rural credit reform in late 1912, the United States Chamber of Commerce editorialized:

There is beneath the agitation of this whole subject something vastly more important than mere money transactions. A right solution of the rural financial problems of America will tend to stop the political and economic dangers arising from the drift of people to the cities. It means the permanent preservation of the conservative element, who having a stake in actual land possessions give balance and judgment to the thought of the nation.<sup>7</sup>

At a time when the cost of food, much like the urban population, was steadily rising, some business leaders feared for the demise of a conservative rural population if farming remained unprofitable. The latent potential for a return to the politics of Populism was an undesirable prospect for business organizations. Urban agrarian groups wanted to see agriculture modernized based on business principles, not through the resurgence of defeated

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<sup>6</sup>Douglas A. Fiske, "A New Civic Consciousness Is the Hope of the Nation," The Banker-Farmer 1, no. 5 (April 1914): 4.

<sup>7</sup>"Cooperative Rural Credit: Its Significance Explained," The Nation's Business 1, no. 5 (16 December 1912): 12.

initiatives, such as those calling for direct government intervention in farm finance. With tenantry sharply rising, however, a dissatisfied rural population presented a potentially serious threat to national political and economic stability. In response, business periodicals regularly published articles restating, as if it were the gospel of agrarianism, James J. Hill's warnings that increasing urban food consumption would soon overtake stagnant agricultural production.<sup>8</sup> By 1910, the rising cost of living, with the price of food serving as a chief indicator, was among the most prominent of national issues. "Every major magazine had something to say about the danger of rising prices in 1910," and even periodicals such as Cosmopolitan conducted full-scale investigations featuring charges and countercharges, and placing the blame at every link in the food production and distribution chain.<sup>9</sup>

In 1907, Walter Hines Page, the influential magazine editor and urban agrarian, wrote that the skills of the farmer should come to resemble those of the captains of industry.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>For example, one observer noted that agriculture must develop to save the nation from hunger. See Edward A. Rumeley, "The Passing of the Man with the Hoe," The World's Work 20, no. 4 (August 1910): 13246-58.

<sup>9</sup>Maxwell H. Bloomfield, Alarms and Diversions: The American Mind Through American Magazines, 1910-1914 (Paris: Mouton, 1967), 65. On the importance of magazines in this period, Wood cites a 1908 editorial from The Independent that noted "magazines have to a large extent fallen heir to the power formerly exerted by the pulpit, by crowds, parliamentary debates and daily newspapers in the molding of public opinion, the development of new issues, and the dissemination of information bearing on current questions." See James Playstead Wood, Magazines in the United States, 3d ed. (New York: Ronald Press, 1971), 202.

<sup>10</sup>Walter Hines Page, "Teaching Farmers to Farm," The World's Work 14, no. 2 (June 1907): 8987-89.

Communications scholars have noted that Page was one of the most significant journalists in American history, despite his lack of formal training. He edited the respected periodical Forum from 1887-1895, and then took the position of editor at the Atlantic Monthly when it stood "at the pinnacle of journalistic accomplishment."<sup>11</sup> Three years later, Page became a founder and the editor of The World's Work: A History of Our Times, and a partner in the publishing firm Doubleday, Page, and Company. The magazine The World's Work, apparently a success from the beginning, appealed to a growing elite audience interested in a range of urban and rural Progressive Era issues. Page biographer Robert J. Rusnak found that "almost every issue offered something on agriculture, banking, cities, education, health, government and politics, labor, immigration, railroads, safety, inventions, finance, and commerce."<sup>12</sup>

In 1913, after having played a prominent part in securing his personal choice for both President of the United States (Woodrow Wilson) and Secretary of Agriculture (David F. Houston), Page reported: "You may find in our files a letter from an illiterate carpenter in Maine close beside a letter from the President of the United States and a president of a

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<sup>11</sup>Roland E. Wolseley, The Magazine World: An Introduction to Magazine Journalism (New York: Prentice Hall, 1951), 363-65. Among its many other regular features, The World's Work liked to run articles by men famous in their fields, such as Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, J. D. Rockefeller, or William G. Sumner. See Theodore Peterson, Magazines in the Twentieth Century (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1956), 138.

<sup>12</sup>Robert J. Rusnak, Walter Hines Page and The World's Work, 1900-1913 (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1982), 28, 45.

university, and a banker and a farmer--from all sorts of men--saying that they find the WORLD'S WORK worth while."<sup>13</sup> In a personal election-day letter to his old friend Woodrow Wilson (November 5, 1912), Page offered the new President a few "small suggestions." One of the suggestions urged Wilson to make rural credit a priority for the new administration:

The time is come when the land must be developed by the new agriculture and farming made a business. This calls for money. Every acre will repay a reasonable loan on long time at a fair interest rate, and group borrowing develops the men quite as much as the men will develop the soil. It saved the German Empire and is remaking Italy. . . . This building up of farm life will restore the equilibrium of our civilization and, besides, will prove to be one half the solution of our currency and credit problem.<sup>14</sup>

What follows is an over-time survey of the most salient agrarian reform issues featured in the business press during the years leading up to final passage of the FFLA in 1916. The survey shows that concerns over the rates and terms for rural credit did not stand alone. Instead, they were part of a broader agrarian-reform program advocated by various actors and groups in the business and farming community. What becomes clear in the survey is that

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<sup>13</sup>Walter H. Page, "What The World's Work Is Trying to Do," The World's Work 25, no. 3 (January 1913): 268.

<sup>14</sup>Burton J. Hendrick, The Life and Letters of Walter H. Page, vol. 1 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Page, 1926), 109. David Houston, Page's successful choice for Secretary of Agriculture, recalled bringing in Page to speak to the heads of the various USDA services about writing in plain English. Houston lamented that "one of the largest printing businesses in the world" produced vast amounts of poorly written materials. See Houston, 202-3.

writers and editors for the business press were information conduits for an elite policy network. The agenda-setting effect explicitly sought after was a change in the way business opinion leaders viewed farmers, and an expansion of the possibilities for agrarian legislative reform. There was a widespread appeal to break old habits of thinking (for example, about the nature of farm profitability and its relation to urban interests), and to frame a policy debate that legitimized a new role for the federal government in securing national economic growth and stability.

#### Rates and Terms for Credit

At the start of the 1910s, few authorities were better known in the world of agricultural development than Seaman A. Knapp. As noted in Chapter III, Knapp's farm demonstration methods became popular with the help of businessmen who financed his early efforts. When Knapp's finance views were published during 1910 in The World's Work, they aptly set the tone for the ensuing discussions in the business press concerning the rates and terms for agricultural credit, and the need for some kind of reform. A "large sum of money" was required, he argued, if the United States was going to settle "worthy men" on farms as owners. Small-farm ownership, Knapp insisted, should be equated with conservatism, thrift, and independence. Over the subsequent thirty years, Knapp announced, it would be decided whether the land would be owned by the masses or the few. The plea, however, was not a request for government "charity" to go to farmers. Instead, foreshadowing the main point of

disagreement during the rural credit debate of the 1910s, Knapp called for men with ample capital to step in and solve the rural finance problem out of a spirit of enlightened self-interest.<sup>15</sup>

In the August 1912 edition, Moody's Magazine prefaced a farm finance article by noting that public interest in rural credit was running high, and that it was linked to the high cost of living. Moody's editors introduced the article, which reported news of "a pioneer institution" in a favorable manner. In light of the conservation movement, it stated, the attention of some financiers focused on the terms under which money should be lent to farmers, particularly with an eye turned toward problems of declining soil fertility. In the article, rural credit activist George Woodruff described his Woodruff Trust Company of Joliet, Illinois, and its twenty-year first-mortgage loans that include "a clause providing for proper soil conservation." Woodruff asserted he was trying to spread lending habits and credit terms known to work for 140 years in Europe.<sup>16</sup>

B. F. Harris, the leader of the "banker-farmers," delivered much the same message at every opportunity, arguing that from the "soil side of it," it would be impossible to lend to

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<sup>15</sup>S. A. Knapp, "Help for Men to Become Independent Farmers," The World's Work 20, no. 1 (May 1910): 12888-89.

<sup>16</sup>George Woodruff, "An American `Credit Foncier,'" Moody's Magazine 14, no. 2 (August 1912): 127-29. Consider also Walter L. Williamson, "Farm Mortgages," Moody's Magazine 13, no. 3 (March 1912): 177-78. Williamson argued that farm mortgages ranked with government bonds as a safe investment, because the "value of the farm is unaffected in the long run by the ups and downs of finance"; however, the farm mortgage business "calls for a wide range of reading, and a high degree of intelligence."

farmers who routinely despoiled the security and productive capacity on which their credit was based.<sup>17</sup> In these articles, the logic linking new terms for agricultural credit to prescriptions for the way the land had to be maintained is clear. Lenders began to realize they had a shared interest with farmers in seeing the agricultural land remain healthy and productive.

At the annual meeting of the American Bankers' Association (ABA) in 1912, the general disrepair of the existing system of agricultural credit was not an embarrassing secret to be kept hidden. In fact, quite the contrary was true. By 1912, many of the country bankers who dominated the ABA openly acknowledged there was a serious rural credit problem in need of immediate repair.<sup>18</sup> In a speech that summarized the work of the banker-diplomat Myron T. Herrick, and which also noted the certain adaptability of European cooperative credit to United States conditions, one banker called attention to J. J. Hill's dire predictions. Charles C. Conant warned his peers that

Population has gone on increasing . . . cities stand where cornfields grew. . . . Our awakened economists and statesmen have discovered that demand for food products is more than overtaking supply, that population is encroaching upon farm land, and that even those lands still available for culture lie fallow or are inadequately

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<sup>17</sup>Harris, "Agricultural Credits," 5.

<sup>18</sup>According to Harris, over 90% of the ABA banks during this period were country banks, and 75% of the ABA membership were "banker-farmers." "The average country banker," he wrote, "like the average newspaper, politician and demagogue, has not realized how scarce, relatively speaking, are the `big bankers.'" See B. F. Harris, "The Country Banker," The Banker-Farmer 1, no. 6 (May 1914): 9.

cultivated because the farmer lacks facilities for converting land values into negotiable credit.<sup>19</sup>

Meanwhile, editors at The World's Work and other business periodicals regularly praised the leadership efforts on the part of bankers and other business leaders who wanted to tackle the rural credit problem. At the same time, they generally lamented, often with pointed rhetoric, the tendency on the part of most farmers to cling to their "unsophisticated behavior."<sup>20</sup> A single farmer operating on forty acres, suggested the editors at The World's Work, presented all the financial complexity of any other type of business enterprise. The hoped-for modernization of agricultural practices required "brains and capital," and yet farmers were not thought to be interested in forming the type of cooperative organizations that could draw badly needed outside capital into rural areas on more reasonable terms.<sup>21</sup>

By the time James J. Hill appeared at the 1913 meeting of the ABA, his credentials as the preeminent business patron were firmly secured by journalists working in the business

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<sup>19</sup>Charles A. Conant, "Land and Agricultural Credit," 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), 120. Also consider an article that proclaimed there "has developed during the past year a remarkable demand for rural credit facilities . . . the American farmer is going to insist at last upon a financial system which will place his business on an equality in financial circles with other business enterprises." See "The Trend of Rural Affairs," Business America 14, no. 5 (November 1913): 441.

<sup>20</sup>"Forward to the Land," The World's Work 25, no. 2 (December 1912): 237-39.

<sup>21</sup>"Credit for Farmers," The World's Work 27, no. 2 (December 1913): 252-53.

press.<sup>22</sup> The highly successful builder of railroad empires was treated as a visionary of agricultural and industrial development. In his address, Hill noted it was the banker who was most closely concerned with the processes of wealth production. "One true law," he proclaimed, "is now pretty well established in the minds of thinking men--that agriculture, as the ultimate source of all wealth except the relatively smaller portion drawn from the sea, the forest and the mine, should be the especial care of those interested in maintaining a credit system at once ample and sound."<sup>23</sup> Hill offered the ABA bankers his standard fare of rhetorical warnings about declining food supplies for industrial workers, squandered soil fertility, the impending need to import food, and his perennial concerns with the rising cost of living. When raising concerns about conservation, Hill continued "to point out the economic short-sightedness of exhausting our natural supply of valuable resources whose total is limited by nature and cannot be replaced." Therefore, he concluded:

Sound economic policy and business sense advise us to increase the number of those engaged in farming; educate them in better methods; insist upon care and improvement

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<sup>22</sup>See, e.g., Joseph Hirsch, "The Country Bankers' Opportunity," in The Commercial and Financial Chronicle: Proceedings of the Convention of the American Bankers' Association Held in Kansas City, Kansas, 26-29 September 1916 (New York: William B. Dana, 1916), [pp.]; Hopkins, "Soil Fertility," 107; and "The Resurrection of Agriculture," in The Commercial and Financial Chronicle: Proceedings of the Convention of the American Bankers' Association Held in Boston 6-9 October 1913 (New York: William B. Dana, 1913), 113-14.

<sup>23</sup>James J. Hill, "Agriculture in the United States," in The Commercial and Financial Chronicle: Proceedings of the Convention of the American Bankers' Association Held in Boston 6-9 October 1913 (New York: William B. Dana, 1913), 117.

of the soil; increase production per acre; and, in particular, promote the raising of live stock by which money can be made, industry diversified, our food product enlarged and the soil raised to a higher degree of fertility. In so far as the banker can assist this change by granting agricultural credits wherever it is wise to do so, and especially by *conditioning loans on the use of right farming methods* [emphasis mine], he will strengthen and safeguard his own interests at the same time that he helps build up the country and to give to its industrial fabric a firm and consistent future.<sup>24</sup>

Also in 1913, the ABA's Committee on Agricultural and Financial Development and Education reported among its accomplishments: "The bankers of this country have taken a much more intelligent and effective interest in agricultural development and education than they have ever taken in the matter of currency reform." The committee insisted there was "no division of opinion among the bankers as to agricultural development and education being one of the most important economic questions before the American people," and it praised J. J. Hill as an "apostle crying in the wilderness" for two decades. Railroad men and bankers, it stated, were in closer contact with the farmer than most businessmen. Achievements by state banking organizations over the preceding year included getting laws passed for building good roads (a long-time farm-organization demand) and other rural improvements. The committee argued that the Smith-Lever agricultural extension bill deserved "the intelligent and hearty support of every banker and every citizen of this nation," since it would "revolutionize the agricultural industry of this country." When it considered the question of agricultural credits,

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<sup>24</sup>Ibid., 118.

the report insisted that making the farmer into a better businessman would lower the rates of interest naturally, without the need for the creation of a new rural credit system. "The lowest rate of interest in this or any country is given to the man of unquestioned ability to repay, and this ability is as essential to the farmer as it is to the successful business man."<sup>25</sup>

### Farm Profitability

Magazines such as The Independent anticipated the direction that was going to be charted for agriculture by representatives of concerned business interests. In 1906, editors optimistically noted evidence of rapidly developing agricultural industrialism in the Tenth Annual Report of the Secretary of Agriculture. Farmers, according to the magazine editor, were just beginning to respond to the demands for larger crops and scientific agriculture. Milk, butter, and cheese production, however, were in a condition of inexcusable "shiftlessness and ignorance."<sup>26</sup> By 1907, the same magazine reported a "striking fact" found in the annual reviews of business. There was new recognition of the tremendous growth in agricultural operations. Amid this rapid growth, editors speculated, the "rash and incompetent" thousands were bound to fail without the aid of science. This was to be a

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<sup>25</sup>"Report of the Committee on Agricultural and Financial Education," in The Commercial and Financial Chronicle: Proceedings of the Convention of the American Bankers' Association Held in Boston 6-9 October 1913 (New York: William B. Dana, 1913), 158.

<sup>26</sup>"Agriculture in 1906," The Independent 61, no. 3029 (20 December 1906): 1506-8.

process of "natural selection" favoring intelligent and resourceful farmers. Those who remained in agriculture would be "elements that can be depended on to support the best traditions and to push the most hopeful reforms of American political life . . . they will not tamely submit to the building up of a great plutocracy on the ruins of republican institutions."<sup>27</sup>

The 1909 report of Roosevelt's Country Life Commission (CLC) set the political stage for the urban agrarian movement during the legislative period 1910-1916. The commission's findings became a touchstone for the Country Life movement, despite some evidence that the report was poorly received in Congress.<sup>28</sup> Given that the report was written by business-oriented agrarians, it was no surprise to many observers that business leaders, and not farmers, seemed to consider it a profound document.

For those in the business of supplying farmers with industrial products, farm profitability was a matter of economic survival. Cyrus H. McCormick, whose father invented the reaper, was the president of the International Harvester company starting in 1902. His buoyant view of agriculture in early 1909 posited that merchants, banks, and corporations may come and go, but the farmer was becoming steadily more prosperous. Farming according to past ways, he suggested, held no attraction to the ambitious farmer pursuing

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<sup>27</sup>"The Agricultural Basis," The Independent 62, no. 3032 (10 January 1907): 108-9.

<sup>28</sup>According to Texas judge, and chairman of the business-sponsored Texas Farm Life Commission, S. A. Lindsey, "Congress seems to have been unfriendly and this report, a most valuable document, was not printed for public distribution." See S. A. Lindsey, Our Rural Life and Farm Problems, 63d Cong., 2d sess., S. Doc. 334 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1913), 4.

business enterprise much the same way others pursued merchant and manufacturing careers. McCormick praised the rise of the profession of agriculture, concluding the outlook for both business and the farmer was brighter than ever before.<sup>29</sup>

Of course, this was a period when every optimistic review of farming as a business was confounded by litanies of farmers' failures to make an adequate living. Rural life, noted one writer, seems to conspire to emphasize hardship and privation. "The 50-acre well-tilled farm, producing triple the average yields of corn, wheat, cotton, is now a scattering actuality. Its preponderance will mark the zenith of the farmer's better day."<sup>30</sup> According to The Independent, the London Times wrote in 1914 that agriculture was America's only unorganized industry, and that the "American farmer is very nearly the worst in the world," devouring land "as locusts settle," and showing no sign of mastering "elements of modern methods of marketing and distribution."<sup>31</sup>

To many writers, it became readily apparent that poor tillage alone could not explain farm profitability problems in a period of rising prices. One editorial in The Independent

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<sup>29</sup>McCormick, 85-87.

<sup>30</sup>Truman S. Vance, "Why Young Men Leave the Farms," The Independent 70, no. 3250 (16 March 1911): 553-60. See also J. H. T. Main, "Western Land Problems," The Independent 74, no. 3348 (30 January 1913): 250-52. Main was the president of Grinnell College. He presented "astonishing" statistics showing the story of rising land prices and argued there was no sign it would abate. The result was forecast as a radical change in farming methods and a "disastrous" increase in the day-laboring classes of the cities.

<sup>31</sup>"Farming As a Profession," The Independent 77, no. 3397 (12 January 1914): 48-49.

raised the National Grange claim that the farmer received only 35 cents on the dollar of produce, with the speculative middlemen, handlers, and retailers getting most of the rest. The great problem of the day, according to the magazine, was to bring producers and consumers closer together. Legislators were instructed to remove whatever impediments kept the farmer from getting 65 cents on the dollar.<sup>32</sup>

Even if much of American farming presented uncertain business prospects, there seemed to be little doubt on the part of large-scale investment managers that farm mortgages were among the best investments. In a pair of articles published in consecutive issues of Moody's Magazine, W. H. Tennyson represented the views of the nation's largest single holder of farm mortgages, the Mutual Benefit Life Insurance Company. Tennyson noted that the dominant feeling across the nation in 1911 was uncertainty, though that was considered a reflection of the experiments and "so-called reforms" of business. One thing was certain, however: the increased cost of living presented a threat to "the old order." The insurance business, nevertheless, was not likely to be affected. In fact, he concluded that insurance

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<sup>32</sup>"The Farmer and the Folk," The Independent 71, no. 3268 (20 July 1911): 162-63. Also consider the series centered around the question, "Does Anybody Really Want a Farm?," in The World's Work 23, no. 1 (November 1911): 119. Editors claimed that despite rising farm land values and profits, there was no rush to the land. The World's Work sought answers to questions about where land was available, and what was a fair price, to ascertain whether there was a demand for farmlands. For a defense of the role of the middleman, see Joel Benton, "What Can Be Done About the Middleman?," Moody's Magazine 12, no. 4 (October 1911): 285-88. "The complex division of labor," wrote Benton, "is, in fact, one of the most potent and uplifting things that has come into human society. It promotes speed of attainment, cheapness, quality and convenience, it creates wealth with luxury and leisure, much of which is put within the reach of all who work and aspire."

companies thrived on ever-present uncertainty. In terms of farm mortgages, he suggested there were millions of acres of good, conservative investments. Mutual Benefit Life had invested 47% of its assets in real estate loans. Regardless of economic, political, and social conditions, concluded Tennyson, the land was considered a good long-term investment for insurance companies and other investors.<sup>33</sup>

Wealthy financiers, bankers, and other corporations during this period began to promote the possibility of applying capital and industrial business practices to a new kind of profitable and highly productive agriculture.<sup>34</sup> George French argued in 1913 that farming in the old sense was dying. Two years earlier, he had compiled a "sturdy volume" for the Boston Chamber of Commerce about farming, commercial, and residential progress in New

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<sup>33</sup>W. H. Tennyson, "Farm Mortgages As Investments for Life Insurance Companies," Moody's Magazine 12, no. 3 (September 1911): 208-10. See also W. H. Tennyson, "Investments of Life Insurance Companies," Moody's Magazine 12, no. 4 (October 1911): 261-63; and Williamson, 177-78. For a post-FFLA opinion, see Kingman N. Robbins, "The Future of the Farm Mortgage Business," in Proceedings of the Fourth Annual Convention of the Farm Mortgage Bankers Association of America, Held in Minneapolis, Minnesota, 11-13 September 1917, comp. H. M. Hanson (Chicago: Farm Mortgage Bankers Association, 1917), 73-83.

<sup>34</sup>See, e.g., Elisha Hollingsworth Talbot, "A New Agricultural Empire, the Land of Promise: Dry Farming Successfully Tested in the West," Moody's Magazine 17, no. 12 (December 1914): 577-84. Hollingsworth called it "a strange anomaly that while a large part of the agricultural or rural population of this country is engaged in a senseless and unjustifiable warfare upon the railways, these same railways are carrying on a costly and ever broadening campaign looking to the development of soil possibilities and the greatest attainable benefit to agriculture, and to the man who cultivates the soil." Farm failures in this arid region, he concluded, were due only to a lack of intelligence, industry, correct methods, adaptability, and patience. Consider also "Farming Science Spreads," 2; and G. F. Warren, "Are Our Crop Yields Increasing or Decreasing?," Business America 15, no. 4 (April 1914): 346-48.

England. A new profession was entering the industrial stage, he argued, threatening to replace the poor habits of the traditional farmer. The old archetype of the farmer was considered hard-working, stupid, and extremely conservative, particularly when it came to adopting innovative methods of production and distribution. French presented a new agreeable fact that "many men now working the land compare favorably with men in other lines of business . . . [constituting] a rapidly growing class of scientific and successful farmers at work building up the business of working the land into a great profession." The path to farm profitability was simply intensive farming and the reclamation of disused lands. "The real farmer [was] all right," concluded French; it was "the men who will not learn, or who are too old or poorly equipt [*sic*] with business ability, that are deteriorating and getting ready to disappear, as factors in farming that has commercial or social significance."<sup>35</sup>

One industrial agriculture experiment modeled on corporate capitalism was the much-publicized Taft Ranch. This example of the "new agriculture" was favorably described in The World's Work. Taft Ranch was an early example of a vertically integrated agribusiness, with

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<sup>35</sup>George French, "The Business of Farming," The Independent 74, no. 3348 (30 January 1913): 247-50. Consider also Forrest Crissey, "Speeding Up the Farm--Business Men at the Wheel Make Good," The Banker-Farmer 1, no. 6 (May 1914): 2-3. Crissey elaborately praised the banker-farmer movement, commenting that "the most wholesome feature . . . is the fact that it is frankly business-like and not smeared over with hypocritical varnish of pretended philanthropy. It is good business for the banker, good business for the merchant, good business for the farmer . . . men who have grappled with the great problems of commerce and industry . . . have turned their keen and practical minds to the task of speeding up the farm . . . [and] will demonstrate that business sense, business system and business perspective will pay just as well on the farm today as in the store, the factory or the shop."

five million dollars in assets, many distinct business enterprises, and several towns and banks owned outright. The writer claimed good salaries were paid to five thousand contented employees. With President Taft's brother as the most prominent financier, Taft Ranch was said to be well known across the United States and abroad. It was visited by the President and diverse students of agricultural development. An extremely large-scale commercial agricultural undertaking, the Taft Ranch served as a model for those who saw large-scale, industrial-model farms as viable solutions to agrarian dilemmas. The operation was highly organized, credit-dependent, and as businesslike as any manufacturing interest of the period. The author praised the fact that advanced commercial and scientific methods were at last being employed to cheapen the cost of food, while at the same time making agricultural life as attractive and profitable as possible. Forecasting the rise of corporate agriculture, Theodore H. Price celebrated the fact that

The Taft Ranch is daily demonstrating that, in the hands of competent executives, agricultural development and enterprise are legitimate subjects of capitalistic exploitation on a large scale. If the captains of industry and finance, who have done so much for American progress in other directions, will study the success of the Taft Ranch and its management, they may do much to make our national life healthier and happier.<sup>36</sup>

In a 1912 article written by the president of First National Bank of Waverly, New York, W. E. Lyford noted a suggestion made "2-3 years back" by the Syracuse Chamber of

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<sup>36</sup>Theodore H. Price, "A 100,000-Acre Business," The World's Work 25, no. 3 (January 1913): 275.

Commerce. To induce people to make money and live in satisfying conditions, he recalled, it had to be proven that farming could be a profitable business. The chamber had suggested that "companies be organized with plenty of capital to purchase land, erect buildings, buy machinery, and have working capital sufficient to operate the business." A plan for organization along the lines of industrial manufacturing firms would be drawn up, which included creating superintendents of scientific farm management. Good dividends and profits were then thought to follow simply from the establishment of a "properly managed" business. These carefully managed agricultural projects would operate under corporate ownership, utilizing a minimum of 10,000 acres, in order to create a complete community with a school and church.<sup>37</sup>

Writers in the business press converged around the notion that farm profitability was dependent on the proper application of capital to problems of production and distribution. The World's Work, for example, reminded readers that most farms were unprofitable because they lacked adequate capital to be conducted as a business. Getting farmers capitalized was declared a "fundamental national task," yet it was one continually made more difficult by the lack of business organization and skills for farm management in the sector. For this reason alone, the magazine suggested, there was going to continue to be a lack of adequate rural capital. With a steady rise in the prices paid for staples, the magazine noted,

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<sup>37</sup>W. E. Lyford, "Farm Financing," Moody's Magazine 13, no. 6 (June 1912): 435-36.

"businesslike" farming was a goal well within the alert farmers' reach.<sup>38</sup> In a 1913 editorial, the ABA made it clear who knew best how to make money by using capital appropriately:

Farming will never become an honorable profession until it is attended with the same study of science and business methods which is instinctively given to other occupations. . . . The banker particularly is in a position to bring this about. The merchant whose methods are slovenly is looked at askance by his bankers and others. If farming, largely through the attitude of the banks, can be put on the same footing as other industries, the problem will be in a fair way to solution. When farming is a business so far as the world is concerned, it will become a business for all those engaged in it, but never before.<sup>39</sup>

### The Cost of Living

Writers in the business press, along with journalists from every other type of print press, participated in a national debate about the causes and consequences of the rising cost of living. The cost of living was considered a significant national problem throughout the 1910s. At the same time, as some scholars have noted, the legitimacy of the large corporation in the American political economy was not yet secure, nor would it be until

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<sup>38</sup>"Our Fundamental National Task," The World's Work 25, no. 4 (February 1913): 378. The theme of making farmers more "businesslike" through the application of capital to problems of production was pervasive in the business press survey. See, e.g., "Chambers of Agriculture," The Nation's Business 1, no. 12 (16 June 1913): 7.

<sup>39</sup>"The Resurrection of Agriculture," 114. See also Jesse E. Pope, "Agricultural Credit," Moody's Magazine 17, no. 9 (September 1914): 495-99. Pope argued that farmers' isolation and ignorance of business methods in some sections of the country made the credit middleman a necessity, and contributed to the greatest abuses by lenders and borrowers.

roughly the middle of the twentieth century.<sup>40</sup> In the aftermath of corporate consolidation at the turn of the century, big business had to defend its national industrial leadership role against possible culpability for the higher prices being paid by consumers for many life essentials. In addition, it was clear by this point that the economic structure of industrial capitalism relied on a steady, cheap food supply to guard against wage push, unionization, and other countervailing pressures on the part of the steadily growing urban work force. The prices paid to farmers for staples, and at the retail level, were carefully watched indicators of both the rising cost of living and farm profitability trends. There were, therefore, several reasons why business press writers made repeated arguments about the relationship between the rising cost of living, farm profitability, and the rates and terms for rural credit.

When writers in the business press considered questions of supply and demand in agriculture, they generally lamented the low or declining productivity of traditional methods. For example, at this point only an extremely small number of farms made use of the internal combustion engine. As one author put it in 1910, only one acre in twenty thousand was plowed by machinery; as a result, the increasingly unmet "vital food-needs of men will hasten the passing of the horse."<sup>41</sup> According to this view, American agriculture needed to develop

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<sup>40</sup>See, e.g., Robert B. Reich, The Work of Nations: Preparing Ourselves for 21st-Century Capitalism (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 37-39. Reich noted, "public passions were periodically ignited by the specter of malicious corporate giants plotting against the body politic."

<sup>41</sup>Rumeley, 13246-58.

along new lines, not only to save the nation from hunger, but to do so in such a way that increased farm profits while simultaneously lowering the cost of living. Consumption of foodstuffs was, as so many others had warned in the wake of J. J. Hill's reform campaign, rapidly overtaking production. Only improved farming and the widespread adoption of scientific agriculture offered any hope for a return to cheaper food prices.

When the price of meat sharply increased around 1910, the result was that "every newspaper ran columns about the cost of living." Walter Page's son Arthur, a staff member at The World's Work, claimed some causes of this increase "could be eliminated by prosecuting somebody, but the main cause is fundamental. . . . We are outgrowing our food supply." While the daily papers blamed farmers, the meat trust, or the retailers, Page argued the real trouble was with production techniques. Noting that the prescription for better farming offered by J. J. Hill and others would take time to produce results, he concluded, "the consumer must face the fact that food was not so plentiful as it was," and in the mean time, shop more wisely. For instance, buying in bulk quantities was considered a stopgap measure that could ease the financial burden produced by poorly developed agricultural production.<sup>42</sup>

When Secretary of Agriculture James Wilson ended his tenure as one of the longest serving cabinet members in American history in 1913, The Independent praised his "chief glory," which was to begin the work of increasing agricultural production, with the final goal

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<sup>42</sup>Arthur W. Page, "The High Cost of Living to Continue," The World's Work 19, no. 6 (April 1910): 12770-72.

being the extraction of the maximum yield of crops from "every tillable acre of national soil." Increased food production, the editorial noted, would ease the cost of living and allow the nation to safely "double and redouble" its population. "We venture to say," concluded the editor, "that in the hands of President Wilson's employees lies the key ability whether to expand continuously as a people, or to become a mere mass of underfed human beings."<sup>43</sup>

Business press writers suggested connections existed between productive and distributive inefficiencies, low farm profits, high food prices, and the lack of adequate rates and terms for rural credit. In one 1913 article, cooperative credit was described as the most important of eight proposals for regaining the dignity of Eastern farmers, while maintaining respect for both urban and rural needs. Other proposals designed to manage the cost of living included better adapted produce, direct retail marketing, improved sorting and packing, as well as lower transport costs, better targeted to meet regional needs.<sup>44</sup>

To be sure, railroad executives like J. J. Hill and B. F. Yoakum had an economic stake in convincing the public that transportation costs, at least on the rails, in fact were not

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<sup>43</sup>"Secretary Wilson and His Work," The Independent 74, no. 3353 (6 March 1913): 494-96. See also John Lee Coulter, "Agricultural Production and Population," Business America 14, no. 1 (July 1913): 54-58. One writer, M. M. Schayer, commented, "Generally speaking the history of farming in America has been without intelligence or skill, without method or management, without knowledge or care, without proper fertilization of soil or selection of seed or rotation of crops. The result of this ignorance and folly has been in many cases to impoverish or exhaust the soil." Consider the investor's magazine spin on the cost of living and agriculture in M. M. Schayer, "Irrigation and the High Cost of Living," Moody's Magazine 17, no. 4 (April 1914): 195-96, 200.

<sup>44</sup>Clyde Lyndon King, "From Farm to the Consumer: Can the Cost of Provisions Be Reduced?," The Independent 74, no. 3355 (20 March 1913): 635-38.

the source of steadily rising food prices. Yoakum, for one, argued that other causes were responsible for driving up prices, and inciting "proletariat" consciousness. Foremost was the high price farmers had to pay for credit. The chairman of the St. Louis and San Francisco lines thought the threat of continued rising food prices had the potential to drive even more workers into the "hands of theorists and false leaders."<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>45</sup>B. F. Yoakum, "The High Cost of Farming," The World's Work 24, no. 5 (September 1912): 519-33. One skeptic of this explanation, Byron W. Holt, while admitting cost of living was a fundamental question and cause of "world-wide discontent and anarchy," charged: "Our salaried and professional men are strongly tempted to become socialists or anarchists because of the fact that the cost of living is rising much faster than their incomes. Even some of our railroad presidents have recently harbored anarchistic ideas." See Byron W. Holt, "The Fundamental Causes of High Prices," Moody's Magazine 17, no. 9 (September 1914): 441-48.

### Soil Fertility

In 1908, The Independent was editorializing on the complex agricultural and financial issues connected with the problem of feeding an increasingly "congested" city population. It forecast that tradition-bound farmers had to go through a massive reorientation in terms of their relationship to the soil:

The farmer of today is a new sort of man; a creator instead of a destroyer. It has dawned upon him, with astounding emphasis, that he can obliterate all the forests of a continent inside a hundred years; can exhaust the oil wells and the coal mines; can not only make a garden of a desert but can turn a garden into a desert; can even use up the nitrogen of the air. The new agriculture teaches him that he has all this to reverse, and that reverse it he can. . . . Farming for the future will consist in devising some method for stealing fertility from the atmosphere, and embodying it in the soil and the plant . . . the farmer has come to a day when he must be a scientist.<sup>46</sup>

During 1910, the meeting of the Second National Conservation Congress was reported in The World's Work as an indication of an increasingly important movement. A. W. Page noted that five years earlier the idea was unheard of, but in 1910 it drew notable

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<sup>46</sup>"The New Farm," The Independent 65, no. 3127 (5 November 1908): 1080-82. See also Kenyon L. Butterfield, "The Tide of Rural Affairs," Business America 15, no. 2 (February 1914): 158, who warned that if the nation's soil continued to be degraded that "the bread supply of the nation is at stake." As early as 1901, the report of the Industrial Commission on Agriculture and Agricultural Labor pointed out that it was "possible to get as much income while improving the soil as by letting it deteriorate." See Industrial Commission on Agriculture and Agricultural Labor, Report of the Industrial Commission, vol. 10 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1901), 29.

reformers as well as any other important gathering in the United States.<sup>47</sup> The federal government, acting through the USDA, was doing what it could with limited means to encourage soil conservation.<sup>48</sup> At the 1912 ABA meeting, bankers heard about the promise of encouraging soil conservation through the county agent who understood the business of agriculture:

Through a force of this sort in the field it is possible to materially change conditions, to institute new methods of farming . . . ultimately to establish such a system of agriculture as will maintain fertility of soil indefinitely and lead to better prosperity among the human family. The most priceless heritage that we have is the soil and its fertility. I believe the time is coming when . . . the common understanding generally will be that the man who owns an acre of land has not the absolute right to do with it as he pleases; that he holds it in trust as a sort of food supply for the future, and, that if he leaves that land at the

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<sup>47</sup>Arthur W. Page, "The Fight for Conservation," 13607-11.

<sup>48</sup>The problem of soil fertility merited institutional consideration at the USDA during the first decade of the twentieth century. The problem remained one of disseminating the latest information and converting farmers to scientific farm practices. See C. G. Hopkins, "Soil Fertility in Relation to Permanent Agriculture," in Proceedings of the Nineteenth Annual Convention of the Association of American Agricultural Colleges and Experiment Stations, Washington, D.C., 14-16 November 1905, ed. A. C. True, W. H. Beal, and H. C. White (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1906), 134-42; Milton Whitney, "Soil Fertility," in USDA Farmers' Bulletin No. 257 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1906), 5; Milton Whitney and F. K. Cameron, "Investigations in Soil Fertility," in USDA Bureau of Soils Bulletin No. 23 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1904), 5; and James Wilson, "Report of the Secretary," in Yearbook of the United States Department of Agriculture, 1907 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1908), 74-76.

end of his tenure, be it by death or otherwise, poorer than when he took it he will be an enemy of society.<sup>49</sup>

According to The Nation's Business, the Texas Industrial Congress was one of the foremost promoters of scientific agriculture. Originally established to develop the commerce, industry, and agriculture of Texas, the organization faced the need to encourage farmers to conserve soil fertility. "Through the activities of the Congress there has been awakened a state-wide interest on the part of the press, banks, railroads, other corporations and individuals in agricultural matters, in soil conservation, better methods of cultivation, and better marketing conditions." With \$10,000 given annually in cash prizes for the best yields, the Texas Industrial Congress claimed to have fostered improved relations between landlords and tenants, both of whom benefited when good tilth materialized as higher yields. Further, the organization claimed it had "decreased the number of acres cultivated by the average farmer," which in turn meant "an increased population and a corresponding increase in production, more business for the merchant and the banker and consequently more general prosperity."<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup>Bradford Knapp, "What the Government Is Doing for Agriculture," 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), 131. See also Hon. N. Kaumanns, "The Influence of Farmers' Associations on the Development of Agriculture in the United States," in Proceedings of the Twenty-Fifth Convention of the Association of American Agricultural Colleges and Experiment Stations, Columbus, Ohio, 15-17 November 1911, ed. Secretary J. L. Hills (Montpelier, VT: Capital City Press, 1912), 49. In this address, the Imperial German Special Commissioner for Agriculture to the United States suggested the near total lack of rural credit institutions fostered "the well-known, irrational system of robbing the soil, by which it is forced to produce large returns as quickly and cheaply as possible."

<sup>50</sup>"Texas Industrial Congress," 7.

Cyril G. Hopkins was a well-known soil scientist, and regular communicator of the fertility message before meetings of the nation's country bankers. Hopkins asserted, "As agriculture is the basis of all industry and commerce, so the fertility of the soil is the fundamental support of every form of agriculture; and a greater localized knowledge of soil fertility is the greatest need of American agriculture."<sup>51</sup>

Bankers, by this time, had their own oracle of soil fertility in B. F. Harris. Starting late in 1913, Harris reached thousands of bankers and farm journalists through the official press organ of the ABA's Agricultural Commission, The Banker-Farmer, which was published monthly. Every issue emphasized it was the responsibility of the country bankers to make sure farmers contributed to both soil and bank reserves.<sup>52</sup> The soil expert C. G. Hopkins used the bankers' periodical as a platform to continue a campaign that consisted simply of stating his "self-evident truth." According to that truth, "impoverished soil yields no profits, either to agriculture, to industry, or to commerce . . . to ignore this basic truth can lead only to land ruin and ultimately to commercial and industrial suicide."<sup>53</sup>

In this context, soil fertility was an evocative concept. It became widely understood in the business press that soil fertility was a matter of grave national importance. This doomsayers' interpretation of agricultural trends influenced aspects of the rural credit debate at various stages. It was a matter of rough agreement among all the journalists and

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<sup>51</sup>Hopkins, "Soil Fertility--The Greatest Necessity," 108.

<sup>52</sup>Harris, "Saving Your Soil," 4-6.

<sup>53</sup>Hopkins, "Principles and Profits," 18.

contributors concerned that increasing the scientific education of the farmer was the only possible solution. Knowledge and capital to apply that knowledge became the goal for urban reformers. For example, in 1912, W. C. Brown, the president of New York Central Lines, made the connection between "worn-out" soil fertility, the price of food, and the business leadership needed for the long-overdue education campaign:

The failure to increase the production of the nation's farms by increasing the number of bushels per acre is steadily and rapidly increasing the cost of living, and the only possible solution is an immediate and thorough awakening of our people to an appreciation of the over-shadowing importance of this condition, followed by a systematic, persevering campaign of education.<sup>54</sup>

For this railroad executive, educating farmers meant cooperation between colleges and railroads to double the yield per acre on every farm by "preaching the gospel of better farming." This was work, indeed "statesmanship of the highest order," for the Boards of Trade and Chambers of Commerce. Brown also raised the expectation that the New York Bankers' Association could "exert a most powerful influence in this great movement of improving agricultural conditions," by lending money "liberally if assured that it will be used intelligently and economically in increasing the productivity of the farm."<sup>55</sup>

### Education

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<sup>54</sup>W. C. Brown, "The Importance of Improved Agriculture: The Banker's Opportunity," Moody's Magazine 13, no. 6 (June 1912): 433.

<sup>55</sup>*Ibid.*, 434.

Articles about education for the farmer encompassed every issue discussed in the survey of the business press. It was regularly argued that traditional farmers had a great deal to learn in this period, and writers in the business press enthusiastically urged every concerned interest to be a part of making sure they did so. In 1907, The Independent warned that new educational institutions for the farmer meant the stereotype of the farmer as "old hayseed" would soon be dead. Science was to be linked directly to farm work. The magazine editors expressed full agreement with President Roosevelt that opportunities for farmers to attain industrial training should continue to grow.<sup>56</sup> A number writers noted the role of the agricultural colleges enriching both the life of the farmer, and American democracy, by, as Kenyon Butterfield put it, "going out with the gospel of a better agriculture and a saner, sweeter rural life."<sup>57</sup> Cooperation from the railroads on this project was described as "enthusiastic," which business writers endorsed because the strategy would increase business in general. Thus, during this period, there was a growing recognition of the propriety of the

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<sup>56</sup>"Our Agricultural Colleges," The Independent 62, no. 3053 (6 June 1907): 1362-64.

<sup>57</sup>Kenyon L. Butterfield, "The Leadership of the Agricultural College," The Independent 65, no. 3115 (13 August 1908): 368-70. Consider also "Agricultural Colleges and Their Adjuncts," The Independent 66, no. 3143 (25 February 1909): 431-32; and E. P. Powell, "Agricultural Colleges and the People," The Independent 63, no. 3061 (1 August 1907): 253-59.

development of an educational system that worked in tandem with industries possessing a shared interest in the prosperity and durability of American agriculture.<sup>58</sup>

Whether the shared interests and elite policy networks that linked business to agricultural education and development rose to the level of a social movement is a matter for debate. Certainly the elite journalist Walter Hines Page thought the "Country Life" movement ranked high on the priorities of politicians operating at the national level early in 1912. From Page's viewpoint, there was a great change underway that centered on diverse efforts to improve all aspects of rural organization through education. Social surveys of rural areas were giving birth to the fledgling disciplines of rural social science, such as agricultural economics and rural sociology. Business groups in every region were sponsoring the types of educational forums that gave momentum to the idea that a Country Life movement was indeed underway.<sup>59</sup>

Educators also played a significant role rallying business to turn its attention to the attainment of better agriculture. Andrew M. Soule, president of the Georgia State College of Agriculture, told ABA bankers in 1912 that the condition of agriculture continued to be unsatisfactory. Foremost among his concerns was the unarrested tendency toward great

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<sup>58</sup>E. P. Powell, "What the Agricultural Colleges Are Doing," The Independent 66, no. 3150 (15 April 1909): 797-802. Some described the business efforts as a response to economic necessity, and a sign of a new national era. See "Agricultural College Extension," The Independent 71, no. 3289 (14 December 1911): 1245-47.

<sup>59</sup>"The Great Country Life Movement," 616-19.

amounts of soil depletion, a trend constituting agricultural malpractice. "The progress of a nation depends upon soil conservation. It is the one primal and inexhaustible source of wealth when rationally managed." Echoing the report of the CLC, Soule warned that without "social or business organizations to protect him, [the farmer] loses interest in his business and drifts away from the land." The solution proposed, later embodied in the Smith-Lever Act of 1914, was to enable agricultural colleges and experiment stations to reach the masses in such a way that education could advance all aspects of country life.<sup>60</sup>

### Relations Between Classes

One of the most salient issues in the survey of the business press concerned the changing relations between urban and rural classes. Traditionally, the urban-rural relationship harbored a great deal of suspicion and animosity, as well as economic and political conflict. However, as the survey has so far demonstrated, there existed a coherent set of reasons--produced by economic and political incentives--for a mobilization by business stakeholders

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<sup>60</sup>Soule, 117-19. See also Joseph Chapman, "Report on Committee on Agricultural and Financial Development and Education," 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), 144. Chapman noted the ABA's presentation before House and Senate committees in support of legislation for federal aid to better the farming conditions. That year, the ABA also printed 25,000 copies of a 368-page conference proceedings, gathered at a meeting of State Bankers Associations, and meant to become "a textbook for bankers . . . in spreading the doctrine of practical education along agricultural and industrial lines." The report noted the bankers' principal task was to influence public opinion.

around a program of agricultural reform. At times, as we will see in descriptions of the farm and farm-organization surveys (see Chapters VI and VIII), the business-sponsored efforts to uplift agriculture struck long-time agrarian observers as overzealous, hysterical, dangerously propagandistic, and uneconomical, to name only a few of the most commonly cited objections. Urban interest in rural uplift, nevertheless, also conveyed serious attention to the mutual advantages of good business methods and cooperation between urban and rural interests.<sup>61</sup> Even skeptics admitted, cautiously, that there were legitimate reasons for allowing the increasingly vocal industrial intelligentsia an opportunity to participate in the public debate about the future of agriculture.

Once again, it is probably safe to trace the business impetus for a fundamental change in urban-rural class relations to the publication of the Country Life Commission report. CLC member W. H. Page considered the report a "call for a national awakening."<sup>62</sup> In fact, the report was based on the distillation of diverse sources of rural sentiment through an elite, urban agrarian, agenda-setting committee. The CLC transformed rural grievances into a

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<sup>61</sup>See, e.g., "A Country Life Conference," The Independent 73, no. 3318 (4 July 1912): 273-74. The magazine editorialized that a conference held in Madison, Wisconsin, dealing with the businessman's role in rural affairs, marked the dawn of a new sort of country life, one which united bankers, ministers, and editors in rural uplift. Consider also "The Awakened Farmers," The World's Work 25, no. 6 (April 1913): 620, which recognized the National Conference on Marketing and Farm Credits (see Chapter V) as evidence that better farming, business, and rural living was possible, and that it was linked to the prosperity of railroads, bankers, and manufacturers.

<sup>62</sup>Walter Hines Page, "What Country Life May Become," 11380-84.

sweeping prescription for farmers to become, essentially, more like the highly organized businessmen found in the cities, and the organized farmers in Europe. Editors at The Independent recalled a letter from a farmer who questioned whether farmers actually had any part in forming the CLC's opinions, concluding that if farmers do not themselves want to change, the report would have no effect upon them.<sup>63</sup>

What the survey shows with remarkable uniformity is that business reformers and journalists, sensing the resistance of farmers to follow the advice of the CLC, and the limited efficacy of the USDA in reaching farmers, took it upon themselves to conduct agenda-setting campaigns within the business and farming communities. These campaigns were overwhelmingly in support of the unifying idea that agriculture and industry were irrevocably linked. The corollary was that, given this interdependence, the two traditionally hostile factions, rural and urban classes, had to cooperate in the introduction of new agricultural practices and policies. Furthermore, where farmers and farm organizations lagged behind the leaders of the scientific/industrial revolution in agriculture, business was determined to take the lead in the movement for improved agriculture through a shift in class relations.

Bankers played a crucial part in fostering this desire among business leaders for a shift in social relations during the 1910s. Joseph G. Brown, the president of Citizens National

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<sup>63</sup>"The Farmer's Uplift," The Independent 66, no. 3152 (29 April 1909): 933. See also W. L. Nelson, 77-79. Nelson wrote that much of the literature on country life was being written by "city-people." He also noted a survey showing "encouraging" shifts in the farmer toward ideals of sustainable agriculture and away from Populism. Agricultural teachers were seen replacing agitators, just as professors stood in the place of politicians.

Bank, Raleigh, North Carolina, told ABA bankers in 1911 that behind "all commerce, back of all banking, back of all manufacturing, back of all industry lies agriculture, the real basis of all prosperity." Running through the work and rhetoric of various Country Lifers was a desire to establish more "cordial relations" between farmer and banker. Brown noted one special need

that underlies all others and without which we can never hope to get out of country life the very best there is in it. There must be some system of finance by which the farmer may not only secure funds to make his crop, but may also be sure of facilities for holding or marketing it after it is made, so as to get for himself a fair share of the profits of his labor . . . our defective financial system has not affected the farmer alone. It has touched every phase of business life.<sup>64</sup>

The effort at recasting the public image of the country banker as the friend and guardian of the farmer gained significance as the demand for rural credit reform increased during 1913. For example, The Independent introduced an article with the following note: "One would gather from remarks in Congress and criticism in newspapers that the banker is the natural enemy of the farmer and his sole object is to squeeze the profit out of every horny-handed industry." Editors noted further that the article, dealing with the "awakening" of the country banker, was thought to be a good antidote for that particular mistaken view. In the article, Charles Moreau Harger described how a recent banking conference focused on

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<sup>64</sup>Joseph G. Brown, "The Needs of the Farm and Its Benefits from the National Reserve Association," in The Commercial and Financial Chronicle: Proceedings of the Convention of the American Bankers' Association Held in New Orleans, Louisiana, 21-24 November 1911 (New York: William B. Dana, 1911), 143.

better farming, soil conservation, and stock breeding. In this new phase of rural development, the country banker realized "his prosperity depends on the success of his customers-- something the old-fashioned banker never accepted seriously." Harger concluded that the country banker had essentially redefined the goals of the business, away from exploitation, and toward the goal of mutual advantage through cooperation.<sup>65</sup>

As Chapter V of this dissertation makes clear, no banker more completely exemplified the efforts to recast urban-rural relations than the leader of the "banker-farmers," B. F. Harris.<sup>66</sup> As the editor of the ABA's monthly agricultural newspaper, The Banker-Farmer (first published in December 1913), Harris encouraged a brand of business journalism that dwelled on the need for new patterns of social relations.<sup>67</sup> One banker writing in The

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<sup>65</sup>Charles Moreau Harger, "The Country Banker's Awakening: How the Bank May Cooperate with the Farm for Their Mutual Advantage," The Independent 75, no. 3380 (13 September 1913): 611-15. At the 1913 meeting of the ABA, one address on the role of the banker in developing the county agent network noted: "There is not one farm in fifty that has sufficient working capital to make it profitable as it should be and conserve the fertility of the soil at the same time. If the bankers, by bringing about the conditions referred to, could make the farmer more prosperous and his land more productive, the business of the town would prosper in the same ratio." See S. M. Jordan, "The County Agent," in The Commercial and Financial Chronicle: Proceedings of the Convention of the American Bankers' Association Held in Boston 6-9 October 1913 (New York: William B. Dana, 1913), 125.

<sup>66</sup>See, e.g., "The Banker Helps the Farmer," 1-2.

<sup>67</sup>"Cooperation by Corporations," 10. Harris noted many of the great industrial, manufacturing, and transport corporations had undertaken effective and expensive campaigns for the cause of better farming. See also A. R. Mann, "How the Country Town Can Help Itself by Fostering Rural Life," The Banker-Farmer 1, no. 4 (March 1914): 4. Mann stated, "The business interests--the merchant, the banker, the manufacturer, and all the rest--must become alert to the necessity for creating fair and adequate relations with the land population in their own trade area."

Banker-Farmer declared, "My whole aim and desire is to help the farmer change from the fertility-destroying cropping, so long followed in this country, to a saner and more profitable system that will tend to build up his land and his standing as a citizen."<sup>68</sup>

In the inaugural issue of The Banker-Farmer, Harris reported the ABA's agricultural development policy this way:

The business of farming is no more the farmer's exclusive business than is banking the exclusive business of the banker. Both are morally trustees of the assets of the nation; one with the heritage of all the people--the soil's fertility in his keeping; the other custodian of their money and credit . . . it remained for the banker and his state and national organization to give the impetus, to make the first and only organized effort on the part of any class of business men, to help in the work that belongs to all--the reconstruction of American agriculture.<sup>69</sup>

Activist agrarian banking associations were joined in their efforts at reshaping urban-rural relations by groups such as the Duluth Commercial Club. Like many other commercial organizations across the country, the leadership in Duluth faced questions about how to feed an expanding industrial population affordably. The organization visited outstanding local

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<sup>68</sup>Clarendon Davis, "A Southern Bank President," The Banker-Farmer 1, no. 3 (February 1914): 4.

<sup>69</sup>"American Bankers Applaud Agricultural Work," The Banker-Farmer 1, no. 1 (December 1913): 13-15. See also "Sixteen State Associations: Their Work, Their Ambitions," The Banker-Farmer 1, no. 2 (January 1914): 12-13; Louis M. Tobin, "Looking Back at the Banker-Farmer Movement--Has It Paid?," The Banker-Farmer 2, no. 2 (January 1915): 2. Tobin suggested the banker, once widely considered a Shylock, was being humanized by the banker-farmer movement.

farms, encouraged better farming techniques by offering prizes, and had bankers and farmers "side by side" as members in the country club. The key recognition, according to the author of this article, was the interdependence of business and agriculture.<sup>70</sup>

The recasting of urban-rural relations received a great deal of attention in the first years of operation for The Nation's Business, which was the official press organ of the newly formed United States Chamber of Commerce.<sup>71</sup> The paper carried regular reports summarizing the agrarian educational uplift efforts of the nation's commercial organizations. One of the stated goals of these efforts was to establish greater appreciation of the creed establishing mutual respect and cooperation between urban and rural classes.<sup>72</sup> One article reported a "palpable community of interest between the town and country has become a

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<sup>70</sup>Frank Parker Stockbridge, "Two Cities That Turned Farmers," The World's Work 25, no. 4 (February 1913): 459-69.

<sup>71</sup>In the first issue, the editor stated: "Commodity exchange runs through all local and national activities, the foundation of our national life is business, and the motives and the powers of business define the very strength and value of our national life. . . . Therefore, the very foundation of the nation's patriotism is affected by business activity and interchange--farming, mining, manufacturing, the three productive efforts." See "The Nation's Business," The Nation's Business 1, no. 1 (2 September 1912): 1-2.

<sup>72</sup>Kennedy, 4; James B. Hessong, "Development of Grain Trade Aided by Baltimore C. of C.," The Nation's Business 1, no. 2 (23 September 1912): 7; "What Commercial Organizations Are Doing," The Nation's Business 1, no. 18 (15 December 1913): 14.

center of [commercial organizations'] activities."<sup>73</sup> Another writer staked out a more philosophical position:

It is not altogether a matter of producing 100 bushels of corn where 50 grew before, or piling up a bank account to the greater altitude, half as much as that all men shall realize their kinship and the solidarity of mankind; that the farm life shall become more attractive; that the burden of the house wife shall be less; that the education of the boy and the girl shall be more practical; that better roads shall be built; that public improvements shall be encouraged. When all these ethical ideas are worked out no one need doubt that the financial gain to all parties concerned will be greatly increased.<sup>74</sup>

In response to President Wilson's 1913 inaugural address, which touched on the need to redress the failures of industrialism, The Nation's Business argued that businessmen had already recognized the need to correct for the evils arising from industrial expansion. A spirit of cooperation among business, the paper claimed, was supplanting old individualism. "Almost every town and city in the United States today has it [*sic*] chamber of commerce, board of trade, or commercial club, in which the business men of the community are brought together to work for the benefit of the community as a whole, not alone to advance their own

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<sup>73</sup>"Cities Learn to Co-operate in Agriculture: Urban Societies Devise Methods to Help Farmers Solve Their Problems. Town Aids the Country: Mutual Interests of the Community Advanced by Association of Endeavors," The Nation's Business 1, no. 2 (23 September 1912): 6. This article reported on business agrarian activities in thirteen states.

<sup>74</sup>"Clinton County's Original Plan for Agricultural Promotion: Bridging the Gap of Indifference Between City and Country," The Nation's Business 1, no. 8 (17 February 1913): 2.

selfish interests."<sup>75</sup> This pledge included working for the benefit of agriculture.<sup>76</sup> In another report, the paper noted: "More organizations speak of agricultural development as an achievement than any other form of activity during the year."<sup>77</sup>

At Business America, the theme of reshaping urban-rural relations was evident in every issue. This was particularly true in the "Rural Affairs" department, which regularly presented a small collection of articles that touched on the status of urban agrarian reform concerns. Department editor Kenyon Butterfield cited the chair of the CLC, Liberty Hyde Bailey, as the source of the apt term "benevolent urbanism," which captured the spirit of the movement. While urban interest in agriculture had once been criticized for being slow to arise, by 1914 Butterfield found it growing "apace." He declared the trend was "wholly desirable," since city and country interests had been conceived as separate for too long. "Leaders of business and finance," he wrote, "have reacted from the old idea that manufacturing and commerce were the chief tests of national prosperity. They now concede that agriculture, as

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<sup>75</sup>"President Wilson and the Country's Business," The Nation's Business 1, no. 9 (19 March 1913): 1.

<sup>76</sup>"For Country Betterment," The Nation's Business 1, no. 18 (15 December 1913): 11. Consider also "A County As an Agricultural Factory," The World's Work 28, no. 1 (May 1914): 12-13.

<sup>77</sup>"Achievements of Commercial Organizations," The Nation's Business 2, no. 1 (15 January 1914): 12. Included in this work were explicitly social events, such as "Macomb County Day" held in Michigan: "The merchants of the city decided that their farmer patrons should be their guests for one day. On that day about 4,000 farmers enjoyed city hospitalities. It was not dispensed by hired attendants but by business men themselves."

the source of a cheap food supply, is indispensable, while, indeed, the agricultural business is still our largest business."<sup>78</sup>

Banking and commercial organizations pursued an agenda explicitly designed to reconfigure the existing social and economic landscape. In the editorial words of The Banker-Farmer, "The line between the town and country must be wiped out."<sup>79</sup> Another writer declared, "The needs of the business man and the farmer are identical and any scheme for state and national business associations must bring together both branches of industry on an equal basis."<sup>80</sup> One Massachusetts Agricultural College professor concluded,

City and country dwellers alike have come to a keen realization that the agricultural problem is neither sectional not territorial in importance. . . . When farmers are not prosperous then bankers cannot be. When a farmer is charged high rates of interest or is not given fair credit accommodations he is made poorer.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>78</sup>Kenyon L. Butterfield, "A Benevolent Urbanism," Business America 15, no. 5 (May 1914): 442-44. See also D. A. Wallace, "Why the Business Man and the Farmer Must Get Together," The Banker-Farmer 1, no. 10 (September 1914): 15.

<sup>79</sup>"To Lend a Hand," The Banker-Farmer 2, no. 1 (December 1914): 7. "Were the farmers not to trade," wrote one contributor, "practically every store would be forced out of business and in a few years the town would pass out of existence." See Clyde Ashley, "Why the Farmers and the Country Merchants Must Come Together," The Banker-Farmer 2, no. 3 (February 1915): 11.

<sup>80</sup>Charles S. Calwell, "Business Men and Farmers," The Banker-Farmer 2, no. 5 (April 1915): 4.

<sup>81</sup>W. D. Hurd, "Why the Eastern Banker, Too, Should Work for Agriculture," The Banker-Farmer 2, no. 6 (May 1915): 4.

Even the Secretary of Agriculture lectured the business community to the effect that it owed its existence to agriculture, and therefore it was incumbent upon businessmen to become students and instruments of better rural life.<sup>82</sup>

### Conclusion

Taken together, Chapters III and IV suggest that business actors in, and acting through, the press during the 1910s declared they had a tangible stake in the long-term viability of American agriculture. The two chapters show business leaders acting under the guise of altruism, while making no effort to conceal their financial self-interest. Clearly, business actors expended considerable resources when they, using the print press to make their case, sought agrarian reforms to make the market economy more productive, profitable, and reliable. Collectively, the journalists and contributors to the business press should be understood as political actors who undertook a comprehensive agenda-setting task as a central strategy in a long-term policy process. Using the print press, this policy network identified high-minded civic virtues, and the corresponding economic gains, that awaited one and all once agriculture moved from traditional to industrial methods of production, distribution, organization, and finance. To remove uncertainty and inflation from the food supply, business rallied around the rhetoric of agrarian visionaries such as James J. Hill.

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<sup>82</sup>David F. Houston, "The City's Duty to the Farmer: How Business Men Can Cooperate," The Banker-Farmer 3, no. 8 (July 1916): 11.

This chapter has shown that the most salient issues appearing in the business press seldom stood alone. Rural credit reform was embedded in a broader discussion of a number of interrelated issues. In the business press, the parameters of these debates were set by a multitude of editorial choices. Business journalists reported on the interplay of particular interests and issues. They established experts and reaffirmed the existence of several elite policy networks whose activities targeted the uplift of farmers.

In terms of the proximate origin of the FFLA (H1), evidence exists that many business agrarians supported rural credit legislation at the national level. There was disagreement and criticism of competing proposals, and certainly there was no sector-wide rationality on the specific details of legislative reform. However, there was a prevailing consensus about important causal links between agricultural credit and the future stability and prosperity of the nation. Few if any business press writers questioned the aim of lowering the cost of food and improving farm profits through the extension of reliable and affordable rural credit. While B. F. Harris exemplified the viewpoint that this was possible without federal legislation, other bankers and businessmen maintained it was indeed a goal in need of a major reform. In short, the survey captured a willingness on the part of business actors to foster a move away from unregulated market relations, and toward a model of government intervention, one later associated with Fordism and Keynesian economics.

Chapter IV provides compelling evidence of the rise of coherent agenda-setting efforts (H2) manifest in the business press. Groups such as the United States Chamber of

Commerce and the American Bankers Association launched new periodicals, which joined the established business press in calling for increased farm profitability through the adoption of better business methods. A consensus had been reached that the ability to apply affordable credit to the production and distribution of agricultural commodities was a condition necessary for the commercialization of a tradition-bound sector. The evidence that business was aware of the interconnection of issues such as the cost of living, farm profitability, and the rates and terms for credit supports the premise of H2. By the same token, the urban agrarian agenda emphasized that the future durability of agriculture was not simply a matter of extending cheaper credit. Rather, the agenda called for legislation that would provide for the practical education of the farmer in methods that maintained soil fertility. Perhaps one of the more unique developments of the period was the business- and banker-sponsored effort to make improved agricultural credit dependent on a commitment to adopt soil conservation techniques.

This study of agenda-setting in the business press reveals that much attention in the business press focused on developing a hybrid ideology of civic-minded altruism and economic self-interest in business leaders. Business genuinely expected to lead recalcitrant agriculture into a new epoch. It planned to do so by guiding the formulation of agrarian legislation, in Congress and in the court of public opinion. In the words of B. F. Harris,

We are demonstrating, and will continue to demonstrate, in growing measure, as other great organizations of business men are doing, our living interest in public affairs--that the people, more men without party, more

business men and fewer politicians, must run their government and formulate their policies.<sup>83</sup>

This required both business and farmers to break with old habits of thought, for example, about the relationship between the rates and terms for rural credit, farm profitability, and the rising cost of living. As business organizations assumed leadership roles in the agrarian uplift efforts, they propounded a model of agriculture that equated education in scientific methods with the maintenance of soil fertility, which in turn would lower the price of food, increase farm profitability, and drive the cost of credit down in the countryside. In the spirit of the emerging conservation movement, business agrarians mobilized concerns about soil fertility to evoke a sense of urgency about their work.

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<sup>83</sup>B. F. Harris, "What the Banker-Farmer Movement Is Doing for a Better Agriculture," The Banker-Farmer 2, no. 8 (July 1915): 4.