

CHAPTER V

THE PROGRESSIVE ERA FARM PRESS: A PRIMER ON A NEGLECTED SOURCE OF AGRARIAN HISTORY

Introduction

Speaking at Iowa State College, where the creation of a chair of journalism was under consideration in the spring of 1905, John Clay commented on the "new era in agriculture." A great unfolding scientific age was to sweep through the sector, uniting the written word with the minds of the nation's plough men. For Clay, "the fertile pen" would shape progressive agricultural practices and sound public policy. A chair in journalism was needed to meet the large number of requests for editorial assistance by the nation's leading papers and magazines, many of which were adding agriculture departments. Clay thought farm journalists would be perfect candidates to steer the American press clear of the sectionalism and yellow journalism dominating the daily newspapers. A thriving farm press would inspire farmers to address moral, technical, and political issues more knowledgeably. "The

seed sown today and in future days at this college," wrote Clay, "may germinate journalists who, knowing their work behind the plow, can take up, in a practical way, the great lifework of molding public opinion through the printing press."¹

This chapter introduces the rich and authoritative sources of rural public opinion in the early twentieth-century farm press. It provides a glimpse of the critical role of the farm press in linking isolated farmers to politically active business influences. In addition, it illustrates the agenda-setting ambitions of agricultural journalists, particularly on the issue of rural finance. Detailed accounts of the rapid rise of the urban press during the start of the twentieth century have obscured impressive gains made by farm papers as a medium for the cultivation of rural public opinion. Often the entire history of agricultural journalism merits only a passing reference or is reduced to a description of the power and excess of the Populist papers.²

¹John Clay, "The Plough and the Book," in An Address Before Iowa State College (Ames, IA: Limited Personal Edition, 1905), 11-20.

²Consider the extremely limited or nonexistent treatments of the early twentieth-century farm press provided in Willard Grosvenor Bleyer, Main Currents in the History of American Journalism (Cambridge, MA: Riverside Press, 1927); Michael Emery and Edwin Emery, with Nancy L. Roberts, The Press and America: An Interpretive History of the Mass Media, 8th ed. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1996); Jean Folkerts and Dwight L. Teeter, Jr.,

The early twentieth-century farm press leaders, however, were serious journalists who took an interest in national policy decisions affecting the rural economic sectors that kept them in business. While farm papers were trade journals, focused on improving agricultural and business practices, their editorial columns dealt with the broader policy dilemmas of the day.³ The farm press is a neglected source of agrarian political history. Chapter V examines the important relationship between farm journals, farmers, and business agrarians. Prominent farm journalists effectively linked widely dispersed rural readers with urban business advertisers and urban agrarian

Voices of a Nation: A History of Mass Media in the United States (New York: Macmillan College Publishing, 1994); Frank Luther Mott, American Journalism: A History, 1690-1960, 3rd ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1962); and Hiley H. Ward, Mainstreams of American Media History: A Narrative and Intellectual History of the Mass Media (Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon, 1997). One student of the problem speculated, "press historians have been unwilling or unable to reconcile developments in the agricultural press and their overall interpretation of media history." See Karl Leo Heinze, "Yeomanry Transformed: The Changing Image of the American Farmer in the Northern Agricultural Press, 1873-1893" (Ph.D. diss., Michigan State University, 1988), 15-16.

³I distinguish the farm press (e.g., trade papers like Wallaces' Farmer, which were primarily publishing enterprises focused on improving farm practices) from the farm organization press (e.g., National Grange Monthly, which focused on the organizational interests of the group). For a recent study of the farm organization press, see Mary M. Cronin, "Fighting for the Farmers: The Pacific Northwest's Nonpartisan League Newspapers," Journalism History 23, no. 3 (Autumn 1997): 126-36.

reformers. The essence of Chapter V is the hypothesis that farm papers had a demonstrably conservative influence on rural opinion about agricultural finance reform.

The first section in this chapter details the existing historiography of the farm press. Relevant to the rise of agenda-setting hypothesis (H2), this chapter examines the established tradition of agenda-setting, an integral component of the farm periodical business. In a competitive market, farm papers achieved success by focusing on improving agricultural practices and the business acumen of farmers. Farm journalists fulfilled a self-appointed leadership function, acting as an organ of rural public opinion, while simultaneously seeking to manipulate the agrarian agenda. What emerged during the 1910s was a concerted effort to influence relations between urban reformers (such as those described in Chapters II-IV) and farmers, and ultimately to shape the agrarian legislative agenda at the national level. The following section presents primary source evidence of the appeal and influence of the farm press during this period. The final section describes a key series of conferences organized by elite farm papers to bring urban agrarians together to debate matters such as rural credit reform. In support of the proximate origin of the FFLA hypothesis (H1), this section suggests that

the farm press was united with business agrarians in opposition to publicly funded rural credit reform. For example, farm journalists organized an annual conference for important urban reformers who, by and large, shared a commitment to keeping the sources of rural credit in the private sector.

The Existing Historiography of the Farm Press:
A Tradition of Agenda-Setting

In 1900, the rural population in the United States exceeded 44 million.⁴ A decade later it was approaching 50 million, reflecting a period of agricultural expansion and rural settlement. The census of 1910 showed the total number of farms exceeded 6 million for the first time. This occurred in the face of a heralded "drift to the cities" of farm-weary children, failed farmers, and prosperous absentee landowners.⁵ A demographic surge created a demand from rural residents for sources of reliable information. Yet, W. S. Crowe, editor of Batten's Agricultural Directory, found farmers were still "a little shy of scientific teaching." This despite the fact that by 1908 there were

⁴Department of Commerce, "Agriculture 1909 and 1910," in Thirteenth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1910, vol. 5 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1913), 28.

⁵S. A. Knapp, 12888-89; Vance, 553-60.

89 schools of agriculture, 56 federally funded experiment stations, and 46 farmers' institutes.⁶

The printed word and the plough were coming together, and the result was a steady stream of publications. Book farming traditionally was scorned by rural skeptics.⁷ Much of the rural population, however, faithfully read their favorite farm paper. Batten's listed a total of 458 agricultural periodicals in 1908, with a combined circulation that exceeded 15 million.⁸ These circulation figures may have been inflated, given the competitiveness characteristic of the farm press prior to the founding of the Audit Bureau of Circulations (ABC) in 1914. Advertisers, nevertheless, found the circulations were sufficiently substantial to keep a large number of papers viable with their

⁶W. S. Crowe, Batten's Agricultural Directory (New York: George Batten, 1908), 15. On the links between increasing demand for reading materials and consumer goods, see Peterson, 41.

⁷On the widely noted resistance of early American farmers to "book farming," see George F. Lemmer, "Early Agricultural Editors and Their Farm Philosophies," Agricultural History 31, no. 4 (October 1957): 3-22. Also on the "deep-rooted prejudice against book farming," see Richard Baradolph, "Agricultural Education in Illinois to 1870: The Press" (Ph.D. diss., University of Illinois, 1944), 17. The best scholarly treatment of the role of the farm press in the efforts to convert farmers into students of scientific methods is Roy V. Scott, The Reluctant Farmer: The Rise of Agricultural Extension to 1914 (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1970).

⁸Crowe, 40.

advertising dollars. Farm-paper publishers were among a small group of businessmen promoting advertising standardization by helping to found the ABC.⁹

The limited historiography of farm journalism is often told as a narrative of outstanding leaders.¹⁰ William Ogilvie, for example, presents the early farm press in a series of biographic sketches. John Stuart Skinner, with his Baltimore paper The American Farmer (established in 1819), "marked the beginning of agricultural journalism in the United States." The title page to his paper read: "The American Farmer Containing Original Essays and Selections on Rural Economy and Internal Improvements with Illustrative Engravings and the Prices Current of Country Produce." From the outset, American farm journalism sought to make the farmer a better informed

⁹The early work of establishing the ABC is chronicled in Charles O. Bennett, Facts Without Opinion: First Fifty Years of the Audit Bureau of Circulations (Chicago: Audit Bureau of Circulations, 1965), 15-38.

¹⁰The critique of journalism history as "needlessly" biographical is relevant when considering the limited literature available on the farm press. See James W. Carey, "The Problem of Journalism History," Journalism History 1, no. 1 (spring 1974): 3. An earlier critique by Allan Nevins suggested this was an "expedient" in the face of the "hodgepodge" of material in the typical newspaper file. Consider how the biographical method is one solution to too much data in Allan Nevins, "American Journalism and Its Historical Treatment," Journalism Quarterly 36, no. 4 (fall 1959): 415.

participant in an evolving market society. During the mid-1840s, in a business enterprise with Horace Greeley of the New York Tribune, arrangements were made for Skinner to publish the Monthly Journal of Agriculture. According to Ogilvie, Skinner's "aim was to bring industry and agriculture into sound and just coordination." The task of bringing these two sectors of the economy into proper alignment through legislation, education, cooperation, and farmer self-help, occupied the farm press for years to follow.¹¹

William Dempster Hoard was a Wisconsin farm-paper editor widely respected for his contribution to the development of a thriving rural economy. His doctrines were disseminated "through the columns of his pioneer papers," such as the nationally known Hoard's Dairyman. Ogilvie suggests that, during the 1870s, it was a Hoard innovation to have a country weekly paper carrying entirely farm news. Inspired by Greeley's editorials, he was "determined from the first his paper should include as strong an editorial column as he could

¹¹William G. Ogilvie, Pioneer Agricultural Journalists (New York: Beekman, 1974), 3-9. See also Harold T. Pinkett, "The American Farmer: A Pioneer Agricultural Journal, 1819-1834," Agricultural History 24, no. 3 (July 1950): 146-51. Another writer suggests that the short-lived publication The Agricultural Museum was in fact the original farm paper, with the first number appearing July 4, 1810. See Claribel R. Barnett, "The Agricultural Museum: An Early American Agricultural Periodical," Agricultural History 2, no. 2 (April 1928): 99-102.

write, a page to set forth his opinions on current affairs, political, economic, local and agricultural." Hoard went on to become the Governor of Wisconsin in 1888, and president of the Farmers' National Congress in 1897, with his status firmly secured as a result of publishing an outstanding farm paper.¹²

James Evans's study of The Prairie Farmer also approached the history of the farm press through an analysis of an outstanding individual. Under Burrige D. Butler, The Prairie Farmer operated during the early 1900s in competition with fifty other farm publications with headquarters in Illinois. Facing stiff competition, Butler believed his enterprise could survive only by pursuing a strong editorial strategy. Editors advocated changes in both the business and legislative work of farming. The Prairie Farmer also provided a clearing house for the opinions of isolated farmers. Butler's editors claimed that in one 1915 issue there were 117 letters, questions, and opinions contributed by readers. Cash prizes were offered for the most interesting letters, with forty thousand correspondences received in a single year.¹³

¹²Ogilvie, 45-53. Also concerning the influence of W. D. Hoard, see John T. Schlebecker, "Dairy Journalism: Studies in Successful Farm Journalism," Agricultural History 31, no. 4 (October 1957): 22-33.

¹³James F. Evans, The Prairie Farmer and WLS: The Burrige D. Butler Years (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1969), 62-69. At a leading Southern farm paper the request regularly went out for "news from the farms."

Perhaps no institution or individuals received more attention than Wallaces' Farmer, and the three influential Henry Wallaces of Iowa. Uncle Henry, Henry Cantwell, and Henry Agard Wallace became the best known farm-paper editors in the nation's history. Wallaces' Farmer maintained a national reputation for frank talk, sound advice, and, above all, integrity. Uncle Henry was a dirt farmer interested in scientific agriculture, who, after having his views well received at a Fourth of July speech in 1878, turned to a career in farm journalism. His fame steadily grew and he went on to be a guiding force in the work of Roosevelt's Country Life Commission between 1907 and 1909. His son and grandson both edited Wallaces' Farmer before reaching the office of Secretary of Agriculture, with the latter eventually attaining the Vice-Presidency.¹⁴

See, e.g., "Farmers Should Cooperate with Their County Papers," The Progressive Farmer 30, no. 16 (24 April 1915): 4.

¹⁴Russel Lord, The Wallaces of Iowa (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1947), 130-37; Edward L. Schapsmeier and Frederick H. Schapsmeier, Henry A. Wallace of Iowa: The Agrarian Years, 1910-1940 (Ames, IA: Iowa State University Press, 1968), 2-6. The paper claimed a regional and national reputation in "Wallaces' Farmer Comes of Age," Wallaces' Farmer 41, no. 7 (18 February 1916): 4. Other studies have made connections between the work of rural journalists and their subsequent political careers. See Homer E. Socolofsky, "The Development of the Capper Farm Press," Agricultural History 31, no. 4 (October 1957): 34-43; Evenson Williams, "The Editor As Politician: W. R. Ronald and the Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1933,"

In 1941, Albert Demaree published The American Agricultural Press. In it he documented the claims of mid-nineteenth-century farm papers that beneath all improvements in agriculture there was the farm press, stimulating farmers to join groups, spreading the experiences of the best farmers, and reporting news of the best stock, tools and methods. The central claim of the farm press was that it constituted the best resource for learning what works on a farm. The advantages of crop rotation, proper plowing, business methods, and species diversity were standard recommendations. Early farm papers "not only advocated and advertised such activities as the plowing match, the fair, the reaper trials, which developed and popularized agricultural improvements, but they abounded with enthusiastic editorials, pictures, and accounts of labor saving devices." This activity was conducted with "missionary zeal," encouraging the adoption of new practices that had been proven in the fields of the most progressive farmers.¹⁵

American Journalism 13, no. 1 (winter 1996): 48-59.

¹⁵Albert Lowther Demaree, The American Agricultural Press (New York: Columbia University Press, 1941), 39-47. Early editors saw themselves as reformers leading a more or less unified, though competitive, private publishing movement to upgrade agricultural practices in the United States. See, e.g., Harry J. Carman, "Jesse Buel, Early Nineteenth Century Agricultural Reformer," Agricultural History 17, no. 1 (January 1943): 1-13. Consider also James W. Silver, "C. P. J. Mooney of the Memphis Commercial Appeal,

Ralph Nafzinger's 1920 study looked at the methods that allowed a farm paper to survive over time in Wisconsin. Those that endured did so because they were "just adequately in advance of the farmer to take up editorially and in their amplified news sections the new agricultural implements." In addition, farm-paper businesses clung to their nonpartisan status, preferring to be identified as leaders on the basis of being in touch with the most progressive agrarians. Proven leadership on behalf of all the farming classes, regardless of party affiliation, was a selling point that no publisher could afford to overlook.¹⁶

Farm papers provided a medium through which farm groups could extend their organizations beyond a rural locality. Isolation was long considered an impediment to effective farmer organization. The farm press, however, reached across local and regional boundaries, providing a link for

Crusader for Diversification," Agricultural History 17, no. 2 (April 1943): 81-89.

¹⁶Ralph Otto Nafzinger, "The History and Influence of the Farm Press in Wisconsin" (Bachelor's thesis, University of Wisconsin, 1920), 1-2. Farm papers often stated their nonpartisanship was unyielding. In 1912, an election year, The National Stockman and Farmer declared it would not back any candidate or party in the election, though it did want to see more farmers in public office representing "the greatest industry." See "Our Policy," The National Stockman and Farmer 36, no. 2 (11 April 1912): 1.

rural opinions. Nora Quebral noted that when the Populist uprising inspired a surge in rural organizing, the major paper Farm Journal created a department called "Pulling Together," giving voice to Grange, Farmers' Alliance, and other rural-based proposals for dealing with problems facing farmers. This led to the permanent establishment of a department known as "Farmers' Problems," devoted to teaching the science of government and committed to steering clear of all partisan struggles.¹⁷

Primary Source Evidence of Farm Press Influence

By the Progressive Era, farm papers were considered a credible source of information by a large segment of the rural population. Substantial numbers of farmers apparently accepted the offers of guidance (see Table 1). In 1913, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) reported that farm papers were being supplemented by government

TABLE 1. Farmers Taking Agricultural Papers

¹⁷Nora Cruz Quebral, "Farm Journal and American Agriculture, 1877-1965" (Ph.D. diss., University of Illinois, 1966), 45-50. One prominent farm paper reported regularly on the farmers' club growth, which was "a Simon-pure movement of the farmers themselves." See "The Farmers' Forward Movements," American Agriculturist, 30 August 1913, 5.

Section	Farmers Visited	Number Taking Farm Papers	%
North-Atlantic	1,285	893	(69.5%)
South	1,001	454	(45.4%)
North-Central	707	534	(75.5%)
West-Central	705	542	(76.9%)
Total	3,698	2,423	(65.5%)

Source: C. Beaman Smith and H. K. Atwood, "The Relation of Agricultural Extension Agencies to Farm Practices," Bureau of Plant Industry Circular No. 117, 15 March 1913, 18.

bulletins and farmers institutes, and noted that the "question arises as to the efficiency of these agencies in actually reaching the man on the farm and influencing his practices." USDA researchers concluded that the "agricultural press shows up in this survey as one of the dominating influences in American agriculture."¹⁸

A second aspect of the USDA survey asked farmers to select the most helpful resource from the available agencies (see Table 2). The findings

¹⁸C. Beaman Smith and H. K. Atwood, "The Relation of Agricultural Extension Agencies to Farm Practices," Bureau of Plant Industry Circular No. 117, 15 March 1913, 13-18. After reading the study, editors at Wallaces' Farmer concluded that a "first-class farm paper exerts a more potent influence in favor of better farming than all the other agencies combined." See "The Influence of the Agricultural Press," Wallaces' Farmer 38, no. 20 (16 May 1913): 4.

suggest a clear split between the stand-pat farmers, who seemed to believe they had nothing to learn from anyone, and another large segment of the survey population that placed their faith in the wisdom of the farm paper.

TABLE 2. Number and Percentage of Farmers Stating Agency Most Helpful in Their Farming

Farmers' Value Statements	No.	%
Stating experience is the only valuable teacher	1,616	(43.7%)
Preferring farm papers	1,492	(40.3%)
Preferring USDA agricultural bulletins	235	(6.3%)
Stating all agencies equally valuable	167	(4.5%)
Preferring farmers' institutes	133	(3.6%)
Preferring demonstration agents	24	(0.6%)

Source: C. Beaman Smith and H. K. Atwood, "The Relation of Agricultural Extension Agencies to Farm Practices," Bureau of Plant Industry Circular No. 117, 15 March 1913, 22.

The government researchers concluded "the agricultural research institutions of this country should make systematic use of the agricultural press as one of the most efficient means of reaching the farmer." After reading the report, one farm paper editor commented:

This is all the more remarkable in view of the fact that the farm press is self-sustaining, receives no pap or privilege, and pays postage as do other periodicals and newspapers. On the other hand, national and state agencies for promoting agriculture cost

upward of \$200,000,000 a year, not to mention the free postage and other pap.¹⁹

During the Progressive Era, farmers were frequently advised by their farm-paper editors about cooperating with businessmen and bankers on agrarian legislative proposals. On crucial issues, such as the movement for rural-credit reform, agricultural journalists conceived of their function as gate-keeping mediators situated between legislators, urban policy activists, and farmers. Farm papers represented their work as the creation of sound public opinion that was good for agriculture and the nation.²⁰

¹⁹"What Farmers Really Want," American Agriculturist, 22 March 1913, 18. There was a rivalry between the private farm press and the fledgling agencies of the government seeking to influence farmers. For one Denver-based farm paper, some government publicity on behalf of rural development was acceptable, but when the Bureau of Reclamation started publishing a newspaper covering matters traditionally handled by country journalism, it was decried as inexcusable "to use government publications supported at public expense, to warp the sentiment of the people." See "Why Federal Journalism?," Western Farm Life 18, no. 13 (1 July 1916): 8.

²⁰"Can Farmers and Businessmen Cooperate?," The Progressive Farmer 29, no. 15 (11 April 1914): 16; "Farmers and Others," The National Stockman and Farmer 37, no. 36 (6 December 1913): 1; "How the Banker Can Help the Farmer," Wallaces' Farmer 38, no. 31 (1 August 1913): 3. A dissenting view maintained the interests of financiers and farmers would always clash. See John Grattan, "Economics of Rural Credits," Western Farm Life 18, no. 8 (15 April 1915): 13.

E. T. Meredith, publisher of Successful Farming, could speak from experience about the influence of the farm press. In 1914, he turned down the position of Assistant Secretary of Agriculture, thinking "he could boost farming as effectively through his paper as he could through federal office."²¹ The same commitment did not prevent him from assuming a position on the Board of Directors of the Federal Reserve Bank for the Chicago District later that year. His paper editorialized that the Fed Board had "shown their appreciation of the great agricultural interests of the country."²² It would be more appropriate, perhaps, to conclude that it was the agricultural press interests, and not those of the dirt farmers, that were recognized by the appointment of an urban, nonfarmer to the elite ranks of the new Federal Reserve system.

In 1921, Meredith wrote about the influence of his paper on "millions" of lives each month: "A publication enjoying as wide a circulation and as great a prestige as Successful Farming is not a place for the expression of snap

²¹Herman B. Walker, "Ferreted Facts for Farmers: Inside News from Our Washington Correspondent," Successful Farming 13, no. 9 (September 1914): 8.

²²"Reserve Board Recognizes Agriculture," Successful Farming 13, no. 11 (November 1914): 6.

decisions, the advancement of ideas based upon loose thinking or reasoning, nor the advocacy of untried theories." The need, instead, is to maintain the confidence of readers:

The editor must be able to see things from the viewpoint of his readers. The more nearly he can make his readers feel that he is their close friend, that he has their interests at heart and will defend the same, the greater will be his success. With that thought in mind, the editors of *Successful Farming* avail themselves of every opportunity to mingle with farm people and endeavor to keep in close touch and hence in sympathy with farm life.²³

A critical point is that farm press editors were not farmers. They constituted a class distinct from rural agrarians, possessing some shared and some separate interests with farmers, and a distinct philosophy about their role in the formation of public opinion. Whereas the internal organization of the farm press, by virtue of its operating structure, resembled other publishing businesses, many farmers during this period were slow to adopt standard bookkeeping practices and other prerequisites of normal business operations.²⁴

²³E. T. Meredith, *The Opportunities and Responsibilities of the Farm Paper Editor* (Des Moines, IA: *Successful Farming*, 1921), 3-10.

²⁴Some doubted whether the prevailing business methods in agriculture could justify lower interest rates. See A. L. French, "Is the Farmer Entitled to Easier Money?," *The Progressive Farmer* 28, no. 2 (11 January 1913): 35. See also "Farmers Need Business Training," *American Agriculturist*, 12 July 1913, 8.

The fact that editors needed to be reminded of the importance of mingling with the actual tillers suggests they were more aligned culturally with bankers and businessmen than with farmers. The main point for Meredith was that the farm-paper editor should assume leadership. "A progressive, constructive publication must necessarily . . . be a leader and should tactfully present propositions which are not yet of direct interest, but which are destined to become of general interest." This was an insider's view, albeit self-aggrandizing, of the agenda-setting function of the farm press.

Meredith continued with a definitive analysis of the farm paper's function:

Briefly, it lies within the province of an agricultural publication to create the proper desires and interests on the part of its readers, as well as satisfy the desires and interests which already exist. The extent to which a publication is capable of accomplishing the former as well as the latter is a measure of its progressiveness and constructiveness, and also its influence.²⁵

During the 1910s and 1920s, scholars, journalists, and representatives of the Kansas State Board of Agriculture organized a farm-journalism lecture series. At the 1916 meeting, the vice president of The Kansas Farmer claimed

²⁵Meredith, 23-24. James Playstead Wood concludes his chapter on farm magazines by suggesting the farm press was "a vital force in informing and molding public opinion." See James Playstead Wood, Magazines in the United States: Their Social and Economic Influence (New York: Ronald Press, 1949), 172.

"there is nothing more efficient than the agricultural press."²⁶ J. C. Mohler, secretary of the Board of Agriculture, called farm papers in 1920 an integral part of progressive farm life. Farmers were becoming enthusiastic readers, he argued, because they knew the farm press was a reliable source of information, rather than a collection of "half-baked articles by aspiring literary geniuses."²⁷

Nelson Antrim Crawford, a professor of industrial journalism and superintendent of printing at Kansas State Agricultural College, conducted survey research into the type of training farm-paper editors wanted for their journalists. Crawford noted that editors stressed "grasping thoroughly the mental attitude of the farmer, and getting into complete sympathy with agricultural and rural life conditions."²⁸ In his 1926 book Agricultural Journalism, Crawford suggested that if one is "to appeal effectively to readers, one must know their convictions, their prepossessions, their prejudices, their

²⁶Charles C. Younggreen, "The Farm Paper Business," Kansas State Agricultural College Bulletin 1, no. 2 (15 November 1916): 29.

²⁷J. C. Mohler, "Agricultural Literature and the Farmer," Kansas State Agricultural College Bulletin 6, no. 1 (1 January 1920): 5.

²⁸Nelson Antrim Crawford, "Preparation for Editorial Work on Farm Papers," Kansas State Agricultural College Bulletin 1, no. 5 (15 March 1917): 28.

habits of mind, their ideals; one must come into intimate relationship with their life." There was, however, a clear tendency to invalidate rural opinion on certain issues. It was possible for the agricultural editor to both identify with the farmer, and at the same time take a stand against deficiencies in certain aspects of rural thought:

Recognition of the essential intelligence of the farmer should not, however, blind one to the unrealistic thinking in which he indulges on many subjects. . . . With reference to the more complex economic and social relations of agriculture the farmer often assumes an even less realistic attitude. This is evident in agrarian radicalism.²⁹

On the issue of a cheap or soft-money supply, farmers carried a stigma for years after the collapse of the populist movement. Farm papers regularly conveyed and contributed to resentment about populist monetary theories. Failed greenback, subtreasury, and free-silver campaigns were lingering symbols associated with farmers' oversimplified views on finance panaceas. Often the farm press did little to mitigate this popular urban view of the farmer as a monetary simpleton.³⁰

²⁹Nelson Antrim Crawford, Agricultural Journalism (New York: Knopf, 1926), 2, 5.

³⁰For a good account of the way populists earned this reputation, see Goodwyn's The Populist Moment: A Short History of the Agrarian Revolt in America. Some of the nineteenth-century agrarian finance rhetoric was likely

The National Conferences on Marketing and Farm Credits:
Changing Urban-Rural Relations

Activism by Progressive Era farm papers in pursuit of legislative influence can be found in the proceedings of the widely publicized National Conference on Marketing and Farm Credits (NCMFC). The NCMFC, which began meeting annually in 1913, was organized by a group of "cooperating" farm-paper publishers.³¹ The Advisory Committee for the first meeting included a diverse group of over 100 people, none of whom listed farmer as their profession. Rather, membership included experiment station officials, members of state and federal legislatures, marketing agents, state commissioners, railroad executives, farm-paper publishers and editors, college and university deans and presidents, bankers and a few farm-organization representatives. The Executive Committee was made up exclusively of

to blame for the stigma attached to farmers' financial views. See, e.g., Ostler, 4-9. Also consider how, as one nineteenth-century writer put it, the "unconscious socialism" of settlers was responsible for many unwise financial schemes. See Frederick Emery Haynes, "The New Sectionalism," Quarterly Journal of Economics 10 (April 1896): 269-95.

³¹"Officers, First National Conference," in Marketing and Farm Credits: Proceedings of the First National Conference on Marketing and Farm Credits, comp. Secretary Charles W. Holman (Chicago: Cooperating Farm Papers, 1913), vi-ix.

publishers of major farm papers. These publishers issued a call for conference papers that embodied the logic of a widely published reform agenda:

While the people are complaining of the high cost of living many farmers are finding that their business does not yield profitable returns on labor and investment. This constitutes the giant paradox of our time, and is so because of certain remediable defects in the economic structure of the Nation. We believe these defects come from a crude organization of the farmers' way of doing business. The losses occurring yearly amount to millions and affect producers, transportation lines and many business interests.³²

The proceedings were prefaced by the following disclaimer:

In calling the First National Conference on Marketing and Farm Credits the publishers of the farm journals had no pet scheme to foist upon the public; neither was it their purpose to inaugurate a fight upon any special interests connected with the present methods of marketing farm products or financing farm business . . . the promoters of this conference took every precaution to keep it apart from any touch of sensationalism and free from evidences of hasty action.³³

This was followed by a contradictory suggestion that in fact the right minds had been assembled to "have great influence with those in legislative

³²"A Call for a Conference," in Marketing and Farm Credits: Proceedings of the First National Conference on Marketing and Farm Credits, comp. Secretary Charles W. Holman (Chicago: Cooperating Farm Papers, 1913), iv.

³³"A Word to the Public," in Marketing and Farm Credits: Proceedings of the First National Conference on Marketing and Farm Credits, comp. Secretary Charles W. Holman (Chicago: Cooperating Farm Papers, 1913), iii.

halls." Over the years 1913-1916, participants at the NCMFC actually foisted quite a few pet schemes. By and large these were not plans associated with the demands of organized farmers. If any special interests were threatened by these meetings, they were the existing farm organizations, such as the National Grange or National Farmers' Union, which had to contend with powerful urban professionals exerting their influence on public opinion about agriculture. While the publishers might not have selected a plan to endorse, they made it clear who should be assembled to define the policy choices. For example, the farm press cure for a history of too much rural radicalism in finance debates was to call together the urban, commercial interests that went on to dominate public debate about rural credit reform.

The report of the NCMFC committee on farm credits included the sentiment of two bankers, B. F. Harris and George Woodruff, who were prominent in the public debate on farm finance. A third member was Clarence J. Owens, managing director of the Southern Commercial Congress (SCC), and a force behind the business-sponsored plan to send a commission to Europe to study cooperative rural credit. Owens' conference presentation emphasized the relationship between the farm press and the adoption of the

SCC's nationally publicized plan for a privately run, publicly enabled system of rural cooperative credit:

Let the farm papers of the country take the leadership in this campaign and here decide to devote a section or department under the direction of the most capable editors who can be secured, to follow the findings of the federal commission, and give the rural population of the country the fullest interpretation of all that is available in order that knowledge may guide them in acceptance of new plans for the solution of their economic problems.³⁴

One farm finance speech featured Herbert Myrick, president of the Orange Judd Company and editor-in-chief of a chain of five major farm weeklies. At the time of the NCMFC, Judd weeklies claimed to reach over half a million farms. Myrick's long-time work on rural credits appeared regularly in his farm papers and in his books, such as Co-operative Finance: An American Method for an American Problem (1912), The Federal Farm Loan System (1917), How to Co-operate (1912), and Rural Credits System (1922). Myrick also edited the semimonthly magazine Farm and Home and served as the director of Good Housekeeping from 1900-1911. In 1917, he

³⁴Clarence J. Owens, "American Commission to Study European Farm Finance," in Marketing and Farm Credits: Proceedings of the First National Conference on Marketing and Farm Credits, comp. Secretary Charles W. Holman (Chicago: Cooperating Farm Papers, 1913), 205-9.

was appointed to the first Board of Directors of the Federal Land Bank of Springfield, Massachusetts.³⁵

Myrick's 1913 speech to the NCMFC repeated themes regularly found in the farm press; it was a farm publisher's view of what the farmers really wanted. True to character, Myrick professed a boundless faith in cooperative organization. This, after all, was the centerpiece of his much-publicized monetary theory. In 1912, he had called attention to the dynamic terrain of the American political economy: "now we discern amid the warfare of aggressive Individualism, ruthless Capitalism and extreme Socialism, the strong figure of CO-OPERATION advancing to the front."³⁶ At the NCMFC, he reiterated the need for adequate farm finance, but insisted "this shall not be done by grants of pap, not by special privilege, but by relative equality of opportunity in banking and exchange for personal mortgage savings and loans, whereby farmers and common people may cooperate to successfully finance themselves."³⁷

³⁵Myrick, Cooperative Finance, 321.

³⁶*Ibid.*, ix.

³⁷Herbert Myrick, "Cooperative Finance for American Farmers," in Marketing and Farm Credits: Proceedings of the First National Conference on Marketing and Farm Credits, comp. Secretary Charles W. Holman (Chicago: Cooperating Farm Papers, 1913), 152.

In forums such as the NCMFC, publishers like Myrick rejected farm-organization demands for direct government aid. Not only were the publishers surrounded by business agrarians representing major industrial interests, but an enthusiastic alliance was forming between the farm press and the most progressive of the agriculturally oriented bankers. B. F. Harris, for example, was a banker, farmer, and business press editor of major influence during this period. His monthly paper, The Banker-Farmer (founded in 1913), claimed to be pioneering a new field of business journalism "wherewith the banking fraternity hopes to serve the cause of Permanent Agriculture."³⁸ Harris represented the views of the Agriculture Committee serving the 27,000-member American Bankers' Association. Farm-press editors celebrated his newspaper for contributing to a change in urban-rural social relations. The Banker-Farmer regularly published excerpts praising the paper from favorable reviews that appeared in the nation's farm press. Harris also organized the well-attended conferences sponsored by The Banker-Farmer, placing the farm-paper editors like Uncle Henry Wallace in an exalted role.³⁹

³⁸"Why and Wherefore," The Banker-Farmer 1, no. 1 (December 1913): 1.

³⁹"The Story of a Great Conference," The Banker-Farmer 2, no. 8 (July 1915): 1-3; "What the Country Thinks of the Conference and The Banker-

Speaking at the 1913 NCMFC, Harris recited a list of criteria essential to farm credit reform. It was an agenda he helped popularize in the pages of his paper, and which also could be found in the pages of many farm papers. The NCMFC, declared Harris, was not a meeting to secure more money for the farmer, nor to give voice to "false sentiment or hysteria." Better farming, rather than easy money, was the goal. Harris adamantly opposed the idea of lending money to "soil robbers," and over several years he took issue with the much-discussed idea that better farming would follow from lower rates and favorable terms for credit. Bankers, he often noted, thought this put the cart before the horse. They favored instead a plan whereby farmers would prove they were worthy of lower rates by protecting the soil on which the security for land-mortgage loans was fundamentally based.⁴⁰

Farmer," The Banker-Farmer 2, no. 10 (September 1915): 6; "What They Say," The Banker-Farmer 1, no. 5 (April 1914): 16. Farm papers really did like what they saw in Harris and his efforts to galvanize the two sectors around his message of better credit through better farming. See "Bankers and Farmers Get Together," The Prairie Farmer 87, no. 15 (17 July 1915): 8. The bond between B. F. Harris and Uncle Henry Wallace was personal and intellectual. Wallace enthusiastically weighed in at The Banker-Farmer conferences. See, e.g., "The Banker-Farmer Conference," Wallaces' Farmer 40, no. 26 (25 June 1915): 4.

⁴⁰B. F. Harris, "Improving Farm Credit in America," in Marketing and Farm Credits: Proceedings of the First National Conference on Marketing and Farm Credits, comp. Secretary Charles W. Holman (Chicago: Cooperating

By the third meeting of the NCMFC, held in late 1915, the reputation of the meeting drew many of the significant players from the farm finance debate in particular, and the broader agrarian reform policy network.⁴¹ The "Foreword" to Marketing and Farm Credits: Proceedings of the Third National Conference on Marketing and Farm Credits, published in 1916, attempted to situate the significance of the annual meetings. NCMFC editors argued that the volume of speeches contributed something new to agricultural economics. For three years the conference had "interpreted the changing thought of Agricultural America," which had been transformed from "the individualist viewpoint to a social concept." Finally, the editors, themselves significantly more inclined toward some form of state aid than most of the speakers, claimed publication of the conference papers advanced "the theory of state aid

Farm Papers, 1913), 178-89.

⁴¹One farm paper remarked: "A few real farmers were present. Speaking widely and fairly it was not a farmers conference, but was made up in the main of men who wanted to do something by, for, or to the farmer. Some of them had axes to grind." See George Weymouth, "Brief from the Big Conference," Farm Life 35, 1 (January 1916): 4. Another paper, noting the emphasis of rural deficiencies, concluded the conference presented "a clearer idea of these problems than of their solution." Consider the expressed view in "Marketing and Farm Credits," The National Stockman and Farmer 39, no. 36 (4 December 1915): 1. Proceedings from the 1914 meeting of the NCMFC, regrettably, are unavailable.

to farmers in the purchase of their farms." It foreshadowed a time when America would deal with the land question as a social issue, and the NCMFC therefore should be considered an "epoch marker in agrarian history."⁴²

Another introductory article noted representatives from forty-two states were in attendance at the 1915 meeting. Not satisfied with simply exchanging views in the conference format, the NCMFC organizers announced they were launching a movement to "organize the agricultural interests of America," using the conference as their vehicle. The movement adopted the slogan of the Irish Agricultural Organization Society (IAOS): "Better Business, Better

⁴²"Foreword," in Marketing and Farm Credits: Proceedings of the Third National Conference on Marketing and Farm Credits, comp. Secretary Charles W. Holman (Chicago: Cooperating Farm Papers, 1916). One of the organizers responsible for the creation of the NCMFC was the farm journalist Charles W. Holman. In his speech, Holman argued that the "drift toward a concentration of land ownership is alarming; already one-fifth of the total land area of the United States is owned by less than 2,000 persons. The holding of lands for speculative purposes has become an evil of menacing proportions. We also have a rapidly growing tenant farmer class; every third farmer in America works another man's land . . . a condition of land tenure has come about that imperils the commonwealth." See Charles W. Holman, "The Irish Land Purchase System and Its Application to America," in Marketing and Farm Credits: Proceedings of the Third National Conference on Marketing and Farm Credits, comp. Secretary Charles W. Holman (Chicago: Cooperating Farm Papers, 1916), 321. On the career of this farm journalist turned "premier agricultural lobbyist of the years 1915 to 1955," consider Joseph G. Knapp, "He Paved the Way: Charles W. Holman," in Great American Cooperators, ed. Joseph G. Knapp (Washington, DC: American Institute of Cooperation, 1967), 227-32.

Farming and Better Living" (see Chapter II). The work ahead, it stated, was to prepare the farmer for a new economic order, and the leaders in the movement were "economists, bankers and leading farmers representative of every section of the United States."⁴³ IAOS leader Sir Horace Plunkett concluded the NCMFC was more significant than the Country Life Commission, and the American Commission to Europe, in advancing rural business interests.⁴⁴

Also joining the debate at the NCMFC was the president of the Farm Mortgage Bankers Association (FMBA), a group which organized existing farm mortgage bankers in response to rural credit agitation in the 1910s. F. W. Thompson claimed that any lowering of interest rates for rural credit was due largely to efforts by the farm mortgage bankers. Thompson further suggested that farm mortgage bankers,

instead of being blamed for the high rate prevailing in some sections of the United States, . . . should be praised for their consistent endeavor to overcome handicaps imposed upon the farm mortgage borrower in good sections. . . . This may come as a surprise to some people who have the erroneous idea the farm

⁴³"Marketing and Farm Credits," 1-3.

⁴⁴Sir Horace Plunkett, "The Next Step in the Organization of Agriculture," in Marketing and Farm Credits: Proceedings of the Third National Conference on Marketing and Farm Credits, comp. Secretary Charles W. Holman (Chicago: Cooperating Farm Papers, 1916), 12-25.

mortgage banker was gouging the life out of the American farmer.⁴⁵

While a leading farm mortgage banker like F. W. Thompson agreed with the proposition widely acknowledged at NCMFC meetings--that there was a need to mobilize more capital for long-term farm loans--he nonetheless insisted the sources of the capital needed to remain private. To increase the supply of affordable rural loans, he argued it was "not consistent with the principles on which this nation was founded, to lend to farmers, as a class either the credit of the nation or its moneys, either directly by government loans, or indirectly by subsidies or guarantees."⁴⁶

⁴⁵F. W. Thompson, "What the Farm Mortgage Bankers Offer," in Marketing and Farm Credits: Proceedings of the Third National Conference on Marketing and Farm Credits, comp. Secretary Charles W. Holman (Chicago: Cooperating Farm Papers, 1916), 365. On the origins of the FMBA, see Kingman N. Robbins, "Farm Mortgage Bankers Association of America: Organization--Original Purposes--Brief Review of Its Accomplishments," 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 of America, 1917), 11-19. According to Robbins, the FMBA formed during 1914, when farm mortgage bankers discovered "those who were agitating the subject [rural credits], and advocating legislation, were concerning themselves chiefly with foreign systems and conditions, and that this attitude was reflected in the hearings before Congress. Practically no expert testimony was being presented regarding existing facilities for rural credits nor conditions governing rural credit in the United States."

⁴⁶F. W. Thompson, 373.

This view was reinforced at the 1915 NCMFC by the banker-diplomat Myron T. Herrick (see Chapter II), who was one of the leading critics of the perceived drift toward too much tolerance for state aid in the rural credits debate. "The farm credits movement," wrote Herrick for the NCMFC audience, "whose simple but grand objects originally were cooperative banking and long-term mortgaging has taken on such paternalistic and socialistic tendencies that it likely will be written in history as the farmers' state-aid craze." Evidence of the headway made for special farm credit privileges could be found at the state level. Herrick noted the laws of sixteen states mobilized credit based on farm mortgages. "The rage for state aid and special privilege appears to be as keen as ever, so no forecast can be made as to where it will go before it blows over." The great fear, for Herrick, was that this state-level sentiment would work itself into federal farm credit legislation.⁴⁷

The resolution on rural credit issued at the end of the 1915 NCMFC summed up the prevailing view of participants who were troubled by this

⁴⁷Myron T. Herrick, "Suggestions for Rural-Credits Legislation," in Marketing and Farm Credits: Proceedings of the Third National Conference on Marketing and Farm Credits, comp. Secretary Charles W. Holman (Chicago: Cooperating Farm Papers, 1916), 403-5.

precedent. It noted that over 100 rural credits bills had been brought before Congress. Many of these bills proposed various forms of government financial subvention. The NCMFC, however, would have no part in supporting legislation of this variety. The Committee on Resolutions reported, "We oppose any legislation that suggests the wholesale distribution of government funds or the loaning of government credit, in such a way as to encourage land speculation, or land investments which the business experience of our people has shown to be hazardous."⁴⁸ As the survey of the farm press in Chapter VI makes clear, this opposition to government financial aid for farm credit fairly accurately captured the prevailing sentiment of the leading farm paper editors and publishers during this period.

Conclusion

The records of the farm press hold many insights for students of American political development, yet the historiography of the farm press is remarkably limited. Interdisciplinary historians concerned with the role of

⁴⁸"Report of the Committee on Resolutions," in Marketing and Farm Credits: Proceedings of the Third National Conference on Marketing and Farm Credits, comp. Secretary Charles W. Holman (Chicago: Cooperating Farm Papers, 1916), 506-10.

early mass communications, agenda-setting, and public opinion would benefit from new scholarship on the role of the "fertile pen." The gap in the literature on the farm press, apparent during the 1940s when Albert Demaree published, remains at century's end. Demaree noted farm periodicals were "not only an invaluable source for agricultural historians, but contain abundant data for the general economic and social historian as well." The resource, however, had been used "sparingly" even though the "pages of these neglected journals contain abundant material for the student who is eager to investigate any phase of American life."⁴⁹

Throughout the formulation period for Progressive Era agrarian legislation, the farm press was a fundamental link between isolated rural voters and distant American national politics. The journalism history of this period, however, is even more limited than that which exists for earlier eras. Historians of the press, it seems, have unduly marginalized Progressive Era agricultural journalism. Conferences like the NCMFC, and influential public

⁴⁹Albert Demaree, "The Farm Journals, Their Editors, and Their Public, 1830-1860," Agricultural History 15, no. 4 (October 1941): 186-87. This seems a fruitful area for future research to relieve the "distress" of mass-communication historians who find that "general historians so badly ignore the role of mass communication in history." See Jean Ward, "Interdisciplinary Research and Journalism Historians," Journalism History 5, no. 1 (spring 1978): 19.

figures such as Henry Wallace, E. T. Meredith, and Herbert Myrick, suggest there is rich historical data in the Progressive Era farm press waiting to be uncovered.

This chapter has examined the role of the farm press in shaping rural public opinion. The farm press collectively constituted a conservative voice, akin to that of the business press, particularly on monetary issues such as rural credit reform. In terms of H1, this chapter lends support to the idea that antipopulist, probusiness sentiment lay at the core of the 1910s rural credit reform movement. With respect to H2, Chapter V suggests that the agenda-setting ambitions of farm journalists reached new levels of sophistication during this period. The survey that follows in Chapter VI illustrates in greater detail the position of the farm press on the issue of rates and terms for credit, as well as on five other highly salient and interconnected themes embedded in the debate on rural credit.