

An Overview

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THE STORY OF THE ORIGINS AND GROWTH OF THE LEADING farm practices in Iowa traces the essential steps in general diversified agriculture in its fullest attainment to the present time. The period involved, extending from the beginnings of modern systematized applications of scientific principles to the practices and business of cultivation and husbandry down to the latest achievements of the scientist, the technician, and the manager, is long enough to present a balanced perspective, but sufficiently recent to provide adequate records for verifiable conclusions and pertinent comparisons.

While such a history is of direct appeal and substantial value for the occupation whose background is traced, it has far wider implications. The experiences of this agricultural commonwealth illustrate environmental adaptation; the achievements and limitations of technology on the farm; the emergence of the business of farming and its relations to other enterprises; the underlying influences and the typical features of voluntary association from the crude, timorous ventures of the early agrarian crusade to the present highly organized and confident commodity co-operatives and the federated organizations of nation-wide interest groups; and finally, the successive stages in the extension of governmental policies of aid, regulation, and direction. Such a record of what a century ago was held to be the state's "leading interest" is of prime importance to Iowa, but hardly less so to the region of which the state is an outstanding unit, and to the nation as a whole to which the state's resources are so essential and its counsels so influential.

Nature herself has provided the basic factors in Iowa's agricultural pre-eminence. As the late Raymond A. Pearson observed, "Providence has been good to us." The economic geographer assigns the Prairie Plains to a most favored area of productivity and dependability. Drainage systems, soil, and climate have combined to concentrate the

growing of corn and the raising of livestock—the typical Cornbelt economy—in this region. Iowa is situated in the “core” or “inner” Corn Belt, with over seven-eighths of its area true prairie and with a full quarter of the grade A land of the nation within its borders.

Its location on the most direct line of movement west of the Alleghenies and between the great interior rivers attracted and facilitated settlement and provided unusual advantages for marketing. The early population was well fitted to take advantage of such opportunities.

Settlers in the formative years were predominately natives, representing a secondary migration from the old Southwest and the old Northwest. The typical Hawkeyes were true pioneers whose forebears had ventured on earlier frontiers. Later immigrant elements, from the British Isles, the German states, Holland, and the Scandinavian countries, readily adjusted themselves to the prevailing economy and society. Certain groups contributed particular skills, especially in livestock management, dairying, and horticulture.

Iowa was the last of the states to be settled under traditional pioneer conditions; the railroad and other utilities were to modify later movements. The state was thus born in a transition stage in transportation and industry. Iowa grew up with the railroad, the factory, the steel plow, the reaper, new forage plants, and improved breeds of livestock. These attainments in production and transportation were coming in a period of, and largely as a result of a regional specialization which made possible a regular and growing home market and an expanding export trade in grain and meat.

In spite of early limitations upon marketing facilities and the natural abundance of resources, efforts for the improvement of breeds of animals, varieties of plants, and the techniques of cultivation and husbandry were undertaken in the early years. Pioneer stockmen and dairymen introduced blooded animals. Machinery and usable roads led to the importation of the leading breeds of draft and driving horses. The expanse of fertile land encouraged an early trial of new and promising varieties of corn and small grains. Horticulturists sought to acclimate the leading fruits and vegetables.

During the first decade of statehood agricultural societies—state and local—were flourishing, and two agricultural papers were launched. A state horticultural association, livestock organizations, general and special, and a dairy association soon followed.

An Agricultural College and Farm were chartered in 1858 and the farm secured. In the years before the College was established the office

of the secretary of the board provided a rudimentary state department for the collection of statistics and the distribution of seeds and plants for trial. Following the opening of the College in 1869, the first professors of the agricultural department conducted simple experiments in crop improvement and livestock breeding and nutrition. With the establishment of a federally aided experiment station in 1888, systematic programs of experimentation and research involving all branches of the state's agricultural interests were conducted in co-operation with regional and federal agencies. These efforts were both promotive and protective, for along with the improvements in breeds, varieties, and techniques, high and specialized cultivation and in some cases foreign importations have brought devastating pests and animal and plant diseases which have been combated with relative effectiveness, although, in varying forms and degrees, they constitute a continuing menace and challenge.

Along with scientific applications to increase and improve production has come an introduction and adaptation of machinery to accelerate and standardize the processes. With its peculiarly favorable conditions for mechanical appliance, the state has pioneered and achieved until most essential operations of the farm and an increasing number in the home commonly are carried on by mechanical, power-driven devices.

Such improvements and equipment, along with rising prices for land, necessitated an increasingly large investment. By the seventies, Iowa farming was commercialized and the farmer was a business man, confronted with the combined problems of credit, investment, management, and marketing. The typical unit has been the medium-sized livestock enterprise characteristic of the Corn Belt. The great staple crop and the subordinate crops of oats and clover, to which soybeans have more recently been added, have constituted a rotation that, under proper management, has made for a relatively permanent and stabilized economy. Cash grain production, dairying, fruit and vegetable cultivation, and beekeeping have been supplemental undertakings and in certain areas, the main specialties. To be sure, like all farming ventures, this one has been subjected to natural risks, and like all business ones, to the fluctuations of the market.

Periodical depressions, usually connected with unfavorable climatic conditions, unbalanced production, overextended investment, and wars, have been the most trying and disorganizing influences. The six major depressions since territorial days have had a progressive intensity with a corresponding degree of disaster. Wars, home and foreign,

have been direct or attending factors in all of these convulsions. The Civil War demands led to production "crazes" and deflated values in the youthful state, and the abnormal stimulus of the first world struggle accumulated unprecedented debts for an unimagined collapse. Among the most hopeful tendencies in the present global involvement have been the widespread evidences of fearful awareness of past experiences. From such financial disasters, as well as from the oppressive disparities with other interests, relief has been sought both by voluntary association and governmental activities.

From the beginning of the class-conscious farmer movements in the Granger days, Iowa has been conspicuous in all of the main organizations, general and special, but with the persisting pioneer traditions of individual property rights, the more extreme and uncompromising economic and political proposals have secured no substantial support. The rare resorts to direct action have been in defense of property rights which were held to be unfairly invaded and endangered. The movements at different stages and with changing special objectives have varied in their effectiveness. In general, however, there is conclusive evidence that the agricultural interest of the state has been strengthened in its relative economic power and that the conditions and standards of rural living have been markedly bettered through collective efforts. But with all the attainments through voluntary effort, there has been an increasing need for the functioning of government—state and national.

The tradition of a rugged individualism that had no need or desire for governmental aid and regulation is a pure myth so far as the Midwest is concerned. From the Louisiana Purchase, which was negotiated to give the farmer an accessible market for his surplus, to the latest regulatory act and grant-in-aid, government has "been in the business" of farming at every turn. The settler in the Black Hawk and later purchases wanted land from the public domain in price, amount, quality, and situation adjusted to his desires and resources. He wanted credit to finance his undertaking; highways and railroads to transport his produce; tariffs to stabilize his market; state and federal departments to be supplemented in recent years by a state-federal extension service, to keep him informed of the latest developments in his occupation; and schools and colleges, general and special, to educate his children.

For all these services the pioneer looked to benevolent and generally accommodating, if not always provident, governments. Later, when the eagerly-sought utilities seemed oppressive and domineering, and

high interest rates and low prices were felt to be the result of the machinations of the "money power," the regulatory services of government were invoked. Still later in a new financial age, special credit agencies were sought as the equivalent of the federal reserve provision for other interests. Temporary relief and permanent solution have been sought from time to time in dealing with special problems of production and marketing. However, all previous policies were subordinated by the inclusive and advanced program of recovery acts in the 1930's, which had their leadership and initiation in the Corn Belt, with Iowa as the focal area.

Iowans have been especially prominent in agricultural administration. The early movement for a federal fact-finding, co-ordinating bureau was supported by Iowa farm leaders in memoranda of societies, in agricultural journals, and by the state's representatives at the meetings of the United States Agricultural Society, which was the main organ of agitation. During the patent office period of administration, one of the most able commissioners was Charles Mason, a large landowner and progressive farmer of the state. During his term from 1853 to 1857, he gave particular and understanding attention to the agricultural branch of the bureau. During the years of the independent department before executive status was secured (1862-1889), several Iowans including William Duane Wilson and C. C. Parry were connected with it and "Father" Coker Clarkson, the agricultural editor of the *State Register*, declined the headship offered both by Grant and Garfield. Since the raising of the department to cabinet status in 1889, four Iowa farmers and farm journalists have served as Secretary of Agriculture under seven presidents. Scores of experts trained in the state have worked in the bureaus at Washington or "in the field."

The transformations that modern science has brought to every branch and phase of the farming enterprise in this state present a record that, except for its familiarity, would be astounding. As always, social and political changes have trailed those in the physical realm, but here, too, advance is marked and accelerating at a rate that promises within measurable time to become more nearly commensurate. For the state as a whole the most significant result of the achievements of a century is that they have not led to new types and organizations of the farming enterprise, but rather that they have tended to perpetuate and strengthen the particular system that emerged through regional adaptation in the formative years—the family-sized diversified farm as an economic and social unit.

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