

**SEEDS OF AGRIBUSINESS:  
GRANT WOOD AND THE VISUAL CULTURE OF GRAIN FARMING, 1862-1957**

by

Travis Earl Nygard

BA, Gustavus Adolphus College, 2002

MA, University of Pittsburgh, 2005

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This dissertation was presented

by

Travis Earl Nygard

It was defended on

December 4, 2009

and approved by

Dr. Barbara McCloskey, Associate Professor, History of Art and Architecture

Dr. Christopher Drew Armstrong, Assistant Professor, History of Art and Architecture

Dr. Ronald J. Zboray, Professor, Communication

Dissertation Advisor: Dr. Kirk Savage, Professor, History of Art and Architecture

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## **SEEDS OF AGRIBUSINESS:**

### **GRANT WOOD AND THE VISUAL CULTURE OF GRAIN FARMING, 1862-1957**

Travis Earl Nygard, PhD

University of Pittsburgh, 2009

This dissertation uses selected works of Grant Wood's art as a touchstone to investigate a broader visual culture surrounding agriculture in America during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. By doing so I argue that Wood engaged with pressing social questions, including the phenomenon now referred to as *agribusiness*. Although agribusiness is often associated with the Green Revolution of the 1940s and 1950s, its beginning dates to the nineteenth century. Indeed, Wood's lifetime was an era when land was consolidated, production and distribution were vertically integrated, and breeding became scientifically informed. To access the power dynamics of this transition, I begin each chapter with work by Wood, and then analyze it in conjunction with imagery produced by or for individuals with diverse cultural agendas. This wide range of voices includes government officials, members of socialist farm organizations, newspaper publishers, plant breeders, owners of large and small farms, auction house managers, and university educators. To show precedents for and the legacy of Wood's work I begin my analysis of visual culture before his birth and end after his death. The dissertation thus begins in 1862—the year that land in the Midwest began to be parceled out for grain farming as small 160-acre homesteads and gargantuan bonanza farms thousands of acres in size. The dissertation ends in 1957—the year that the term agribusiness was coined by the Harvard-based economists John Davis and Ray Goldberg. I take an interdisciplinary approach anchored most fully within the norms of art history, but also engage with strategies from visual, cultural, and agricultural



studies. My argument, ultimately, is that agribusiness is a cornerstone of modern thinking, and that Grant Wood was not only aware of the experiences, debates, institutions, and theories of agribusiness emerging in his midst but engaged with them in his fine art. More broadly, by using a wide range of imagery, including photography, advertising, penmanship, film stills, crops, cartoons, architecture, and diagrams I show that the way Americans came to understand and accept agribusiness as the basis of their food system was negotiated, in part, through visual materials.

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## **PREFACE**

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## 1.0 CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

From 1933 to 1939 the Regionalist artist Grant Wood created and installed his magnum opus of public art—a series of eleven mural panels titled *When Tillage Begins, Other Arts Follow*. They were commissioned by the Public Works of Art Project—a New Deal program—for the library at the Iowa State College of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts. The murals focus on a story of agricultural practice and education, beginning with the plowing of virgin sod and culminating in the scientific farm research of the twentieth century. On one level these murals can be understood as a celebratory statement about agricultural progress and the role of a government-sponsored university system, which enables painting and other fine arts to thrive. This statement meshed with the goals of powerful individuals, who used the cycle to bolster national agendas about farming and citizenship. Most notably, upon completion of the first three panels in 1934, they were shipped to Washington DC, where they were first displayed at the headquarters of the United States Department of Agriculture and later at the Corcoran Gallery of Art. While the specific agendas evoked in the murals will be developed later in this dissertation, for now it is sufficient to note that the cycle's title evokes a set of questions.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For an account of these displays, see the work of Lea Rosson DeLong, *When Tillage Begins, Other Arts Follow: Grant Wood and Christian Petersen Murals* (Ames: Exhibition catalog from the Brunnier Art Museum at Iowa State University, 2006), 23-24.

What is the relationship between working the soil and the arts or visual culture? On initial consideration the mural cycle seems to explain that the arts depend on an economic base of agriculture capable of supporting leisure and aesthetic exploration. Pushing the logic further, however, requires asking if agricultural imagery is more than a passive reflection of farm practices. Could it be a phenomenon that alters the course of agricultural history? This dissertation attempts to respond to this line of inquiry, focusing on cash crops of grain—especially wheat and corn—in the Midwest during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This was the era when the phenomena eventually named *agribusiness* was born. My work is thus about the “seeds” of agribusiness in two senses of the word—literal kernels and metaphoric beginnings. I argue that during this time imagery was indeed important, and that there was a symbiotic relationship between farm practices and visual culture. To the extent that this is true, it can be inferred that the way we came to understand and accept agribusiness as the basis of our food supply was negotiated through visual materials.

## **1.1 RATIONALE**

While both agribusiness and American visual culture have been studied independently, limited scholarship exists on the intersection of the two. Indeed, this is the first sustained study of the topic during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This fact raises the question of why someone would want to read about such a topic. On an art historical level, a plethora of canonical imagery depicts farming or food, and professionals within the discipline may wish to know how the social history of food production informed the making of art. On a broader level, inquiries about food production have merit for the simple reason that eating is a universal human

need and food procurement is a basic human act. People dedicated to the fields of study that address the significance of farming or food may be interested in this work, wishing to learn what images—as unique forms of human expression—can teach us about the history of agribusiness that other data sources cannot.

Although the rise of agribusiness is often associated with the Green Revolution after World War II, what I focus on for most of this dissertation is imagery produced during an earlier era—when many of the institutions that dominate the food economy of the twenty first century were in their infancy. Today these institutions, and agribusiness generally, have become an increasingly polarizing subject of debate. Indeed, the agricultural status quo is usually framed as either socially and ecologically ruinous or a cultural triumph. A lack of consensus is understandable, given that productivity soared during the twentieth century, but there remains no easy solution to the demands of feeding billions of people a nutritious diet while maintaining just labor and business practices and preserving environmental integrity. To clarify assumptions behind these debates about agribusiness, and to humanize the history leading to the system of growing and distributing grain today, a look at origins is thus timely.

## **1.2 AGRICULTURAL AND FOOD HISTORY**

To understand the logic behind interrogating agribusiness during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the Midwest, it is useful to have a skeletal understanding of North American agricultural history since the colonial era. Beginning with colonization, large and small-scale farms coexisted. Particularly in the south, large-scale plantations that depended on slave labor grew cash crops for export—cotton, tobacco, sugar cane, and grain. In the northeast

during the eighteenth century people experimented with communal land cultivation and community-owned pastures—an agricultural commons. This commons was replaced in the early nineteenth century, as encouraged by Thomas Jefferson and other prominent thinkers.<sup>2</sup>

Jefferson bolstered a national myth of land-owning Yeoman farmers as self-sufficient people who formed the backbone of a democracy. While it was not described in these terms, the idea of the small “family farm” dates to this era. Within American collective memory, these Yeoman farmers ran subsistence operations in which families functioned as nearly autonomous units. Each farmstead produced its own food, clothing, and tools. The reality was, of course, more complex. Some goods were unavailable on the farm, and trade networks for luxury goods extended across the globe. This set of realities was incrementally transformed over the course of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as more mass-produced products made off of the farm became available and desirable, and wider networks of food processing and distribution were established. It is this period of transition that my dissertation focuses on—the dawn of agribusiness.

Rather than taking a national approach, or focusing on the northeast, I address an area that first became intensively cultivated by settlers during the nineteenth century—the Midwest. Most accurately, this is a study about the areas of North America in which cash crops of grain are prevalent—the Corn and Wheat Belts, referred to collectively as the Grain Belt. Because there is no crisply delineated boundary that separates the Grain Belt from other parts of the continent, the area is not well-anchored in people’s minds. It can, however, be described. It is a

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<sup>2</sup> A standard one-volume history of agriculture in the US is by R. Douglas Hurt, *American Agriculture: A Brief History*, Revised ed. (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2002). A good overview of agricultural history on a global scale during this time period is the work of Giovanni Federico, *Feeding the World: An Economic History of Agriculture, 1800-2000* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).

region defined primarily by the ecology and economy of the prairie. In the US the area includes portions of the Dakotas, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, Ohio, and Wisconsin. In Canada it includes portions of Alberta, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan. This large geographic space could even be extended to include grain-intensive regions of Texas and California.<sup>3</sup>

The scholarly community agrees that mainstream agriculture in this region is now in an era of agribusiness, defined as a tightly-interconnected and vertically-integrated food system, in which much farming is undertaken on an international, corporate-controlled, large-scale, scientifically-informed, and resource-intensive scale. There is no one moment that can be pinpointed as the origin of agribusiness. I will thus start the analysis with the year that most land in the Midwest was divided and began to enter private ownership—1862. That year the US federal government passed legislation to give small homesteads—160 acres each—to anyone willing to “improve” a parcel of land by farming it. Concurrently, the government began to grant large tracts of land to the railroads, in order to fund transcontinental lines. The railroads sold much of this land to investors, who developed large-scale farms for wheat and other grain. Some of these farms were huge even by twenty-first-century standards—20,000 acres or more. Over the following century debates unfolded that determined the future of farming. In many ways this debate culminated in 1957, with the publication of the popular book *Farmer in a Business Suit* by the economist John Davis and the journalist Kenneth Hinshaw, and the scholarly *A Concept of Agribusiness*, also by John Davis with fellow economist Ray Goldberg. These people named a

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<sup>3</sup> Geographers have a particularly difficult time classifying the Midwest. Radically different maps can be drawn, for example, when a geographer uses the economy, ecology, lifestyle, dialect, history, politics, and self-identification as the defining feature of the region. For an excellent analysis of this dilemma, including numerous maps, see James R. Shortridge, *The Middle West: Its Meaning in American Culture* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1989).

phenomenon that already existed—agribusiness—and thus mark the ending point of my in-depth analysis.<sup>4</sup>

The significance of Davis and Goldberg’s work extends beyond naming a historical moment—a fact that has significance for a historical analysis. Indeed, as practicing economists, they argued persuasively that we should expand our ways of thinking about food production by taking a broad view. Rather than looking at wheat farming and flour milling as completely separate endeavors with only an internal logic, for example, they would have encouraged an analysis that shows how farming and milling are linked in a complex economic system.

Like grain farming, the milling of flour was profoundly changed during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. A plethora of small water-or-wind-powered gristmills—a technology little changed since the first century BCE in Western culture—were replaced by large-scale industrial operations. The older mills used a grinding stone to achieve a coarse product while large mills used steel rollers to produce fine powder. These newer mills exploited technological advances to the fullest extent possible. While still powered by water, the current of a river or brook was insufficient to move the machinery. They thus captured the more intense forces of waterfalls. A few large operations soon came to control flour milling on the national level. Two of the most significant industrial mills—where Pillsbury’s Best and Gold Medal Flours were produced—indeed date to this era.

Americans were keenly interested in these new ways of milling flour. One example of this interest is seen in a controversial novel that Grant Wood illustrated—*Main Street* by Sinclair Lewis. This book was awarded a Pulitzer prize for literature in 1921, but later stripped of that

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<sup>4</sup> John Herbert Davis and Ray Allan Goldberg, *A Concept of Agribusiness* (Boston: Graduate School of Business Administration, Harvard University, 1957), John Davis and Kenneth Hinshaw, *Farmer in a Business Suit* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1957).

honor by the Board of Trustees of Columbia University. The novel takes place during the 1910s, and the second sentence describes the hero, Carol, gazing at the industrial flour mills of Minneapolis-St. Paul. Later when she and her husband visited these cities as tourists they are “shown through the gray stone hulks and new cement elevators of the largest flour-mills in the world” and drive past the mansions of the owners. This could not be further from their small town reality. The Gopher Prairie Flour and Milling Company, managed by Lyman Cass, was an operation run with a waterwheel. It had windows “blanketed with flour-dust, but it was the most stirring spot in town. Workmen were wheeling barrels of flour into a boxcar; a farmer sitting on sacks of wheat in a bob-sled argued with the wheat-buyer; machinery within the mill boomed and whined; water gurgled in the ice-freed mill-race.” Gopher Prairie’s institution was outdated and dangerous—dust-covered windows suggest explosiveness. But the facility was nevertheless a source of local pride. As a dissertation that focuses on agribusiness, taking these types of shifts that affected the food system into consideration is germane, and it is an integral part of my intellectual approach.

### **1.3 INTELLECTUAL APPROACH**

This is an interdisciplinary dissertation, with an analysis that is most fully grounded within art history. Like nearly all work from this discipline the data I scrutinize is visual, the mode of presentation I use is narrative, and the variables of time and place are privileged over a-historical themes. I anchor objects within the logic of when they were created, purchased, and displayed. I rely on the assumption that the meaning of images can be discerned by closely scrutinizing their

visual properties in conjunction with their subject matter. By including the work of Grant Wood I acknowledge that objects of fine art are filled with rich cultural commentary.

Despite all of this, the dissertation extends beyond the norms of art historical practice by asking what would happen to our understanding of Wood if his art is juxtaposed with the visual culture of agribusiness. And conversely, how might our understanding of agribusiness change when we consider Wood's fine art? Wood is the quintessential Regionalist artist, having painted some of the most well-known images of Midwestern life—such as *American Gothic* from 1930 and *Dinner for Threshers* from 1934. My goal is not to rehash a well-known story of Regionalism, but to expand it to examine large-scale agribusiness. As an artist who was astutely aware of the visual culture that surrounded him, and whose work was widely and mostly positively received, Wood is therefore a useful entry point into the broad logic of the era.<sup>5</sup>

To better understand this framework, it is useful to consider the meanings of a term from my title—culture—within several disciplines that I engage with. In art history, inquiry about culture was traditionally funneled to a subset of human creativity—the production of paintings, sculptures, buildings, works on paper, and decorative objects. Here culture implied a hierarchy of value, with only a few objects meriting praise. The most highly scrutinized objects were beautiful and rare, commissioned by the wealthiest people and institutions of stratified societies—especially western Europe and east Asia. The discipline thus focused on the “high” achievements of civilizations, while mostly ignoring vernacular creativity. To what extent the

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<sup>5</sup> I am following the convention of using Regionalism with a capital R to refer to the “textbook” art movement led by Grant Wood, John Steuart Curry, and Thomas Hart Benton, and regionalism with a small r to refer to art with a regional focus, regardless of movement. James Dennis' work is a good example of the former meaning, while William Gerdt's is a good example of the latter. William H. Gerdts, *Art across America: Two Centuries of Regional Painting in America, 1710-1920* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1990), James M. Dennis, *Renegade Regionalists: The Modern Independence of Grant Wood, Thomas Hart Benton, and John Steuart Curry* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998).



discipline remains shackled to these norms is a matter of debate, but studies in this tradition remain prominent.

A discipline that is allied with art history, but which focuses on a wider set of objects, is visual culture. As the art historian James Elkins has noted, this includes the majority of images produced—such as “graphs, charts, maps, geographic configurations, notations, plans, official documents, some money, bonds, seals and stamps, astronomical and astrological charts, technical and engineering drawings, scientific images of all sorts, schemata, and pictographic or ideographic elements in writing.” Self-proclaimed works in visual studies tends to assume a social-scientific definition of culture as the knowledge, heritage, norms, and realities of a group of people—any complex way of life. Given this greater inclusiveness, visual culture is sometimes erroneously presented as a discipline in which all materials are considered to be equally worthy of study, and in which evaluative judgments are absent from the discourse. In fact, studies of visual culture, in order to remain insightful, depend upon carefully developing sets of questions, and then differentiating images that are most capable of answering those questions from less significant ones. In the case of this dissertation, I have sought out those few images that help us to understand the emerging concept of agribusiness to show that people involved in farming, dissident political movements, breeding, milling, and the government continuously borrowed imagery both from each other, often co-opting and subverting each other’s agendas.<sup>6</sup>

The novelist Sinclair Lewis once made the snide comment that “in Grant Wood’s Iowa [...] there is nothing to be seen but corn stalks and college towers and secretaries of agriculture.” While this is certainly a simplification, it also implies that if we want to understand Wood’s

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<sup>6</sup> James Elkins, “Art History and Images That Are Not Art,” *The Art Bulletin* 77, no. 4 (1995): 553.

culture that we should take a visual culture approach, by including displays of prize-winning corn, murals at land grant universities, and portraits of men asked to serve as the Secretary of Agriculture. In such a spirit, I have chosen to examine some of the images that were most prominent within rural culture, and which served as cornerstones for thinking. These images merit scrutiny for their own sake, and they are the materials most likely, when considered together, to reveal widely-held assumptions and areas of contention.<sup>7</sup>

Yet another definition of culture comes from the discipline of cultural studies, whose practitioners tend to apply theoretical perspectives developed for the study of literature and film to phenomena from across the humanities. Although this dissertation does not use this cultural theory in a heavy-handed way, it is nonetheless structured around several assumptions from that discipline. Most prominently I recognize the importance of investigating power relations and the perspectives of marginalized groups. Such a comparative approach has the potential to show how large ideas—including, as I argue, agribusiness—are defined through relations between factions of society.

To ensure that a wide-range of voices are included in my reconstruction of this era, I have chosen to focus in-depth on imagery produced by a successful radical organization, the Nonpartisan League; the United States Department of Agriculture; contributors to the most widely-distributed agricultural periodical in the Corn Belt, *Wallaces' Farmer*; owners of large and small-scale farms, plant breeders, and participants at world's fairs. From amongst the plethora of these materials, I note that images relating to agribusiness and clustering into systems

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<sup>7</sup> Quotation is from Sinclair Lewis, "Introductory Remarks," in *A Sinclair Lewis Reader: The Man from Main Street: Selected Essays and Other Writings, 1904-1950*, ed. Harry E. Maule and Melville H. Cane (New York: Random House, 1943, 1953), 178. Lewis said this in an introduction to a reprinting of a novel by Ruth Suckow, *Country People* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1924).

of ideas merit extra scrutiny. This premise has led me to interrogate the visual properties of materials often ignored by art historians, including stereoscopic cards, panoramic photographs, lithographic prints, mass-produced portraits, political cartoons, penmanship, scientific diagrams, crops, film stills, book illustrations, and advertisements. The overarching goal of working with these materials is to develop insight about some of the most celebrated high art from the Midwest through its juxtaposition with a wider visual culture, thus enabling us to better understand both.

Lastly, it should be noted that the word “culture” has a mostly-forgotten origin, anchoring it in the discipline of agriculture. Etymologically, “culture” is derived from the Latin *colere*, meaning to till the soil. The prefix “agri” comes from either the Latin *ager* meaning field or the Greek *agro* meaning pasture. While we rarely refer to fields of wheat and corn as cultures today, this dissertation can thus be understood, on a literal level, to be about visual culture—imagery of cultivation and people who raise grain. As an academic discipline, agriculture involves analyzing the significance of soil, seeds, machinery, farmers, and laborers on practical levels, and I have immersed myself in the history of this discipline.

#### **1.4 SCHOLARSHIP ON WOOD, REGIONALISM, AND AGRARIANISM**

Although the relationship between imagery and agribusiness has not been well-studied, my work draws on a wide range of scholarship. These resources are described with a running bibliographic commentary in the footnotes, but a few of the most important resources merit mentioning here. These are the standard studies on major themes of the dissertation—Grant Wood, large-scale farming, the Nonpartisan League radical farmers’ movement, and the Wallace

family of Iowa. Among these topics, because this dissertation is written in an art history department, I will emphasize Grant Wood.

As noted above, the concept of agribusiness was first described in 1957 by John Davis, Ray Goldberg, and Kenneth Hinshaw. For broader historical treatments of large-scale farming, Deborah Fitzgerald's book *Every Farm a Factory: The Industrial Ideal in American Agriculture* published in 2003 is a good overview, and the standard study of bonanza farms is Hiram Drache's *The Day of the Bonanza: A History of Bonanza Farming in the Red River Valley of the North*, from 1964. The most widely-read history of the Nonpartisan League radical farmers' movement is the book by Robert Morlan, *Political Prairie Fire: The Nonpartisan League 1915-1922*, published in 1955. For information on the Wallace family, the best overview remains a book by a family friend, Russell Lord, titled *The Wallaces of Iowa*, from 1947, and a good biography of the best-known family member, Henry Agard Wallace, was published by John Culver and John Hyde in 2000, titled *American Dreamer: The Life and Times of Henry Agard Wallace*. Collectively, these works are good entry points for anyone wishing to undertake further research on the social context of this dissertation's topic.<sup>8</sup>

I build on monographs and essays about Grant Wood, which have provided the scholarly community with an understanding of how the artist's works were created and came to cultural prominence. The first scholarly book about Wood, written by the art historian James Dennis,

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<sup>8</sup> Deborah Fitzgerald, *Every Farm a Factory: The Industrial Ideal in American Agriculture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), James M. Dennis, *Grant Wood: A Study in American Art and Culture* (New York: Viking Press, 1975), Wanda M. Corn, *Grant Wood: The Regionalist Vision* (New Haven: Minneapolis Institute of Arts and Yale University Press, 1983), Darrell Garwood, *Artist in Iowa: A Life of Grant Wood*, Reprint ed. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1944, 1971), Davis and Hinshaw, *Farmer in a Business Suit*, Davis and Goldberg, *A Concept of Agribusiness*, Hiram M. Drache, *The Day of the Bonanza: A History of Bonanza Farming in the Red River Valley of the North* (Fargo: North Dakota Institute for Regional Studies, 1964), Robert L. Morlan, *Political Prairie Fire: The Nonpartisan League 1915-1922* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1955, 1985), Russell Lord, *The Wallaces of Iowa* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1947).

articulated themes of craft, satire, folklore, rural culture, and agrarianism in the artist's creative output. Later, the art historian Wanda Corn's exhibition catalog from the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, written in 1983, became the standard biographically-based study. Both Dennis and Corn used scrapbooks assembled by Wood's sister, Nan Wood Graham, to carefully reconstruct events in his life. These scrapbooks were later donated to the Davenport Museum of Art, and a microfilm copy is in the Archives of American Art at the Smithsonian Institution. More recently, Sue Taylor used psychological theories to reassess Wood's mindset. Each of the aforementioned studies draws on the standard biography of Wood—a celebratory tribute by Darrell Garwood that was written immediately after the artist's death. Memories of Wood recorded by his friends and family—especially Hazel E. Brown and Nan Wood Graham—are also useful accounts of the artist's life. Corn divides Grant Wood's career into three stages—his "Roots" on the farm from 1891 to 1901, his "Hometown Artist" era from 1901 to 1930, and his "Regionalist" peak from 1930 to 1942.<sup>9</sup>

Grant Wood's early life was tumultuous. The artist was born in 1891 on a farm near the small town of Anamosa, Iowa, where he lived until age ten. At that time the death of his father caused a financial crisis in the family, and they moved to Cedar Rapids. Wood lived in that city until graduation from high school, and he returned frequently throughout his life. From 1910 to 1911 he enrolled in the Minneapolis School of Design and Handicraft under the tutelage of Ernest Batchelder—an advocate of the Arts and Crafts Movement. The following year he taught

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<sup>9</sup> Corn, *Grant Wood*, Hazel E. Brown, *Grant Wood and Marvin Cone: Artists of an Era* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1972), Nan Wood Graham, John Zug, and Julie Jensen McDonald, *My Brother, Grant Wood* (Iowa City: State Historical Society of Iowa, 1993), Julie McDonald and Joan Liffing-Zug Bourret, *Grant Wood and Little Sister Nan: Essays and Remembrances* (Iowa City, IA: Penfield Press, 2000), Sue Taylor, "Wood's American Logic," *Art in America* 94, no. 1 (2006): 86-93, ———, "Grant Wood's Family Album," *American Art* 19, no. 2 (2005): 48-67.

country school. Returning to art in 1912 he lived in Cedar Rapids making fine jewelry and home furnishings. The following year he moved to Chicago, where he was employed by Kalo Siversmith's Shop before starting a business for himself as a jewelry-maker. Concurrently, from 1912 to 1916, he occasionally enrolled in life-drawing courses at the University of Iowa or the Art Institute of Chicago. Wood returned to Cedar Rapids in 1916 to support his mother and sister. Near the end of World War I he joined the army, and he was stationed in Washington DC as a camouflage painter.

After the war Wood began to foster his career as a painter by seeking out commissions and travelling abroad. Because painting could not yet support his needs financially, from 1919 to 1925 he was also employed by the public schools of Cedar Rapids as an art teacher. The artist took the 1923-1924 academic year off, allowing him to live abroad for fourteen months. He first resided in Paris, studying art-making at the Académie Julian during the fall, and then lived in Sorrento, Italy and travelled in northern France for the remainder of his time in Europe. When in Cedar Rapids, during these years Wood displayed his art in the local Killian's Department Store and fostered a base of patrons among middle-class residents of the city. An exhibition of this decorative work from this era was curated by Jane Milosch of the Cedar Rapids Museum of Art in 2005. David Turner, a funeral director, became Wood's agent during the 1920s and offered the artist free use of a stable behind his mortuary. Wood renovated the stable as a living, studio, and theater space and used it from 1924 to 1935. He returned to Paris in the summer of 1926, where the Galerie Carmine showed his work. In 1925 Wood quit his job as a teacher to pursue painting full time. Two years later, in 1927, he was commissioned to create a stained-glass

window for the Cedar Rapids Veterans Memorial Building, and the following year he travelled to Munich to supervise the work's construction by artisans.<sup>10</sup>

1930 marks the beginning of Grant Wood's national reputation. That year *American Gothic* was displayed at the juried annual exhibition of painting at the Chicago Art Institute. It won the Normal Walt Harris medal and was widely-reproduced in newspapers and periodicals. Wanda Corn included a lengthy exegesis on the painting, including its parodies, in her catalog. Another treatment of the painting's iconic status was written by the literary scholar Steven Biel. Other successes for Wood were to follow. He was, for example, represented at the 1932 Whitney Biennial with the painting *Daughters of Revolution*, the 1933 Century of Progress Exhibition in Chicago included his already-famous *American Gothic*, and the 1934 Carnegie International of Pittsburgh included *Dinner for Threshers*.<sup>11</sup>

Concurrent with the heightened exposure that these venues provided, Wood returned to teaching and began to create work designed for national distribution. In 1932, along with Ed Rowan and Adrian Dornbush, he established a summer art colony and school at Stone City, Iowa. From January to June 1934 Wood served as the Director of the Public Works of Art Project (PWAP) in Iowa—a New Deal initiative that focused on mural painting. When funding for the PWAP ended Wood was hired by the University of Iowa to continue making and teaching the creation of murals. The art historian Lea Rosson DeLong wrote an exhibition catalog for the Brunnier Art Museum at Iowa State University, which discusses Wood's mural-making at this time. While at the university, Wood wrote an essay, "Revolt Against the City," which espoused

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<sup>10</sup> Jane C. Milosch, ed., *Grant Wood's Studio: Birthplace of American Gothic* (Cedar Rapids and New York: Cedar Rapids Museum of Art and Prestel, 2005).

<sup>11</sup> Steven Biel, *American Gothic: A Life of America's Most Famous Painting* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2005).

his ideals. From 1937 to 1941 Wood expanded his audience by distributing lithographic prints through the Associated American Artists (AAA)—a business that sold limited editions by catalog. AAA later published a booklet of the nineteen prints that Wood made for them. Also in 1937 Wood illustrated a special edition of Sinclair Lewis’s novel *Main Street*. This project has been analyzed by DeLong in another exhibition catalog and David Crowe in an essay. Wood died on February 12, 1942 of liver cancer, and the Art Institute of Chicago mounted a retrospective of his work the following fall as a tribute.<sup>12</sup>

More broadly, Wood is remembered as the quintessential Regionalist artist. Regionalism is often erroneously framed as an inherently regressive impulse in 1930s American culture, which allowed people to feel secure with their local idiosyncrasies—a celebration of parochialism and national pride. In the visual arts the movement was led by Grant Wood along with John Steuart Curry and Thomas Hart Benton. In contrast, Social Realism is remembered as a concurrent, but more radical, movement in the visual arts composed of artists who interrogated social injustices and advocated for change. Some of the key painters associated with Social Realism are Ben Shahn, Romare Bearden, and Diego Rivera. Collectively, the two movements are often referred to as American Scene Painting—a phrase used by the artist programs of the New Deal. Scholars who have written major studies of Regionalism and American Scene Painting include Nancy Heller, Julia Williams, Matthew Baigell, Karal Ann Marling, Ann Wagner, Erika Doss, and James Dennis. The most recent scholarship, and especially the work of

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<sup>12</sup> Lea Rosson DeLong, *Grant Wood’s Main Street: Art, Literature and the American Midwest* (Ames: Exhibition catalog from the Brunnier Art Museum at Iowa State University, 2004), Grant Wood, *Revolt against the City* (Iowa City: Clio Press, 1935). The essay was reprinted in by Dennis, *Grant Wood*, 229-35, Sylvan Cole and Susan Teller, *Grant Wood: The Lithographs: A Catalogue Raisonné* (New York: Associated American Artists, 1984), David Crowe, “Illustration as Interpretation: Grant Wood’s ‘New Deal’ Reading of Sinclair Lewis’s *Main Street*,” in *Sinclair Lewis at 100: Papers Presented at a Centennial Conference*, ed. Michael Connaughton (St. Cloud, MN: St. Cloud State University, 1985), 95-111.



Doss and Dennis, has called for a reassessment of Regionalism. They see it as a movement that has been misremembered because radical critics defined the movement too-narrowly during the 1930s.<sup>13</sup>

Still other scholars have approached the subject of Grant Wood with questions about style, conservation, and museums. The art historians Brady Roberts and James Dennis each situated the artist within the stylistic chronology of Western art history, but in different contexts. While Roberts sees Wood's painting style as inspired by European modern art, Dennis anchored Wood in American traditions. Given that Wood was an American who lived and studied in his own country as well as abroad, both interpretations have merit. The former director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Thomas Hoving, wrote a book that uses Wood's *American Gothic* as a foil to instruct lay people how to look at paintings in museums as connoisseurs. Scientific analysis of Wood's painting techniques and materials, geared primarily to conservators, has been undertaken by James S. Horns, Helen Mar Parkin, James S. Martin, and Inge Fiedler.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Dennis, *Renegade Regionalists: The Modern Independence of Grant Wood, Thomas Hart Benton, and John Steuart Curry*, Erika Lee Doss, *Benton, Pollock, and the Politics of Modernism: From Regionalism to Abstract Expressionism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), Karal Ann Marling, *Wall-to-Wall America: A Cultural History of Post-Office Murals in the Great Depression* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), Ann Prentice Wagner, ed., *1934: A New Deal for Artists* (Washington, DC: Exhibition catalog from the Smithsonian American Art Museum, 2009), Nancy Heller and Julia Williams, *The Regionalists: Painters of the American Scene* (New York: Watson-Guption Publications, 1976), Matthew Baigell, *The American Scene: American Painting of the 1930's* (New York: Praeger, 1974).

<sup>14</sup> Brady M. Roberts, "The European Roots of Regionalism: Grant Wood's Stylistic Synthesis," (San Francisco: Exhibition catalog from the Davenport Museum of Art in conjunction with Pomegranate Artbooks, 1995), 1-41, James M. Dennis, "Grant Wood's Native-Born Modernism," (San Francisco: Exhibition catalog from the Davenport Museum of Art in conjunction with Pomegranate Artbooks, 1995), 43-63, James S. Horns and Helen Mar Parkin, "Grant Wood: A Technical Study," (San Francisco: Exhibition catalog from the Davenport Museum of Art in conjunction with Pomegranate Artbooks, 1995), 67-91, James S. Martin, "Technical Study of Materials Comprising Fourteen Paintings by Grant Wood," (San Francisco: Exhibition catalog from the Davenport Museum of Art in conjunction with Pomegranate Artbooks, 1995), 92-95, Inge Fiedler, "A Study of the Materials Used in Grant Wood's *American Gothic*," (San Francisco: Exhibition catalog from the Davenport Museum of Art in conjunction with Pomegranate Artbooks, 1995), 96-98, Thomas Hoving, *American Gothic: The Biography of Grant Wood's American Masterpiece* (New York: Chamberlain Brothers, 2005).

To differentiate my contribution to scholarship on farming in Wood's art from the major interpretive studies by James Dennis and Wanda Corn, summarizing their argument about Wood's agrarianism is useful. As a whole, they viewed Wood as interested in universals rather than specifics, fundamentally jubilant rather than critical, and nostalgically looking to the past rather than grounded in present realities. Dennis considered the rural people in Wood's paintings to be representations of the "noble yeoman"—the good small-scale landholder celebrated by Thomas Jefferson, with precedents in intellectual thought dating the middle ages. More broadly, Dennis framed the artist's body of farming-related work as a search for a universal rural experience tied to the land, explaining that:

His farm views combine two versions of the agricultural-utopia fable. Growing out of his genuine affection for the farmer, Wood's regionalist belief in localism as the key to an independent native art form led him concurrently to the agrarian myth and to a modernized version of the pastoral ideal. The farmscapes reflect his fundamental ambivalence toward the machine and its industrial accompaniment, and issue a last tribute to the elemental agrarian life close to nature just at the time when fields were being submitted to technological reordering.

Wanda Corn later endorsed Dennis's interpretation of Wood's paintings as a celebration of Jeffersonian yeoman values in archetypal terms, and she expanded on the logic.<sup>15</sup>

Corn viewed Wood's paintings—especially during the Regionalist period—as attempts to present the experience of Midwestern farming in generalized terms. She explained:

By the 1930s Wood had come to view farmers as a distinctive Midwestern folk type endowed with a unique, but unsung, folklore. Indeed, he saw his youth on an

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<sup>15</sup> Dennis, *Grant Wood*, 201, 16, Corn, *Grant Wood*, 104.

Iowa farm as an archetypal rural American experience which, if probed, would reveal a strain of the national culture that was as rich and colorful as that of any other region or period in history.

Rather than engaging with the present moment, she sees Wood's farmscapes as looking to the past:

The farm Wood celebrates is that of his childhood, not the 1930s farm of tractors, trucks, and cultivators. The farmer does not ride a noisy, gas-engine tractor in Wood's paintings, but walks, as Wood's father did, in quiet solitude behind the horse-drawn walking plow, the kind of plow which stands, like a religious relic, in the foreground of [Wood's painting] *Fall Plowing*.

For her Wood's representations of people are straightforward, uncritical, celebrations: "He romanticized the farmer and his family just as he did the farmscape. Their clothes are immaculate, their faces red from the sun, and their produce and farm animals as plump and healthy as the figures themselves." These are people defined by "natural goodness and wholesomeness" who are filled with the "satisfaction of working the land." In total, she sees Wood as a person who "celebrated the beauties of the Midwest and mythologized the farmbelt as America's 'fertile crescent.' He painted visions of past peace and plenty, not records of hardships or tragedies. Call it escapist or nostalgic, this was a common artistic response running throughout the decade's films, mural paintings, and literature."<sup>16</sup>

In light of such research I argue that Grant Wood's biography is well-known, but that his body of work and cultural significance is due for a reassessment. Scholars have teased out major themes, but have not done so through the eyes of Midwesterners during Wood's own era. My

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<sup>16</sup> Corn, *Grant Wood*, 2, 90, 94.

work is an attempt to access part of this mindset by focusing on the broader visual culture of agribusiness, and I have thus been led to scrutinize examples of Wood's creative output that have previously been neglected. For example, in this dissertation the fact that Wood was a friend of the scientist and politician Henry Agard Wallace, and that he was commissioned to make a portrait of the man for the cover of *Time Magazine* is important. Wanda Corn, however, neither reproduces nor discusses the portrait, while Dennis reproduces it and only mentions it glibly without discussing the image's visual strategies or the context of its creation. While a cycle of mural panels that Wood created for the Palmer Penmanship Company are important in my analysis as an example of Wood's engagement with visual culture, neither Corn nor Dennis discuss Wood's penmanship cycle at all. Corn does, however, reproduce images of the penmanship cycle in her catalog. What knowledge, then, can we gain from rethinking Wood's career amidst a broader visual culture?

Wood lived during a time when the future of farming was contentiously debated—the dawn of contemporary agribusiness—and this fact should not be dismissed. Rather than assuming that Wood's work specifically, and Regionalism more generally, are uncritical, I animate this study with imagery that Midwesterners struggled with. In so doing, I argue that we should understand Wood as a worldly artist who was socially-engaged. Instead of assuming that Wood's art was an exercise in nostalgic escapism, I argue that scholars should understand him as part of the conversations about agribusiness that changed American farming, many of which remain unsettled in the twenty-first century. With a different set of questions and a different set of objects chosen for intense scrutiny, I reach different conclusions about Wood's art and broader Midwestern culture. I don't see Wood as an artist who ignored contemporary farm politics, but rather as keenly interested in them. He responded to a rural visual vocabulary

animated with controversies, and he should therefore be remembered as an artist who focused on the present as well as the past. Ultimately, I argue that Wood's art was a complex meditation on the changes in agronomy, labor, and technology that would usher in the era of agribusiness that we are dealing with today.

## 1.5 ORGANIZATION OF MATERIAL

To organize the dissertation, I present agribusiness as a braid of concepts, adding a strand in each chapter, using work by Grant Wood as a springboard. This does not mean that Wood was an uncritical advocate of agribusiness. He does, in fact, usually present imagery with great subtlety and ambiguity. He is nonetheless useful in this context as a person whose creative practice was informed by wide ranges of imagery and who was intellectually engaged with his wider culture. After using Wood as an entry point to these debates, I expand on his work to reconstruct broader visual trends and systems. In this way, by the end of the dissertation a multifaceted understanding of cultural phenomena that led to agribusiness will be attained.

In chapter one I begin with Wood's painting *Dinner for Threshers* from 1934—a depiction of farm laborers—as a way to discuss agribusiness as the labor practices required for large-scale farming. I show how imagery depicting large “bonanza” farms was experienced differently from images of small-scale family homesteads. The dissertation thus begins on the farm.

Chapter two shows how Wood's illustrations of a rural *Radical* and a *Perfectionist* drawn in 1937 for Sinclair Lewis's novel *Main Street* were part of visual debates about wheat distribution and milling. This is fundamentally a chapter about how agribusiness can be defined

as aspects of the food system worth arguing about, which radicals framed polemically. In the specific debate that I reconstruct, Wood's portraits can be understood as culminating a struggle for the future of flour production that involved one of the largest companies in the US—General Mills—and a socialized alternative that was realized by the Nonpartisan League—the North Dakota State Mill and Elevator. It is thus a story of one crop—wheat—and its contentious journey after leaving the farm.

Chapter three addresses the other major grain crop—corn—by beginning with Wood's portrait of the breeder Henry Agard Wallace created for the cover of *Time Magazine*, as well as his *Corn Rooms* commissioned for Iowa hotels. The chapter's goal is to show how it became “true” that one distinct visual form of corn—yellow dent—was the best to plant—a fact that ultimately led to it becoming the quintessential crop of contemporary agribusiness. I demonstrate that, while scientific knowledge and business acumen were part of this process, on another level this was an aesthetic negotiation. It resulted in one variety becoming predominant while numerous others, of diverse shapes and colors, have faced extinction. This chapter is thus about how visual culture can both bolster ideas and narrow choices.

Chapter four takes Wood's *American Gothic* from 1930 as a starting point to consider grain farming as a set of *identities* and a *system* that focus on food. The chapter thus builds on the previous three to form a more complete synthesis of visual thinking about grain, as it was depicted from seed house to farm to miller to consumer. I show that the identities and systems articulated visually during the early twentieth century are precursors to the concept of agribusiness, as defined in the two books from 1957 that brought it to public and scholarly consciousness, *Farmer in a Business Suit* and *A Concept of Agribusiness*. Having reached the

point when the phenomena of agribusiness was named, I conclude the dissertation with a coda that explores the legacy of this imagery.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Davis and Goldberg, *A Concept of Agribusiness*, Davis and Hinshaw, *Farmer in a Business Suit*.

## 2.0 CHAPTER TWO: EXPERIENCING IMAGES OF FARM LABOR

### 2.1 INTRODUCTION

Working the harvest was one of the harshest, most uncomfortable, and often deadly endeavors undertaken in modern America, but that is not how Grant Wood portrayed it. It is difficult, indeed, to imagine a more positive image than his *Dinner for Threshers* painted in 1934, showing smiling men seated around a table as a woman brings in a bowl of mashed potatoes held triumphantly aloft (Figure 1). What is not immediately clear, however, is that this image depends on visual strategies that evoked specific experiences, and which depend on understanding the social ramifications of farm labor. To start unpacking these realities, we might ask ourselves questions, such as: Who are these threshers? Why are they eating? And when is this scene taking place? Such questions require us to meditate on the dilemmas that faced all farm workers at the turn of the twentieth century. To answer them it is useful to compare *Dinner for Threshers* with other depictions of farming. By so doing, we can understand the visual culture of the era as grounded in the experiences of people who worked the land.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> The painting is now in the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco. At 20 x 81 1/16 inches it is a large tempera painting. For a good description of *Dinner for Threshers*, see the exhibition catalog entry on it in Corn, *Grant Wood*, 104, 17.



The fact that a dichotomy existed in American farming from the middle of nineteenth century is germane. Single-family and large-scale farms have been concurrent since 1862 when the first “bonanza” farms were founded. Although specific techniques of farming are fundamentally different in the twenty first century, the conceptual problems have remained remarkably unchanged. Bonanzas were the first “factory” farms, and they were usually viewed as temporary investments by their owners, who hoped to make a quick profit and eventually sell the land. They were thus not intended to result in a longstanding or sustainable lifestyle. They also represented a fundamental shift in the American understanding of what rural life should be—a transition to an economy of scale.<sup>19</sup>

Small farms, in contrast, were often the result of homesteading, in which farmers could acquire 160 acres of land in the US or Canada by merely living on it for five years and “improving” it by farming. Such an arrangement was possible after 1862 in the US under the Homestead Act and after 1872 in Canada under the Dominion Lands Act. The major difference between the two countries was that in Canada a \$10 registration fee was required, but in the US registration was free. In Canada it was also possible to later acquire an additional 160 acres of land for an additional \$10 fee.

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<sup>19</sup> On the hallmarks of bonanza farms, see Hiram M. Drache, *The Day of the Bonanza: A History of Bonanza Farming in the Red River Valley of the North* (Fargo: North Dakota Institute for Regional Studies, 1964), 71-75, John Lee Coulter, “Industrial History of the Valley of the Red River of the North,” *Collections of the State Historical Society of North Dakota* 3 (1910): 580-81, William Allen White, “The Business of a Wheat Farm,” *Scribner’s Magazine*, November 1897, 541, Poultney Bigelow, “The Bonanza Farms of the West,” *The Atlantic Monthly*, January 1880. The book which remains the best resource on these farms, which is a careful study of Cass, Richland, and Trail Counties in North Dakota, is Drache, *The Day of the Bonanza*. For information on the northwestern states, especially Washington and Oregon, see the trade book by Kirby Brumfield, *This Was Wheat Farming: A Pictorial History of the Farms and Farmers of the Northwest Who Grow the Nation’s Bread* (Seattle: Superior Publishing, 1968). A stereoscopic photograph taken in Idaho and marketed by the Sears and Roebuck Company (Card 952 of their Metropolitan Series) and also distributed without a publisher indicated also describes this type of farm as widespread. I will subsequently discuss this card in detail.

Bonanza farms were founded because of railroad land grants that were made, beginning in 1862, by the governments of the US and Canada to establish transcontinental railways. The land was used both to lay track on and also sold to investors for farming, mining, and other development that funded construction. Of the nineteenth-century transcontinental lines, the Union Pacific, Central Pacific, Southern Pacific, Northern Pacific, and Canadian Pacific were all funded in this way. Only the Great Northern was built by private investment. To be classified as a bonanza a farm had to be at least 3,000 acres and the average size was 7,000. Most bonanza farms grew only one crop for profit—wheat. The development of these farms was covered by national magazines, such as *Scribner's* and *The Atlantic Monthly*. They were most prevalent in the Red River Valley of the north, but existed throughout the western US and Canada. At least 91 such farms existed in North Dakota where the history has been best-studied. These two types of farms polarized the agricultural community, as they were based on mutually exclusive approaches to rural life. A relevant question, then, is whether Grant Wood was familiar with both types of farms and cared about their operation—and the answer is yes.

## **2.2 GRANT WOOD'S ARTISTIC MINDSET**

Wood knew farms. He did not view them through the vagueness of an outsider, and he no-doubt had strong opinions about farm life. Most art historians agree that his farm sensibility came from the nineteenth century. Although Wood lived in a small town for most of his life—Cedar Rapids, Iowa—and likely gained some new understanding of agriculture there, his intimate experience with farm chores during the 1890s and increased responsibility in 1901 were the foundation of his knowledge. Thus even his later paintings are deeply informed by the Victorian era. He was

raised on a farm in Iowa near Anamosa until the age of ten when his father died. After the death he ran the farm for a year with his mother and siblings. He raised goats and chickens, milked cows, and worked the harvest. When the steam thresher was running he served as the water boy. The family then moved to town, and although Wood never farmed again his family owned a cow there. Given these facts, we should understand his well-known statement from 1936, “all the really good ideas I’d ever had came to me while I was milking a cow” as more than facetious. It affirmed his identity as a farmer.<sup>20</sup>

*Dinner for Threshers* is no exception to Wood’s Victorian sensibility, but placing the painting’s imagery in time is complicated. Indeed, it seems to bookend 42 years. The painting contains a date—1892—which is painted at the peak of the barn. Wallpaper, the print of horses on the wall, and a wood stove would all fit into this era. But the late-nineteenth-century Victorian architecture is filled with people that would have fit in on family farms well into the twentieth century, and the women’s dresses reflect the fashions of the 1930s. The image thus asks us to ponder a broad period of time, as we unravel both its overt and implied content. With these facts in mind we can start to view the painting as farmers and laborers from throughout this era would have.

Given Wood’s widespread interest in visual culture—indicated by his collection of numerous items and work in several media—it is particularly appropriate to compare his paintings with diverse imagery from other farms. Indeed, the study of clippings, dishware, and garbage were part of his artistic practice. Although best-known for easel painting, the creation of

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<sup>20</sup> Corn notes that Wood was actually born in 1891, but that he frequently confused his birth year. Corn, *Grant Wood*, 104. For a discussion of his contributions running the farm, see Graham, John Zug, and McDonald, *My Brother, Grant Wood*, xv, 1-8. The quote about milking was originally published in “Iowa Cows Give Grant Wood His Best Thoughts,” *New York Herald Tribune*, January 23, 1936.

advertisements, furniture, jewelry, junk sculpture, domestic architecture, dishware, a chandelier, a moving panorama, magazine covers, book jackets, illustrations, interior decor, theatrical sets, stained glass, and collage were all parts of Wood's skill set in addition to the traditional fine arts of fresco, lithography, bronze casting, and drawing.<sup>21</sup>

By taking some of these visual forms into account we can see that different sizes of farms are correlated with different world views—and these differences are not subtle. Despite the limited information available in any given painting, print, or photograph of rural life, the size of a farm is usually discernable. This is as true of Grant Wood's paintings as R. W. Leigh's drawings, Currier and Ives' prints, F. Jay Haynes's photographs, United States postage, or Truman Ingersoll's stereoscopic cards. After determining the size of a farm in an image it is possible to extrapolate some of the history of the land and some of the values of the farmers. Such correlations allow us to anchor these images in the aesthetics and politics of their time.

### 2.3 EXPERIENCE AS A CRITICAL FRAMEWORK

A comparative approach to visual culture is also useful for reconstructing how images were *experienced* in very personal ways. Although Wood was an early advocate of the study of visual culture, he did not use those terms. Visual culture is sometimes thought of as a late-twentieth-century academic development, but its roots are much earlier. For example, the philosopher John Dewey's book from 1934, *Art as Experience*, broadened the definition of art beyond lofty

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<sup>21</sup> Examples of his work in all of these media are contained in the two major monographs on Wood as well as a catalog on his decorative arts: James M. Dennis, *Grant Wood: A Study in American Art and Culture* (New York: Viking Press, 1975), Corn, *Grant Wood*, Jane C. Milosch, ed., *Grant Wood's Studio: Birthplace of American Gothic* (Cedar Rapids and New York: Cedar Rapids Museum of Art and Prestel, 2005).

experiences—such as viewing paintings by great masters—to include simple experiences—such as poking a fire to create beautiful sparks and flames. His theories are rarely taken into consideration by art historians today, but they remain prominent among artists and aestheticians. Wood expounded the virtues of Dewey’s ideas, noting the example of fire specifically, in an article that he published in two places in 1940. In this article he explained that his earliest aesthetic experiences were personal meditations on farm life, especially the feather patterns of Plymouth Rock hens, which he drew at age three as semicircles.<sup>22</sup>

There is a good rationale for using experience as a critical framework in this chapter. Most importantly, focusing on the experiences of specific people or groups of individuals allows us to personalize and humanize the analysis. In this case, the focus will be on the experiences of image-makers, patrons, farmers, and farm workers. By taking each of these perspectives seriously, the richness of humankind is better understood, and we can empathize with the logic of each player in the visual conversations that will unfold. Given that some of these individuals were profoundly powerful, while others were marginalized, this approach also gives voice to perspectives that are often forgotten. While the historical record rarely includes overt commentary by all of these individuals, it is nonetheless worth taking them each into consideration as much as possible, as it is through their unique desires, pains, customs, challenges, and joys that these images became initially meaningful. This personalization lies at the core of the concept of experiencing, and it helps to prevent analyses from becoming a set of reductive generalizations.

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<sup>22</sup> John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1934, 1959). On Wood’s broad definition of art, see Grant Wood, “Art in the Daily Life of the Child,” *Rural America*, March 1940, 7-9. The article was first printed in the *National Parent-Teacher* the same year.

Dewey hinted at this personalization when he explained that we should focus on the conditions that artists worked under, rather than the objects themselves, and to link art to everyday life. He said that our “task is to restore continuity between the refined and intensified forms of experience that are works of art and the everyday events, doings, and sufferings that are universally recognized to constitute experience.” He believed that we must look at “the sights that hold the crowd—the fire-engine rushing by; the machines excavating enormous holes in the earth; the human-fly climbing the steeple side; the men perched high in air on girders, throwing and catching red-hot bolts.” These experiences were not merely what we happen upon in life, but the *most profound* experiences. As he explained, often “things are experienced but not in such a way that they are composed into *an* experience. There is distraction and dispersion; what we observe and what we think, what we desire and what we get, are at odds with each other.” Furthermore, merely ridding oneself of distractions does not create an experience unless what we happen upon contains “fulfillment.” To explain fulfillment he noted that it is when “a piece of work is finished in a way that is satisfactory; a problem receives its solution; a game is played through; a situation, whether that of eating a meal, playing a game of chess, carrying on a conversation, writing a book, or taking part in a political campaign, is so rounded out that its close is a consummation and not a cessation.” While this definition is admittedly vague, he said that those events which make us say “that *was* an experience” are what he is referring to.<sup>23</sup>

Thoughtful reflection on the two meanings of the word experience can further clarify why we should use the concept. On one level an individual’s experiences are all of the things that the person has literally done as a human being. In the case of Grant Wood we can say that he had the experiences of doing farm chores as well as looking at fine art. On another, deeper, level, an

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<sup>23</sup> Quotations and key ideas are in Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 3, 5, 35-36. Emphasis is in the original.

experience is more than an act. It is the mental recognition of an event in a direct, unmediated, way, and the decision if that event is somehow important. It is this latter meaning that is most relevant to discussions of visual culture. As humans look about their environment, we are seeking out information that helps us to make sense of the world, and on a slightly removed level we do the same thing with images. Exploring the content of a painting or stereoscopic photograph, for example, is a way to experience it, albeit in a vicarious way that was steered by the image-maker.

Grant Wood himself acknowledged the importance of this search for meaning. Indeed, his statement in the article about Dewey that we should “dispense with the notion that art consists solely of a number of strange objects shut up in museums, galleries, and the mansions of the wealthy” is an attempt to tie art to individuals in meaningful ways. Similarly, the philosopher noted that we must look at artistic culture not collected by museums because “generally speaking, the typical collector is the typical capitalist”—suggesting that museums are filled with the most rare and valuable, but not necessarily the most important, materials. On the same page that he described the aesthetics of fire, Dewey noted that “the arts which today have most vitality for the average person are things he does not take to be arts: for instance, the movie, jazzed music, the comic strip, and, too frequently, newspaper accounts of love-nests, murders, and exploits of bandits.” As is clear from these passages, Dewey discussed the arts in a broad sense—including mass culture and theatrics—but I will focus only on how his ideas illuminate our understanding of visual materials. With this theory in mind, it is useful to return to *Dinner for Threshers* while reconstructing what the profound visual experiences of farmers and laborers would have been.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup>Wood, “Art in the Daily Life of the Child,” 7-9. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 5-6, 8.

## 2.4 REPRESENTING COLLECTIVE AND WAGE LABOR

*Dinner for Threshers* is a celebration of the camaraderie of laborers who are heralded in numerous ways. But who are these laborers and what experiences might be significant to them? Harvesting is a necessary task, but how to do so was controversial. Sometimes groups of neighbors formed “threshing rings” in which they harvested each others’ crops communally, while other times farmers hired migrant harvest workers. Each practice was defended by its adherents. The visual evidence in *Dinner for Threshers* suggests that these are neighbors. Hired laborers were usually in their late teens or early twenties, but the average age in *Dinner for Threshers* might be thirty or thirty five. None are bald or gray or have the slender physiques of eighteen year olds. All of the men wear clean overalls and shirts without signs of wear. Their hair is well-groomed, and, indeed, a man on the far left is combing. Their faces are red from the sun, but healthy. Although their musculature is concealed behind tubular clothing, they appear to be strong and slightly overweight. They are sweat-free. One can imagine smelling the food but not the body odor of fourteen exhausted men.

An inventory of Wood’s painting reveals some of the complexity that might have been noticed by people during the early twentieth century. He composed it to evoke both voyeurism and sanctity. We peer into a home like a dollhouse through a missing wall, and the remaining walls divide the canvas into a triptych. The outdoors is on the left, dining room is in the middle, and kitchen is on the right. The central room is asymmetrical. The lone window is right of center, and a chimney vent is to the left. The doorframe on the right is cut in two, missing the woodwork nearest to us, while the door on the left can be seen framed in its entirety. The wood around the doors is painted a pleasant shade of gray, and decorative circles are carved into the corner blocks. A kerosene lamp tells us that there is no electricity in the home, but the presence of a windmill in



the upper left quadrant suggests that there may be a generator on the premises. Draft animals and a cart are in the background. On the opposite side women are cooking on a wood stove. The focal point is the men in the middle. Although arranged around the long table in a composition that evokes the sanctity of the last supper, Wood has carefully placed fourteen men in the room, suggesting that he wanted to differentiate it from the twelve disciples and Christ. The men are culturally refined. An individual in the center sits with his back to us on a piano stool, indicating that the family enjoys music. In the background is a print published by Currier and Ives titled *Horses in a Thunderstorm* (Figure 2).<sup>25</sup> Food is abundant in the bowls and on the stove. The house appears comfortable and well-maintained. Overall life seems good for them. Taken as a whole this itemization suggests that we are being privileged to see intimate family life, but it does not help us to understand why Wood might have painted the scene that he did. To answer that question we must unpack some of the broader complexity of images from the era.

A drawing of hired harvest workers focuses on the type of person that Wood did not show. *Types of Harvest Hands* by William Robinson Leigh was created in 1897 to illustrate an article in *Scribner's* (Figure 3). The article was part of a series on great businesses, and today it is considered one of the best sources of information on nineteenth century bonanza farms. The editor sent Leigh to Mayville, North Dakota, to do research, so the illustration is well-informed by the realities of farming. Leigh did not originally want to make drawings for magazines, but he

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<sup>25</sup> Although they do not discuss the specific Currier and Ives prints that I analyze in this chapter, both Corn and Dennis acknowledged that Wood was interested in them. Dennis, *Grant Wood*, 114, 47, Corn, *Grant Wood*, 25, 33, 45, 74, 75, 118. *Horses in a Thunderstorm* is included in Bernard Reilly, *Currier and Ives: A Catalogue Raisonné* (Detroit: Gale Research, 1984), number 3190. For a reproduction of the print, refer to the database by Vanessa Rudisill Stern, *A Gallery of Currier and Ives Lithographs* (<http://freepages.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~vstern/index.html>, created in April 2002 and accessed April 12, 2008). Stern's goal is to make digital reproductions of every Currier and Ives print available on the Internet, submitted by collectors. As of April 2008 she has made 5,480 available, out of an estimated 8,500 published by the firm.

turned to the art editor at *Scribner's* as a source of income in 1896. He was a regular contributor, and in 1897 alone that magazine published ninety eight of his illustrations. Between 1898 and 1906 he expanded the venues that he published in, including the popular magazines *Collier's*, *McClure's*, *Harper's*, and *Bobbs-Merrill*. Today Leigh is remembered as one of the best artists to capture the “wild west,” with a reputation that rivals the slightly better-known Frederic Remington. Upon Leigh's death in 1955 the Gilcrease Museum recognized his significance by acquiring his entire studio and art collection.<sup>26</sup>

Despite superficial similarity—both are arrays of laborers displayed on a horizontal band—the experience of viewing these images results in radically different understandings of farm work. We come to see Leigh's men as pathetic while Wood's are exalted. While Wood shows the well-fed, Leigh emphasizes the gaunt. Wood depicts contentedness and Leigh frustration. Wood shows clean-shaven faces, but Leigh depicts bushy mustaches. Wood renders smooth skin—Leigh wrinkles. While Wood shows the clean, Leigh offers the unkempt. Wood emphasizes nice clothes and Leigh ragged fabric. Wood includes bare heads, but Leigh opts for crumpled hats. Wood shows impeccable posture, but Leigh's laborers are slouching. Wood arranges men conversing with each other, although Leigh's confront the viewer. Wood renders a well-maintained house, but the Leigh background is a well-worn fence. While Wood includes both men and women, Leigh includes only men. Wood focuses on an interior and Leigh the outdoors. Overall, Wood's men seem valuable to society, but Leigh's discarded. Wood's

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<sup>26</sup> The illustration was published in William Allen White, “The Business of a Wheat Farm,” *Scribner's Magazine*, November 1897, 534. The best source on W. R. Leigh is June DuBois's biography. She drew heavily on Leigh's own memoir from 1952, *My Life*, which remains in a private collection and unpublished. On his work for *Scribner's*, see June DuBois, *W. R. Leigh: The Definitive Illustrated Biography* (Kansas City: Lowell Press, 1977), 47-49.

message is that the men are content and enmeshed in a supportive community, while Leigh's message is that these types of men are emotionally alienated and socially segregated.

Each image validates the experiences of land owners, albeit one addresses small farming while the other large. Wood's *Dinner for Threshers* and Leigh's *Types of Harvest Hands* are opposite extremes of the dichotomy between self-reliant family farms and industrial farming operations. The former were able to harvest with only neighborhood help, and are celebrated by Wood, who validates the farmer-as-laborer. The latter employed migratory harvesters that travelled annually from the southern United States up to Canada as the wheat crop ripened, and they are derided by the land owners who depend on their exploitation. Employee turnover was high on these large farms. While the field laborers were usually men, some women also worked in the fields and others sought employment cooking and doing domestic tasks. Hired harvesters were highly stigmatized. Tens of thousands were needed, and according to a government official many farmers believed them to be "strange," "unclean," and "diseased." One newspaper accused the laborers of being "vagrants" expelled from cities "with the strict injunction to keep moving until they hit the harvest fields." Its editors further charged that "The large city propagates this class of humanity and tried to cleanse its social system by dumping its refuse upon the rural communities, thereby forcing [upon] them a burden of depraved humanity and lawlessness." Clearly these were not people whose lives were widely celebrated.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> The quotes and facts are from Toby Higbie, "Indispensable Outcasts: Harvest Laborers in the Wheat Belt of the Middle West, 1890-1925," *Labor History* 38, no. 4 (1997): 401, 04-05. The original sources for the quotations are William M. Duffus, "Labor Market Conditions in the Harvest Fields of the Middle West," in *Report to the U.S. Commission on Industrial Relations*, Record Group 174, U.S. National Archives, Washington D.C. (December 1, 1914), 7, "Sins of the City," *Webster (SD) Reporter and Farmer* as reprinted in *Aberdeen (SD) Daily News* August 1, 1913, 2.

The lives of these harvesters were uncomfortable, lonely, and dangerous. Few farms had bunk houses, so laborers often slept in sheds, barns, or even chicken coops. While a hired hand on a small farm might associate closely with the family employer, on farms with ten or more laborers the norm was to eat at separate tables and be excluded from family life. Because public transportation was poor the laborers hopped moving freight trains that often took their lives. The practice of hopping trains continued as late as 1921, when 60% of harvesters travelled this way, and only 35% paid a fare. Although the freeloading laborers were beaten if caught on board, farmers pressured railroad officials to include empty boxcars on each train and to slow when passing through towns. Officially, 156,390 people died hopping trains between 1888 and 1905, but the actual number of deaths may have been three times higher. Burying the mangled corpses in unmarked graves beside the tracks was the norm to avoid the inefficiency of contacting coroners. During the mid-1920s used cars became available and train travel was slowly phased out.<sup>28</sup>

These realities of large-scale farm labor help to explain why Wood created such a vehemently positive image of neighborly threshing. He is precisely the type of person that would be suspicious of industrial farming. Because he grew up poor on a small family-run farm he would not identify with the investors who owned bonanza operations. Furthermore, small farmers tended to emphasize the community spirit achieved through helping neighbors to thresh, while frowning upon the broken social bonds of bonanza farm harvests. Wood's opinion of farm laborers would have likely sunk even lower during adulthood when living in Cedar Rapids, where he would have encountered the migrant laborers. In 1921 two thirds of harvest laborers

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<sup>28</sup> On transportation of harvest workers, including mortalities from hopping trains, see Higbie, "Indispensable Outcasts," 399-400. Higbie's statistics are from Major Pangborn, "Discussion of Vagrancy," in *Proceedings of the National Conference of Charities and Corrections* (Indianapolis: 1907), 73-74.

found work through “street interviews”—serendipitous encounters with farmers. Townsfolk like Wood complained about the increased crime, public drunkenness, and noise that are the predictable result of underemployed loitering. Regardless of these social problems, these are people who contributed to their society, and taking the tasks that they accomplished and places that they worked into consideration will further the analysis.<sup>29</sup>

## **2.5 DEPICTING LANDSCAPES AS WORKPLACES**

How to portray the land itself in a way that would create significant experiences for the owners and laborers—to use Dewey’s terms—was a problem that artists faced. What visual properties might not only convey the realities of large and small farms, but do so in a way that was visually engaging? In other words, how might we expect to see the images manipulated to create landscapes that conformed to the sensibilities of different types of farmers, laborers, and the public? Some key features of both large and small farms are straightforward to identify. While terrain might be thought of as incidental, the largest farms clustered on the Great Plains near railroad tracks. As such, we should expect depictions of them to emphasize flatness while smaller farms will often be hillier. On a purely visual level, it is worth noting that perspective can be manipulated to emphasize these key features of intimate homesteads or expansive bonanzas. Another relevant fact is that buildings existed in higher density on small farms, so we should expect those depictions to emphasize houses, barns, and sheds.

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<sup>29</sup> Higbie describes street interviews and the response of small townspeople on page 406.

Because *Dinner for Threshers* does not include much of the outdoors, we should turn to another painting from about the same time for insight into Wood's art. In *Spring Turning* from 1936 the division of land is the subject matter (Figure 4). Like most of Wood's farmscapes, this painting is defined by its patterns. An aerial perspective allows us to see fields appearing like the squares of a quilt top, echoed in the squared-off shapes of clouds that roll across the sky. While the patterning in the image makes it generic—we would have a hard time matching it to any specific locale—it also reinforces an understanding of the land. Small square fields are typical of those on the modest-sized farms acquired via the homestead act, which were platted in a gridiron pattern with township roads running north to south and east to west one mile apart from each other.

This quilt-top type of patterning is an important part of Wood's mindset. One example of his imagery plays on the similarity with fabric directly—a textile design from about 1939 that never made it to production (Figure 5). Titled *Spring Plowing*, it shows eight squares of land, edged with fence posts resembling stitches. Numerous paintings and prints also show small rectilinear fields near each other. See, for example, *Young Corn* from 1931, *Fall Plowing* from 1931, *Spring Plowing* from 1932, *Arbor Day* from 1932, *Near Sundown* from 1933, *In the Spring*, *Farmer Planting Fence Posts* from 1939, *Approaching Storm* from 1940, and *Spring in the Country* from 1941. Returning to the example at hand, in *Spring Turning* we see a tiny farmer in the foreground using a hand plow as he travels the perimeter of the land. Another man is doing the same in the middleground on the right. And still another is working on the horizon line at the far left. The implication, of course, is that they are neighbors. It is not clear what they are preparing to plant, but a herd of cattle in the upper left suggests that these are diversified farms rather than monoculture plantations. As such, the farmers will likely plant some wheat in

the fall, and some oats, barley, and corn in the spring. Given the title, this image refers to the latter crops.<sup>30</sup>

Bonanza farms, in contrast, tended to show the land as a unified whole. Uninterrupted expanses that reflected their extensive acreage were the norm in photography and prints. When examining depictions of the land on bonanza farms a few images stand out and are therefore worthy of close scrutiny. Some of them were widely available but others were designed for a narrow viewership; some were straightforward but others were meant to deceive; and some were technically difficult to create but others were easily made. While each image would be difficult to interpret alone, together they can be used to create a composite understanding of the visual culture of bonanza farming.

Like Grant Wood's *Spring Turning*, depictions of bonanza farmland used patterning to convey meaning. However, while Wood emphasized right angles to segment the land, some of the best photographs of bonanza farms are filled with parallel lines to suggest expansiveness. One such photograph was created by the photographer Frank Jay Haynes. While Haynes is usually remembered for his 4,800 photographs of Yellowstone Park, which were used to promote the area until as late as the 1950s, these are but one slice of his creative output. He also had studios in Fargo-Moorhead from 1876 to 1911 and in St. Paul beginning in 1889. Documenting the Dalrymple bonanza farm was the first commission of F. Jay Haynes for the Northern Pacific (NP) Railway, in 1876, and he later became the company's official photographer. The farm adjoined the tracks, and the photos were intended to demonstrate the richness of the land and profitability of living near the line. The railway officials renovated a car for him in 1885 to use

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<sup>30</sup> For reproductions of these images, see Dennis, *Grant Wood*, 95, 98, 175, 76, 78, 80, 207, 23. The fabric design was commissioned by Reeves Lewenthal and is reproduced and briefly discussed by Corn, *Grant Wood*, 56.

as his exclusive “Haynes Palace Studio” and provided free transportation—a situation that he took advantage of until 1905. Bonanza farms such as the Dalrymple family’s were considered “scenic marvels” of America and merited inclusion in coffee table books—the very types of impressive subject matter that Dewey gravitated toward. Haynes contributed to one such book, *America’s Wonderlands*, in 1893.<sup>31</sup>

Both of the Dalrymple farm photographs in this album are harvest scenes, the first showing horse-drawn rigs and the second showing laborers shocking grain. The former is titled *Harvest Scene on Dalrymple’s Farm, North Dakota* and it focuses on the relationship of workers to the land itself (Figure 6). This “harvest” actually shows the aftermath of harvesting, when plant matter is plowed under. A line of mule-driven rigs is arranged to echo the fresh tillage. The entire lower half of the image is filled with a single field that extends to the horizon, where the lines converge. Such terrain may suggest the scale of the farm, as flatness was a near-necessary condition for large farming because it made dividing land and coordinating tilling and harvesting easier.

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<sup>31</sup> The contributors to this book are simply described as “three of the best out-of-doors photographers in the county,” but I have confirmed that Haynes was one of them by matching the photo titled *Liberty Cap and Mammoth Hot Springs Hotel* reproduced on page 258 with the fully cataloged photo titled *Cap of Liberty and Mammoth Springs Hotel* in the collection of the George Eastman House (number 70:0181:0004). Two men seated at the base of the cap make clear that the prints derive from the same negative. J. W. Buel, *America’s Wonderlands: A Pictorial and Descriptive History of Our Country’s Scenic Marvels as Delineated by Pen and Camera* (New York: Hunt and Eaton, 1893), 12, 278-81. The core bibliography on Haynes includes: Montana Historical Society, *F. Jay Haynes, Fifty Views: Photographs from the Haynes Collection*, Montana Historical Society (Helena: Montana Historical Society Press, 1981), ———, *F. Jay Haynes, Photographer* (Helena: Montana Historical Society Press, 1981), Freeman Tilden, *Following the Frontier with F. Jay Haynes, Pioneer Photographer of the Old West* (New York: Knopf, 1964), Edward W. Nolan, *Northern Pacific Views: The Railroad Photography of F. Jay Haynes, 1876-1905* (Helena: Montana Historical Society Press, 1983). Of these, the Nolan text is the most complete and reliable. It should also be noted that while the Tilden book is interesting it mixes fact with fiction to create a seamless narrative. For the history of the Dalrymple farm, see Drache, *The Day of the Bonanza*, 92-105, John Stewart Dalrymple, *Oliver Dalrymple: The Story of a Bonanza Farmer* (Minneapolis: Privately Printed, 1960). The latter is a celebratory account written by the founder’s grandson. On the NP Railway’s *Wonderland* annual, see Nolan, *Northern Pacific Views*, 172-74.



The print run for *America's Wonderlands* must have been large, as it was concurrently released by at least twenty publishers in the United States and Canada. Given the high profile of the book and its subject matter, the inclusion of two images of the Dalrymple farm juxtaposed with images of Yellowstone's geysers on the facing pages becomes culturally relevant as a window for Americans to understand modern farming (Figure 7). The album was marketed door-to-door by salespeople and could be purchased in four colors and qualities of binding. Such canvassing was a common way to distribute books in rural areas where there were few stores, and it was a common occupation for women. Mark Twain distributed most of his writing this way, as did thousands of other authors. Salespeople were prompted to say that *America's Wonderlands* was "the only *Complete Picturesque America* ever published, and the only one that represents the scenery of our native land in *photographs*" (emphasis in original). Such an assertion presented the volume as an update and superior replacement to one of the earliest, and most successful, canvassed books—*Picturesque America* by William Cullen Bryant from 1872.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> *America's Wonderlands* was published by the following presses: both Historical Publishing and Sessler and Dungan of Philadelphia; the five publishers W. W. Wilson, J. Williams, Hunt and Eaton, Langan and Brother, and Pierce Supply of New York; M. Hoyte of Charleston; B.F. Johnson of Richmond; the four publishers George M. Smith, J.S. Round, Union Publishing, and Desmond Publishing of Boston; World Publishing of Denver; J. Dewing of San Francisco; Caie, Montgomery, and Moore of Cincinnati; McDonald and Company of New Orleans; both N.D. Thompson Publishing and Historical Publishing of Saint Louis; and J.W. MacGregor Publishing of Vancouver—see the books with OCLC WorldCat accession numbers 619076, 6121701, 9710328, 10126025, 10618746, 16844625, 18817870, 21791756, 22747078, 26450595, 27076811, 3143275, 3286032, 3909622, 42781506, 51605952, 5936984, 80311149, 81318655, and 8318068. For a scholarly treatment of book canvassing, see Amy M. Thomas, "'There Is Nothing So Effective as a Personal Canvass': Revaluing Nineteenth-Century American Subscription Books," *Book History* 1, no. 1 (1998): 140-55, Ronald J. Zboray and Mary Saracino Zboray, *Literary Dollars and Social Sense: A People's History of the Mass Market Book* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 130-39, Ann Fabian, *The Unvarnished Truth: Personal Narratives in Nineteenth-Century America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 17-18, 25, 124, 87. For examples of canvassing books, see virtual exhibitions at The University of Virginia and The University of Pennsylvania Libraries. The former library focuses on Mark Twain and includes information on canvassing his works while the latter focuses on the nearly 3,000 volumes in their Zinman Collection of Canvassing Books. Stephen Railton, *Mark Twain in His Times* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia

Despite the questionable originality, *America's Wonderlands* represents an intriguing time in the history of printing. While *Picturesque America* had been illustrated with woodcuts and steel engravings, *America's Wonderlands* was illustrated with halftone printing—a new technology that had only become widely available the year before it was published, in 1892. At that time the Levy Company of Chicago began to manufacture supplies. This technology enabled photographs to be mass-produced cheaply. The halftones in these volumes are of particularly high quality—the screen being nearly imperceptible—and described as using the most up-to-date techniques of “fine art printing.” Most impressively, eight of the prints were created with the “camerograph” technique to simulate hand coloring.<sup>33</sup>

According to the leading description in *America's Wonderlands*, the book included:

More than 500 Magnificent Photographic Views of the Majestic Mountains, Bewildering Canons [sic], Beautiful Waterfalls, Curious and Weird Formations, Charming Valleys, Picturesque Lakes, Famous Caverns, Spouting Geysers, Colossal Glaciers, and hundreds of other Natural Wonders that render America the most famous and beautiful among the Nations of the world. Interspersed with

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Library: <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/railton/index2.html>, 1996 updated 2007), Lynne Farrington and Michael Ryan, “Agents Wanted:” *Subscription Publishing in America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Library: <http://www.library.upenn.edu/exhibits/rbm/agents/index.html>, 2003). The canvassing edition of *America's Wonderlands* for salespeople was published by W. D. Condit of Des Moines in 1893. It contains samples of the four bindings, extracts from the text, sample photographs, and yellow slips of paper with instructions for salespeople about how to narrate specific pages. Such slips of paper were intended to be removed before presenting the sample book to the public. On Bryant's *Picturesque America*, see “The World—Past and Present, Near and Far” in Farrington and Ryan, “Agents Wanted,” Sue Rainey, *Creating Picturesque America: Monument to the Natural and Cultural Landscape* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 1994). The original is William Cullen Bryant and Oliver Bell Bunce, *Picturesque America, or, the Land We Live In: A Delineation by Pen and Pencil of the Mountains, Rivers, Lakes, Forests, Water-Falls, Shores, Cañons, Valleys, Cities, and Other Picturesque Features of Our Country* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1872).

<sup>33</sup> The quotations are from these instructions for canvassers affixed to the title page and first camerograph plate of the canvassing edition. David Clayton Phillips, “Art for Industry's Sake: Halftone Technology, Mass Photography and the Social Transformation of American Print Culture, 1880-1920” (PhD Dissertation, Yale University, 1996), 14.

History, Legend, Adventure, and Entrancing Descriptions of the Marvelous Regions and Natural Wonders embraced within our vast domain, from Alaska's frigid clime to Florida's summerlands.<sup>34</sup>

Clearly the visuals were meant to impress their audience.

To understand why the Dalrymple bonanza farm is included in this album we must explore the deceptiveness of the book. What is not evident from the images or text is that this is a piece of propaganda for the railroads, including the Northern Pacific (NP) line. The book claimed to provide its readers with direct insight into the American countryside through pictures. Although understated in the organization of the book, one of the most significant inclusions is the set of photos of a bonanza farm. The railroad is never credited as the instigator of this book, but the evidence is clear. Even the title of the book is strikingly similar to the promotional annual for the NP, *Wonderland*, which usually featured Haynes' name on the cover and used his photographs to promote the area from 1885-1906. Despite Haynes' status as the official photographer for the NP, the text of *America's Wonderlands* painstakingly denies an official connection:

It is seemly to add that our tour was made wholly at the expense of the publishers. Free transportation was offered us over all the railroads on which we traveled, but all such courtesies were uniformly refused, because an acceptance would have placed us under obligations to manifest some favoritism, and thus interfere with the declared purpose of the publishers to issue a work on American scenery in which the views and descriptions should be given truthfully, and without partiality. We therefore selected the routes which promised most satisfactory

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<sup>34</sup> Buel, *America's Wonderlands*, title page.

results, without regard to personal convenience, having in view the ambition to present and describe the most interesting, if not always the most famous, scenery of our country, and in so doing produce a work of which all Americans, like the publishers, may be justly proud.<sup>35</sup>

Although ostensibly three photographers contributed to the volume, Haynes seems to be the most important, as evidenced by the prominence of Yellowstone, the presence of the Dalrymple farm, and a photograph of a railroad car labeled “Historical Palace Studio” as the frontispiece that is nearly identical to photographs of the “Haynes Palace Studio.” Given these connections with the NP and Haynes, we can infer that this imagery is serving the interests of bonanza farmers, and that it is celebrating the large-scale operations enabled by the railroads. It suggests that people should ride on the NP line to see the impressive acreage, or buy their own farms near it. By looking more broadly at imagery intended to impress people with the grandeur of large-scale farms, we can see that Haynes’ strategies did not function alone. Before doing so, however, it is useful to interrogate images of small farms.

It is worth noting that smaller operations were interspersed with larger ones on the plains, and that images of them also exist. While these have some affinity with depictions of bonanzas, they manipulated visual properties to meet their own agendas. For example, a farm scene used as column headings in the *Nonpartisan Leader* newspaper that targeted small farmers shows a strategy for manipulating linear perspective and the vantage point to portray homesteads (Figure 8). The header was used to introduce “Between the Rows by Farmer Jones”—a regular feature of the paper that focused on the practicalities of farm life. It shows a single field, but the lines are

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 15.

used to emphasize the importance of a farm family by placing a home where the lines of tillage converge.<sup>36</sup>

Given that Wood included a print by Currier and Ives in *Dinner for Threshers*—one of his visual statements about small farming—we should examine how this firm’s imagery fits into the dialogue as well. Currier and Ives published numerous farmscapes during the 1860s. Because the prints were affordable and often reproduced on dishes, calendars, and ephemera they were familiar to most people around the turn of the twentieth century. Although the images peaked in popularity during the 1860s, their use continued and they remained available for decades. Indeed, they remain popular old-fashioned imagery during the twenty first century. The firm advertised itself as “the Grand Central Depot for Cheap and Popular Prints” and their products as “suitable for framing or the ornamenting of walls ... the backs of bird cages, clock fronts, or any other place where elegant tasteful decoration is required.” Most of these prints were produced anonymously, although a few were made by such well-known artists as George Inness, Eastman Johnson, and George Catlin. Some of the firm’s farmscapes were cycles of prints corresponding to the four seasons, while others stood alone.

New England farmsteads were the most common, and their celebrated four-print series on extra-large paper *American Farm Scenes* is an excellent example of this. The first image is most relevant to this discussion, as it focuses on an aspect of agronomy—plowing (Figure 9). The other three focus on the feeding of chickens, caring for draft animals, and the farmstead in winter. The print at hand is divided such that irregular terrain fills the middle and background, where a farm home and barn are visible. The foreground shows a subject that I will focus on later in the chapter—plowing across a picture plane. Taken as a whole, we are left understanding that

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<sup>36</sup> Farmer Jones, “Between the Rows,” *Nonpartisan Leader*, August 16, 1917, 13.

fields are interspersed amongst rolling hills and groves of trees, with an organization that conforms to the natural terrain. While small areas can be cultivated with crops in straight rows, the rule is organic, meandering, paths.<sup>37</sup>

Currier and Ives also issued two images of farming on the plains which conform to the aesthetics of bonanza farms. The first is titled *Prairie Fires of the Great West* and the second *The Western Farmers Home* (Figure 10 and Figure 11). Both were created in 1871 by unknown artists. *Prairie Fires of the Great West* emphasizes the same parallel lines as Haynes' photos, with a train receding into the distance instead of tillage. The train suggests that the crops are growing on the tracts of land acquired through the railroad land grants—quite likely a bonanza farm. While the title refers to flames which fill the sky, the vantage point of the viewer is in the middle of a wheat field that extends right to the edge of the tracks. Visual interest is created through the juxtaposition of danger with the crops. An alternate interpretation of this vegetation would be tall grass prairie that has not yet been farmed. In either case the fire threatens the area where bonanza farms existed. A more detailed view of this type of land is found in *The Western Farmers Home*—a visual hybrid. The foreground contains rendering that evokes the farmscapes of New England, which were familiar to Currier and Ives' New York-based artists. This landscape is hilly, with a crest on the left side of the image. Paths meander through this irregular terrain in front of the houses, and a road in the foreground is beginning to form a Y as if following the contours of the land. In the background, however, the image breaks open to expose

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<sup>37</sup> As of 2008 the best critical study of the farm scenes of Currier and Ives, which focuses on how they tend to be idealized representations “arcadia” when compared to the more critical images of rural “squatters” painted by George Caleb Bingham, is by Bryan F LeBeau, *Currier and Ives: America Imagined* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001), 127-31. Quotes are reproduced by LeBeau on pages 1 and 27. *Prairie Fires of the Great West* was also issued with a date of 1872. The prints of farming on the plains are cataloged in Reilly, *Currier and Ives*, numbers 5269 and 7150.

the Great Plains, with the same parallel lines converging on the horizon. Different terrains merge in the middle of the image providing a peek at the “wonders” of a modern, large-scale, farm.

## 2.6 VISUAL PROPAGANDA FOR LARGE FARMS

Large-scale farm imagery, using the linear properties of the land to suggest great size, was repeated in the most widely reproduced image of a bonanza farm. Ironically, this image of a huge farm is tiny—the vignette of a postage stamp (Figure 12). Although all postage is widely available, this stamp—a two cent issue titled *Farming in the West*—is particularly important because it was linked to two world’s fairs. It is based on a photo that was included in North Dakota’s displays at the World’s Columbian Exposition of 1893 (Figure 13). The photographer is unknown, but was likely familiar with Haynes’ work. It could even have been Haynes himself. As such, I am unsurprised by visual parallels with his previously-discussed images. The photograph became best-known when the stamp was released in 1898 to commemorate the Trans-Mississippi Exposition in Omaha, which continued the following year as the Greater America Exposition. Like the World’s Columbian, it boasted a “White City,” industrial, artistic, and patriotic displays; ethnic performances; battle reenactments; and parades. The overarching mission, however, was to promote the economic and industrial development of the Midwest.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> On the World’s Columbian Exposition, see the newspaper account “Picture of N.D. Man, Now Dead, Is on ‘Two Cent Omaha’ Stamp,” *Fargo (ND) Forum* 1934, 1. For other facts, refer to information geared toward stamp collectors, including Ralph A. Kimble, “The Trans-Mississippi Issue of 1898,” in *Commemorative Postage Stamps of the United States* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1933), 19-25, Randy L. Neil and Jack Rosenthal, *United States of America: The Trans-Mississippi Issue of 1898* (Danbury, CT: Andrew Levitt, 1997), x, 59, Lester G. Brookman, “The Trans-Mississippi Issue of 1898,” in *The 19th Century Postage Stamps of the United States* (New York,: H.L. Lindquist, 1947), 207-28, “Nineteenth Century Commemoratives,” in *Encyclopedia of United States Stamps and Stamp Collecting*, ed. Rodney A. Juell and Steven J. Rod (Minneapolis: Kirk House Publishers, 2006), 180-90. Of

Given this context of the world's fairs, which celebrated large-scale achievements, the stamp would be understood as a statement about industrial bonanza farming—not small homesteads. The other stamps in the series also focus on Midwestern and far Western subjects, titled *Marquette on the Mississippi*, *Fremont on Rocky Mountains*, *Troops Guarding Train*, *Hardships of Emigration*, *Western Mining Prospector*, *Western Cattle in Storm*, and *Mississippi River Bridge*. These were the second commemorative set of stamps ever issued by the US Post Office—the first being for the World's Columbian. They came to fruition because the chair of the Trans-Mississippi publicity committee, Edward Rosewater, requested them and the Postmaster General James A. Gary approved the idea. Huge sheets of the uncut stamps were displayed in the government building at the Trans-Mississippi, and they were sold to the public three weeks after the fair's gates opened, on June 17, 1898. The stamps were pulled from circulation on December 31 of the same year. While display for the public demonstrates the importance of this image, we can better understand it by looking at the individuals involved in its production.

Most people would not have identified with the image on the stamps personally, unless they had a connection to the Amenias and Sharon Land Company, which is the bonanza farm where the photo it was based on was taken. This farm was one of the largest in American history, and it existed in eastern North Dakota from 1875 to 1922. It was owned by a group of investors in Connecticut, and it was managed by Eben W. and Herbert F. Chaffee. This bonanza wheat

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these Neil and Rosenthal are the most thorough. On the history of the Trans-Mississippi Exposition, see Robert W. Rydell, "The Trans-Mississippi and International Exposition, Omaha, 1898: 'Concomitant to Empire'," in *All the World's a Fair: Visions of Empire at American International Expositions, 1876-1916* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 105-25, 260-64. See also the encyclopedic account by James B. Haynes, *History of the Trans-Mississippi and International Exposition of 1898* (Omaha, NE: Published under direction of the Committee on History as Authorized by the Board of Directors, 1910).



farm encompassed 27,831.66 acres when founded. At 174 times larger than a homestead, the Amenias and Sharon could not have been more different than a family farm. The sheer size meant that the Chaffees needed to employ droves of laborers rather than relying on neighborly help. The farm was so large that it encompassed two company towns—Amenias and Chaffee. The work required 171 draft animals and the latest technology. At its apogee in 1892 the company owned \$30,000 worth of machinery, including 40 harvesters, 36 plows, 36 seeders, 34 wagons, and 15 harrows. Some of the equipment was purchased new annually and abandoned to rust in the field, as nurturing used machinery was viewed as inefficient.<sup>39</sup>

Leaders of the company personally identified with the imagery on the stamp and exploited it for advertising. This fact is epitomized by a story about the man in the lower left hand corner of the image driving a rig. The man's arm obscures his face as he prevents his hat from blowing off in the wind, but the local consensus was that this is Ed A. Nybakken. He was a Norwegian immigrant farm laborer who later worked for the McKone Cigar Company. Behind Ed is a field boss named Sam White, and another boss with the surname Barber. Nybakken viewed the wind as a great misfortune that caused the ruin of his likeness, and those feelings were taken into account by the company. The Chaffees opportunized on the stamp in numerous ways. Custom printed envelopes stated "The picture on the stamp is from a photograph taken on one of our farms at Amenias, ND," and the vignette was re-engraved for its invoice and letterhead. While the image on letterhead was unaltered, on the invoice Ed's arm was redrawn so as not to obscure his face.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Kimble, "The Trans-Mississippi Issue of 1898," 22. For the history of the Amenias and Sharon Land Company, see Drache, *The Day of the Bonanza*, 199, 42-46.

<sup>40</sup> Ed's birth name was Evan. The most complete account of this manipulation, including the quotation, which is by H.L. Chaffee the former secretary of the company, is in Neil and Rosenthal, *The Trans-Mississippi Issue of 1898*,

Although presented on the stamp as a victorious *harvest*, a few people had the personal knowledge that the event depicted was a disaster. Hail had destroyed the field, and workers are shown in the process of plowing the failed crop under. In general, farmers do not like to be reminded of crop failures, making this stamp unusual. I am not aware of any other image of a crop failure celebrated by farmers. At least one anecdote suggests that depicting them was socially taboo, violations of which merited iconoclasm. At the Davison County Courthouse in Mitchell, South Dakota two low relief sculptures of locusts by Reinhold Adam Schenkenberger, carved in about 1936, originally flanked the front steps. Farmers were so distraught at the sight of these symbols of pestilence that had recently undermined a season's work that they rallied together and chiseled off the images. Today only a blank space remains (Figure 14).<sup>41</sup>

People less attuned to the realities of Midwestern farming—including employees at Postal Service Headquarters in Washington DC—have often misrepresented the scene. Indeed, despite the clarity of the image's engraving the only conclusion we are likely to draw without more historical background is that the farming depicted involved many people and animals in the process of a quasi-industrial maneuver. Misinterpretation dates to before the stamp was printed. It was originally intended to be titled *Harvesting in the West*, and indeed that is the title that

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55-59. On the identification of individuals in the stamp see "Picture of N.D. Man, Now Dead, Is on 'Two Cent Omaha' Stamp," 1.

<sup>41</sup> In 1953 Herbert F. Chaffee's son H. L. Chaffee described the photo as "Large crews of men, horses, and machinery, operating in groups of fifteen to twenty units, were commonly used in field work. The picture was taken ... when one of these crews, working eighteen units, was in the field plowing down a wheat field that had been hailed out. The usual size of the fields worked was one square mile, 640 acres, and a workman and his horses were generally understood to have put in his miles whenever he had crossed the field twenty times." Quoted in Drache, *The Day of the Bonanza*, 145. The story of the Davison County Court House locust was explained to me during the summer of 2003 by members of the Mitchell Historical Society. A dedication panel by the front doors of the building indicates that it was erected from 1933 to 1936 by the architects Floyd F. Kings and Walter J. Dixon, and that the decorating and painting was done by R.A. Schenkenberger. The building was erected as part of the Federal Emergency Administration of Public Works, as Project Number 4045.

appears on the 1998 reissue (Figure 15). A more accurate understanding might be achieved by people unfamiliar with the circumstances of the stamp's creation but familiar with farming, as they could identify the visual cues to interpret it as a bonanza scene.

The high quality of the design by R. Ostrander Smith, rendering of the vignette by Marcus W. Baldwin, and similar rendering of the frame by Douglas S. Ronaldson—all of the Bureau of Engraving and Printing—allows us to analyze the image in detail. Like the previously-discussed photograph by Haynes, the placement of mules receding into virtual space is the dominant element, although an extra rig is placed in the foreground—presumably to allow the viewer to see what they consist of. The line of animals extends diagonally from the middle ground on the left corner to disappear at the horizon line on the right, and the engraver's lines thicken rhythmically to indicate tillage similar to the Haynes photo. Gentle horizontal lines above the horizon suggest sunset. The curves of the horses in the foreground echo the framing cartouche. Appropriately for a farming scene, the cartouche incorporates shafts of wheat and ears of corn interspersed with the corner medallions and banners. The corn is neatly tucked into a crevice formed by the scrolling volute labeled “two” and the upward thrust of a decorative element—perhaps a nod to the same species interspersed in the pseudo-Corinthian capitals of the US Capitol designed by Benjamin Latrobe. Similarly, the wheat stems are tucked into a volute that crowns the frame, with the stems fanning slightly apart before bursting into mature heads. Each crop has been distorted to forefront its essential characteristics, thus remaining recognizable in the itty-bitty format. Husk is parted and pulled downward with perfect symmetry and not a trace of beard stubble extends from the wheat kernels. The ink is rust red, and light colored horses are articulated by bare paper, but the stamp was originally designed to be printed duotone. The interior image was to be black, and the ovoid frame red. Printing plans changed

when the Spanish-American War necessitated national frugality. However, the color scheme is well-known today through the re-issue. I will return shortly to the treatment of machinery in this vignette, but for now it is sufficient to note the strong emphasis on the patterning of the land, which resonates with other depictions of bonanza farms.<sup>42</sup>

## 2.7 PHOTOGRAPHING CASH CROPS

All of the above examples of bonanza wheat fields are visually effective, but they also all depend on conventionally proportioned picture planes. Other modes of representation, such as panoramic and stereoscopic photography, were also used to depict farm life, including the crops themselves. Depicting fields in which the crops register as wheat—rather than oats, flax, millet, or other grassy crops—is difficult in both photography and painting. Much of this problem is derived from the need to show both a clear head of wheat and a large overview of the landscape. W. R. Leigh accomplished this in a painting that introduced the *Scribner's* article on bonanza farms by clumping the shafts, some of which break the picture plane, and adding oversized heads at the top of the image (Figure 16).

With photography, because heads of wheat are small and move in the wind, it is difficult to capture their details and a farmscape at the same time. Attempts to do so often failed. One such failure depicts a “wheet” field on the S.M. Johnson homestead, taken in about 1900. The image is an obvious attempt to replicate the experience of submersion in a bountiful crop. Farmers—probably S. M. Johnson and his son—drown in wheat which rises to shoulder-height

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<sup>42</sup> For a discussion of the corn capitals see Paul F. Norton, *Latrobe, Jefferson, and the National Capitol* (New York: Garland, 1977), 220.

(Figure 17). Although it is tempting to think of the tall shafts as trick photography, during the nineteenth century many crops were bred to sizes unknown today. When such varieties do survive they are now marketed as novelties. They became unpopular because, although large, almost all of the plant's energy is put into growing huge stalks rather than grain. The yield per acre is thus low. The S.M. Johnson farm is at an unknown location, but it is most likely 160 acres—the standard homestead allocation. Although interesting as an attempt to document wheat while ripening, the photo is painful because the foreground is filled with blurred heads of grain. Such a result is almost inevitable given that depth of field and exposure time are linked in an unfortunate way. To capture both the far away humans and the nearby heads of wheat in focus requires decreasing the aperture. But this aperture setting requires a longer exposure time, which increases the chance of blurring. Wheat stalks sway with the slightest breeze, and we are left gazing through a haze of grain.<sup>43</sup>

Photos of shocked grain avoid these problems by allowing the viewer to focus on bundles dotting the landscape. One hand-colored photo taken in about 1900 of a field on the Grandin bonanza farm near Mayville, North Dakota was particularly well-executed (Figure 18). The image is much wider than tall, indicating that it was taken with one of the panoramic cameras from the turn of the twentieth century. Such a choice of media is unsurprising, given that bonanza farms were technologically intensive and the farmers that owned them therefore would have been interested in gadgets and gizmos. They would have been aware of new representational technologies of the era and their potential for documentation.

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<sup>43</sup> “Wheet” is a historically legitimate spelling for “wheat” according to the Oxford English Dictionary. However, such a variation was not standard around 1900, so the wording on this card is likely an error. My understanding of yields from giant crops comes from informal conversations with farmers, not empirical data.

Panoramic cameras date to as early as 1843, when Joseph Puchberger developed one with a pivoting lens that exposed a curved daguerreotype plate, and they reached their height of popularity around the turn of the twentieth century. Large-scale panoramic photographs were developed during the late nineteenth century, using cameras that pivoted on their tripod while light entered the camera box through a vertical slit instead of a conventional shutter. As the camera turned, so did celluloid film inside, resulting in a negative that could be as long as 20 feet and capture more than 360 degrees if the camera circled multiple times. The most common camera for taking these photographs was the Cirkut. Although the invention of this camera is poorly understood, it was first marketed by the Rochester Panoramic Camera Company in 1905. George Eastman purchased the company the same year, and Eastman Kodak continued to market versions of it until 1941. Professional photographers used these panoramic cameras to document conventions, workplaces, landscapes, parades, and military squadrons.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Panoramas date to the eighteenth century, when entire rooms were constructed to hold paintings that encircled the viewer. Later, extra-long paintings toured the country, wrapped on rollers that slowly scrolled in front of the audience. Scenes of Midwestern America, such as the Mississippi or the Dakota War of 1862, were particularly popular. Ralph Hyde, *Panoramania! The Art and Entertainment of The "All-Embracing" View* (London: Trefoil in association with Barbican Art Gallery, 1988). For a discussion of the philosophical concepts that underpinned such imagery in the American west, see Josh Ellenbogen, "Inhuman Sight: Photographs and Panoramas in the Nineteenth Century," in *One/Many: Western American Survey Photographs by Bell and O'sullivan*, ed. Joel Snyder (Chicago: University of Chicago Press for the David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, 2006), 55-73. Although moving panoramas are thought of as a nineteenth century phenomenon, Grant Wood painted a 150 foot one titled *Imagination Isles* with his art students in Cedar Rapids in 1922 that was originally intended as a frieze in the school cafeteria. He later disapproved of the dialogue read when it was moving as "too sweet and syrupy." Graham, John Zug, and McDonald, *My Brother, Grant Wood*, 41-42, Corn, *Grant Wood*, 8-9, 43. It does not discuss farming scenes, but a good history of this type of camera and photograph is by Robert B. MacKay, *America by the Yard: Cirkut Camera Images from the Early Twentieth Century* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006). See pages 12-13 of MacKay for a discussion of negatives. Early Cirkut cameras were sometimes branded using subsidiaries of Eastman Kodak, such as Century Camera or Folmer Graflex. For a history of its invention and marketing, see MacKay, *America by the Yard*, 12. Although I have never used a Cirkut camera specifically, I gained some intuitive insight into the aesthetics of panoramic photographs through my archaeological work. While at the Maya site Yo'okop during 2001, I helped to take 360 degree photographs of plazas, and I have also studied peripheral ("rollout") photographs of vases in my research on the Maya. Peripheral photographs are produced with cameras in the same family as the Cirkut. For a brief overview of peripheral photography, see Justin Kerr, *A Short History of Rollout*

Cirkut cameras were particularly appropriate for documenting an expansive plane of wheat because they distorted the image in a way that highlighted the sensory experience of a viewer. When aimed at fields planted in long straight rows, one of the camera's idiosyncrasies is that it distorts horizontal lines into arcs while preserving the parallel vertical lines that converge at the horizon. The result is that instead of making the field seem well-contained the rows veer off dramatically, suggesting the expansiveness of the farm itself. It is a statement that the field is so big that it cannot be captured with a traditional camera. The photograph becomes powerful because of the viewer's understanding of the media. Rather than searching through the image for fine details, the viewer's appreciation depends on understanding panoramic photography—a precondition for thinking to oneself that this farm is large. In effect the medium and the message are intertwined—to use Marshall McLuhan's famous words.<sup>45</sup>

One particularly effective panorama is of a 960-acre field on the Fairview bonanza farm (Figure 19). The photo captured approximately 180 degrees. While it might be surprising that the photographer has cut the image off at 180 when a 360 degree pan might seem more endless, this is a logical choice. It is easier to avoid shooting disruptive elements such as buildings and roads this way. Even with 180 degrees this exclusion would be difficult. These farms had tool sheds and buildings for cooking scattered throughout the fields, and roads criss-crossed the terrain. The photographer would have likely started out at farm headquarters where there were the most buildings and roads, and the absence of these elements suggests a trek into the most remote areas of the farm. The photographer fills the extra-long picture plane only with large shocks of wheat.

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*Photography* (Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies  
<http://www.famsi.org/research/kerr/rollout.html>, Available online April 11, 2008).

<sup>45</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964).

They dot the land at regular intervals, and because they were arranged in a grid the viewer picks up the pattern and enjoys exploring visual distortion. On the far right the photo contains parallels converging at the horizon, but if we follow these lines to the left they become perpendicular to our line of sight before turning again toward the horizon on the far left. We can explore the numerous relationships of distance among shocks, wallowing in the never-ending field.

This distortion works less well for group portraiture. When people posed for portraits shot with the Cirkut camera, the photographer arranged them in a semicircle—keeping each individual equidistant from the tripod. This curve corrects camera distortion, and the group appears in a straight line in the finished photograph. A good example of this is a fold-out photo reproduced in a souvenir booklet from the Nonpartisan League convention of 1918—an event geared toward radical small farmers (Figure 20). It shows League members posed in front of an auditorium in St. Paul. While they are arranged parallel to the street in the middle of the image, on the left side they were forced into the street, standing atop trolley lines to remain in the correct spots relative to the camera. A photo reproduced in the same booklet of a Nonpartisan League picnic overcompensated the curvature. The people on the far left and right appear closer to the camera than those in the middle. Sometimes photographers would not correct for this enough, resulting in the line of people receding in each direction. A photograph of a gathering of the Society for Equity—another small farmers’ organization—taken in 1916 shows that form of distortion (Figure 21).<sup>46</sup>

We might expect stereoscopic images of large farms to provide similarly profound experiences for their viewers, but attempts to use the strategies described above with stereo

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<sup>46</sup> National Nonpartisan League, *Freedom for All Forever: The Spirit That Is Fighting for Democracy at Home and Abroad* (St. Paul: Souvenir Rally Booklet, 1918), fold-out inside back cover.



cameras resulted in failure. This is because expansive landscapes are difficult to capture stereoscopically, but more intimate outdoor settings are easy. The problem with expansive landscapes is that most of the subject matter is far away from the viewer in the background. While such landscapes are visually impressive in two dimensions, they are disappointing in three because little illusion is experienced. People register the most stereoscopic depth from objects at close range, and pick up progressively fewer cues the farther away an object is from the viewer. Great stereoscopic photographs are composed with rich layering, with objects in the fore, middle, and backgrounds, encouraging the viewer to explore an environment. The reason that intimate settings, such as gardens, are easy to capture stereoscopically is that they always contain objects that are near to the viewer, and it is usually possible to choose a camera angle that captures many layers.<sup>47</sup>

One stereoscopic failure, which attempts to use the strategy of lines of mule teams extending to the horizon, was taken by F. Jay Haynes (Figure 22). The exact location where and the date when this was taken are not recorded, but it shows harrowing on a bonanza farm—likely the Dalrymple family’s discussed previously. To make the landscape seem vast, the camera must be situated so as to show a large amount of ground. Because the picture plane is slightly taller than wide in conventional stereo views it is difficult to show details unless they are close to the viewer—disrupting the horizontals of the fields that photographers were so interested in

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<sup>47</sup> Although I have read numerous books, articles, and web pages on the history and practice of stereoscopic photography, my understanding of the visual properties of this medium is based mostly on my experience as an amateur stereoscopic photographer. I have used cameras with multiple lenses as well as a still camera on a slide bar. As an undergraduate I designed an independent study course on stereoscopic representation, which included making images in major formats—traditional stereo pairs, red-and-blue anaglyphs, and polarized projections—and the study of holograms, prismatic lenses that shift specific colors (ChromaDepth), and lenticular screens. For historical overviews of stereoscopic photography, see Edward W. Earle, ed., *Points of View, the Stereograph in America: A Cultural History* (Rochester: Visual Studies Workshop Press, 1979), John Jones, *Wonders of the Stereoscope* (New York: Knopf, 1976), William C Darrah, *The World of Stereographs* (Gettysburg: Darrah, 1977).

capturing. When inserting the card into a stereoscope the situation becomes worse. Because there are no large objects in the foreground, the image contains little depth. Indeed, there is not even enough ocular disparity to indicate that the two photos were developed from different negatives.

If Haynes had wanted to increase the illusion of depth in the image he could have done so. Normal stereo pairs are taken with a camera that has two lenses spaced two and a half inches apart—the same distance that is between human eyes. If the lenses are farther apart the resulting photo will have an increased illusion of depth. In the case of landscape photographs—where the subject matter moves very little—it is particularly easy to adjust the distance between lenses because shutters do not need to be coordinated. The camera can be physically moved several feet and resituated between the shots intended for each eye.

While it is tempting to assume that the minimal illusion of depth in Haynes' photos is due to technical ineptitude or laziness, increasing illusionism would have undermined the image's integrity. These farms are big. As such, they must appear big in photographs. The problem with increasing the ocular disparity is that it miniaturizes the subject. One way that humans judge the size of their surroundings is through their stereoscopic vision, and when we are presented with stereo images taken with the lenses farther apart than two and a half inches we perceive the object as smaller than it is in actuality. In other words, while increasing the space between the exposures would create beautiful dramatic depth, it would also cause the landscape to appear like a toy farm. Haynes did attempt to manipulate the composition of depth in one way—adding elements to the foreground where we will register more depth, but the effect is just as bad. His photo of seeding on a bonanza farm, for example, includes three sacks standing on end near the viewer, in an obvious attempt at layering (Figure 23). We do not need to explore this photo because we understand it immediately. Ultimately this layering seems contrived and ineffective.

While I have shown that stereoscopy is poorly suited for these settings, the medium should not be dismissed entirely for documenting large farms. In fact, a great stereoscopic image of a 26-mule team on a bonanza farm exists. But to understand this image we should first examine depictions of the gangs of rigs that have been included in several previously discussed images.

## **2.8 PICTURING FARM EQUIPMENT**

Machinery is displayed prominently in many images of farming from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. And its operation was one of the most important experiences of farm laborers. It is also an experience that was fundamentally different on small and large farms. Mechanized harvesting of small grain plants, such as wheat, consists of two tasks—cutting the stalks (reaping) and separating the kernels from other plant matter (threshing). By the late nineteenth century modern technologies to accomplish both of these tasks were in widespread use. A horse-driven threshing machine was invented by Andrew Meikle in about 1784, and it was adapted to steam power by numerous people during the mid-nineteenth century. The first successful mechanical reaper, designed by Cyrus McCormick, was patented in 1834. Such technologies were used on turn-of-the-century small farms, and they separated the work into distinct stages. After reaping the plants were clustered into shocks that dotted the fields. They were then moved to a steam or animal-driven threshing machine. A different process took place on a few wealthy small farms, and many large bonanza farms, where expensive combine harvesters were in use—so-named because they combined reaping and threshing in one step. These machines for wheat harvesting are the apparatuses discussed in this chapter. A similar machine was developed for corn harvesting much later, as will be discussed in chapter three. As

power from animals or an engine propelled the wheat combine harvester through a field it cut stalks, separated grain, moved the grain to a bin, and left the excess plant matter in the field. Such a horse-powered combine was invented in 1838 by Hiran Moore, and by the late nineteenth century could be pulled by a tractor. The technology became practical to use during the nineteenth century, and progressively more affordable during the early twentieth. With this historical framework we can understand imagery such as Grant Wood's *Dinner for Threshers* painted in 1934, depicting the aftermath of steam threshing, as a nostalgic scene. While steam threshers could still be found in use during the 1930s, they were being abandoned by nearly all farmers who could afford to do so. Returning to imagery we can see how people reacted to these technologies.

Grant Wood's *Dinner for Threshers* is as meaningful for what it excludes as for what it shows, and much of what it excludes relates to harvesting technology. Rather than depicting the labor of threshing in progress, Wood rendered the aftermath. This might seem strange until one understands that the small-scale farmers who Wood identified with valued the social bonds acquired by threshing despite the fact that the actual act was hellish. When watching the steam threshers in motion that were used on small farms it is immediately clear that operating them is dangerous, hot, and dirty. The boiler has the potential to explode. The mechanism is driven by long belts without safety guards—sometimes 100 feet in circumference—that vibrate violently as they threaten to snap and maim. Pulverized splinters of straw fly away from the workers, but the slightest breeze sends the matter back toward sweaty skin. Attempting to wipe away the clinging debris causes an itchy rash, as the needle-like bits of chaff dig in. Disaster could strike at any time. Should a spark jump from the threshing mechanism or boiler, the flying dust and bits of

chaff could ignite in a fireball. Flames spread quickly across dry straw-filled landscapes, threatening anything in their paths.<sup>48</sup>

A photograph of a steam thresher in operation captures some of these realities (Figure 24). It was created by Russell Lee in September of 1937 as part of the Farm Security Administration documentary project, and it was presented to the public with the descriptive title *Threshing clover seed, a very dusty operation. Near Little Rock, Minnesota*. The image features a drive belt jutting across the foreground. This belt is presumably adhered to a steam engine outside the picture plane on the left, and such cropping allows us to see the thresher in action. Although we view the scene from above, the underside of the drive belt is visible—emphasizing its free gyration. Two men throw forkfuls of clover into a giant hopper containing a conveyor to draw the crop into the gnashing core of the machine. The rotation of numerous interconnected gears, wheels, and belts is conspicuous on the side of the thresher—each useful for a different stage of the process taking place inside. Obscured from our view, the kernels are beaten and sieved before pouring out of a spout. The chaff is forcefully expelled in another direction. A haze of dust and particulate emanates from the apparatus, nearly obscuring the giant pile of chaff behind it. The men appear energetic, but their backbreaking work of pitching plant matter is not enviable.

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<sup>48</sup> I have seen this type of equipment in operation at the annual Western Minnesota Steam Thresher's Reunion in Rollag. Such demonstrations of antiquated farm equipment are popular forms of historical reenactment today, often coupled with activities typical of county fairs. For anecdotal stories about the dangers of steam threshers, see the bimonthly publication geared toward enthusiasts of steam-driven farm machinery *Steam Traction*, (Topeka: Steam Traction Society. Available online: <http://www.steamtraction.com/>, 1951-2004). Scholarly studies of these machines include J. Sanford Rikoon, *Threshing in the Midwest, 1820-1940: A Study of Traditional Culture and Technological Change* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), Thomas D. Isern, *Bull Threshers and Bundlestiffs: Harvesting and Threshing on the North American Plains* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1990).

The fact that steam threshing is a technology that farmers endured, but abandoned when safer and easier-to-use alternatives became affordable, was perhaps most poignantly emphasized by Grant Wood's fellow Regionalist painter and friend, Thomas Hart Benton. In 1938 he depicted nostalgically the last such thresher operating in Johnson County, Kansas, in the painting titled *Threshing Wheat* (Figure 25). Although Benton rendered it with the cheerily bright colors typical of all of his work, the image nonetheless underscores problems with steam-driven threshing. Benton carefully depicts the mechanical process described above at the same time that he manipulates the composition to reflect a distancing from and mourning of this machine. The image is composed as a horizontal band, with the engine as far as possible from a pile of chaff—a strategy to avert fire. At the same time, he nods to the nerve-wracking realities of the process by including a stream of black smoke spewing forth from the iron horse, slipping toward workers. He places a tired mule in the center of the composition, who rests next to the thresher itself. This animal has pulled a wagon-load of wheat to the scene, and in the distance a continuation of the slow toiling is implied by another draft animal plodding.<sup>49</sup>

It is difficult, indeed, to celebrate the act of steam threshing and easy to see why Wood chose not to paint it in *Dinner for Threshers*, but this does not mean that Wood avoided depictions of work as a whole. Owners of small farmsteads tilled alone—as they do in Grant Wood's *Spring Turning*. Such solitary plowing is a visual paradigm that appears in other works by Wood—a particularly prominent example is in his mural cycle for the Iowa State University Library created from 1935 to 1939, titled *When Tillage Begins Other Arts Follow* (Figure 26). The portion of this cycle that is immediately germane to this discussion is titled *Breaking the*

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<sup>49</sup> The image was made into a lithograph for the Associated American Artists in 1941, and Benton himself commented on the significance of the image in about 1966. Creekmore Fath, ed., *The Lithographs of Thomas Hart Benton*, New ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1979), 116.

*Prairie*, and I will return to the cycle in more depth in chapter four. In this image a farmer is progressing with his hand plow from left to right across the picture space. Such a composition was a well-established visual paradigm. It was part of the bannerhead of the second agricultural periodical in the United States, *The Plough Boy*, founded in Albany during 1819 by Solomon Southwick who used the pseudonym “Henry Homespun Jr.” (Figure 27). It similarly appears in the top register on the cover of the early US periodical *The Plough, The Loom, and the Anvil* that was founded by J. S. Skinner in 1848 (Figure 28). The composition highlights both the farmer and the mass-produced steel plow—one of the first steps toward industrial agriculture. When Wood paints the plow it is a nod to tradition, but during the early-to-mid nineteenth century images of a hand plow promoted technological progress. By the turn of the twentieth century cutting-edge technology, such as the combine harvester, was beyond the means of most small farmers, but it continued to be a focus for the wealthier bonanza operators. To address this question of machinery on bonanzas it is useful to return to stereoscopic photography by F. Jay Haynes.<sup>50</sup>

Mechanical work was choreographed in the fields, and complex formations from the era are preserved visually by photographs. Upon first glance we might think that lines of mules and horses receding into the picture planes of images discussed above are arranged like caravans with each following in each others’ footsteps. But upon closer examination we see that they are usually staggered, providing an unhindered view of each equine rump. This arrangement was

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<sup>50</sup> My information on these periodicals comes from an article that the author claims to be the first history of the American agricultural press: Gilbert M. Tucker, *American Agricultural Periodicals: An Historical Sketch* (Albany: Privately Printed, 1909). It was privately printed from plates intended for use in L H Bailey, *Cyclopedia of American Agriculture: A Popular Survey of Agricultural Conditions, Practices and Ideals in the United States and Canada* (New York: Macmillan, 1909). The author explained that the article was privately printed because, although entirely accurate, an agricultural publisher objected to some of the facts being made public and the editor of Macmillan caved to this pressure.

purposeful and interesting enough to nineteenth-century Americans to merit a detailed description in *Scribner's*. William Allen White stated:

If one stands a few rods ahead of the ploughs, or a few rods behind them, they seem to be following one another in a line, but when one stands to the right or to the left of the “gang,” one sees that the line is broken, and that the second plough in the procession is a plough’s-width further in the field than the leader is, and that the third plow is still another plough’s width further in, and the fourth plow still another width, and so on. The line viewed from the right or the left of it, instead of being a file, forms a kind of stair-steps, from the first to the tenth.<sup>51</sup>

Such descriptions reveal the deep interest that these people had in the practicalities of farm work. This type of staggering must have been the norm for most tasks, including plowing, harrowing, seeding, and harvesting, given the number of surviving images that show diagonally-arranged rigs.

One of the clearest images of this staggering by Haynes, probably taken at the Dalrymple farm around 1880, shows eight-foot seeders arranged with the slight overlap of land that was needed to ensure even sowing (Figure 23). All such photos must have been staged, and in this case the vantage point confirms it. The camera is pointed downward from a scaffold, tower, or barn roof—filling the image with soil. Such elevation allows us a clearer view of horses, which might otherwise be hidden by the rig, but just as importantly it emphasizes the rich humus. Indeed, the photographer does not seem to be interested in the workmen as individuals—who face away from the camera as anonymous drudgers—the focus is on the soil itself being impregnated with kernels of wheat.

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<sup>51</sup> White, “The Business of a Wheat Farm,” 541.



This arrangement of machinery may have sometimes been simulated in images. If we look closely at the postage stamp as well as the photograph in *America's Wonderlands*, we should see the animals staggered, but there is no indication of this (Figure 6 and Figure 12). While such a fine detail may have simply been an oversight in an image as small as the postage stamp, the photo suggests that it may have been easier to stage the rigs in a line, hoping that the viewer would not notice that the animals are not properly aligned. Indeed, it is difficult to determine if they are staggered from many vantage points. Other arrangements of machinery also emphasized choreography. One of the best is of bundle teams that pulsate across the horizon line of the Dalrymple farm, forming a strict divide between the sky and the ground (Figure 29). Like the diagonal compositions, this arrangement emphasizes the careful placement of rigs with military precision.

Perhaps the image of a bonanza farm that Americans were most familiar with during the early twentieth century was a stereoscopic photograph that was first distributed around 1903 depicting a huge combine harvester (Figure 30 through Figure 33). The card has at least three titles, but they are all variations on “Harvesting with a Twenty-six-Mule Team on a Bonanza Wheat Farm.” It was memorable because it nearly actualizes the stereoscopic medium—thus creating a profound experience for the viewer. This accomplishment is quite impressive, given that the probable photographer, Truman Ingersoll, saw the world flat. One of his eyes was glass—the original having been lost as a child in an accident involving an arrow made from the stay of a corset.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> I am attributing the photo to Ingersoll because it was sold as part of sets of cards that he distributed, depicting landmarks of the US. The original photograph labeled “Harvesting with a 26 mule team on a bonanza wheat farm, Idaho” is now in the Keystone-Mast Collection at the University of California, Riverside and the California Museum of Photography. This archive contains nearly all commercially produced stereoviews from the United States, as the company acquired all of its major competitors and merged their resources in a single filing system by 1926.

Ingersoll is best remembered during the early twenty first century for his friendship with George Eastman. According to Ingersoll's son Ward, he perfected the mechanism for the Kodak Brownie Camera in 1886 and was given exclusive rights by Eastman to sell it in Minnesota and to develop its film. This was an interesting anomaly and great convenience to his Minnesota customers, given that the norm was to send the entire camera to the factory in Rochester, NY to have the film changed and processed. Ingersoll remained active until his retirement from stereoscopic photography in 1909, at which time he opened a successful flower shop.<sup>53</sup>

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Stereographic Photoprints by Geographical Location North and Central America United States Idaho, Number KU79841. The best two sources of information on Ingersoll are an article by a freelance journalist and an unpublished biographical essay: Patricia Condon Johnston, "Truman Ingersoll: St. Paul Photographer Pictured the World," *Minnesota History* 47, no. 4 (1980): 122-32, Judy Rauenhorst, "Truman Ward Ingersoll: Portrait of a Minnesota Photographer, 1862-1922," (Unpublished manuscript at the Minnesota Historical Society, 1977). Both authors relied on articles in the St. Paul newspapers, photographs and scrapbooks that remain in the Ingersoll family's possession, and interviews with Truman Ingersoll's son Ward. A catalog of his company survives in the Minnesota Historical Society: Truman Ingersoll, *Ingersoll's Fine Stereoscopic Views and Scopes: Catalogue No. 16*. (St. Paul: 1899).

<sup>53</sup> Although I have been unable to verify his relationship with Eastman, the fact that he developed the Brownie's film is documented in a newspaper testimonial. "In a great many of my rambles I carry my 'Kodak Camera.' Do you know what it is? It is a little instrument for taking instantaneous photos. Each instrument is loaded for 100 pictures, which are taken by leveling the camera at the object, then pressing a button, and—it's done. The price is very reasonable—only \$25. It is small and can be easily carried, and it costs only about 10-12 cents apiece to perfect the pictures. T.W. Ingersoll, the enterprising landscape photographer, 40 East Third Street, is agent for the instrument and also finishes your pictures for you. This is very handy for all proprietors of 'Kodaks,' as it saves the worry, trouble and expense of sending it to Rochester, N.Y. where they are manufactured. Last Wednesday I got a lot of beautiful photos, just finished, of views I took all around Boston. It made me homesick. Of course you can have the instrument reloaded with a new film at a very trifling cost. Step into Mr. Ingersoll's and examine the work done by the 'Kodak,' or send to him by mail for samples and circulars. If you have already one, let him perfect your photo for you. I want to tell you what a man in Hastings said about this little instrument. I think it's a very unique explanation, and fits perfectly. Amongst other things—like this: 'It's a dandy! I wouldn't be without one for a great deal. It's so accurate and easy to handle, any fool can work it.' I don't mean it as a cuss word, but it does express the utility of the little gem." Ingersoll is not mentioned in the two major biographies of Eastman: Carl W. Ackerman, *George Eastman* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1930), Elizabeth Brayer, *George Eastman: A Biography* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996). Nonetheless the fact that he developed its film indicates an intimate familiarity with the Brownie camera's mechanics and makes the story probable. The quote on Yellowstone is in Johnston, "Truman Ingersoll," 127. The testimonial is from an editorial in the *St. Paul (MN) Dispatch*, 1894, quoted in Judy Rauenhorst, "Truman Ward Ingersoll: Portrait of a Minnesota Photographer, 1862-1922," (Unpublished manuscript at the Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul, February 7, 1977), ii.

A particularly interesting fact about the 26-mule-team photograph is that its label is deceptive—different versions list different locations. Captions and descriptions, of course, alter the meanings of photographs. Of the three lithographic versions, two are labeled as depictions of “Dakota,” while the original photo is labeled as “Idaho.” A third lithograph does not state a location. This suggests that the photo may have been relabeled for different audiences. Paradoxically, the fact that the geographic location of this photograph is obscure makes it more universally meaningful. In effect, it served as the image of all large-scale wheat farming in the western United States.<sup>54</sup>

Both black-and-white and color versions of the card exist, and some of them include a history of harvest machinery on the back, which noted that “popular prejudice”—meaning people nostalgic for manual labor—often opposed the introduction of new machinery:

One of the features of the agricultural history of the past fifty or sixty years has been the extensive introduction of machinery. Sowing machines, cultivators, and all the machines that displace the hoe, are of comparatively recent invention. As early as A.D. 33, according to Pliny [the Elder], the Gauls used a cart with projections in front which cut or tore off the heads of grain, but until recent times little effort was made to invent or introduce labor saving machines, owing to popular prejudice which objects to taking from a man his accustomed work.

The most advanced and complicated type of harvester is probably the combined header and thresher which is used in some parts of the United States

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<sup>54</sup> Susan Sontag recently explored the issue of captions and how they altered the perception of photographs of warfare. Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2003), 3.

and in Australia, where there is no fear of rain during the harvest. This machine heads, threshes, cleans and sacks the grain at one operation. The machine is pushed through the grain either by a traction engine or by twenty to thirty mules or horses. It has a capacity of from sixty to one hundred and twenty-five acres per day.<sup>55</sup>

Hundreds of thousands of stereoscopic views, many with this type of accompanying informative material, were created during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They were a popular form of entertainment for the middle class, and they were purchased by libraries and schools as reference sets. So many stereoscopic views were produced, and there have been so few empirical studies, that it is difficult to make generalizations about the medium. Indeed, an estimated 12,000 stereographers practiced in the US between 1860 and 1890. The second largest firm, Underwood and Underwood, published between 30,000 and 40,000 different views, and the largest, Keystone, produced even more.<sup>56</sup>

In the case of the 26-mule team, the card was once distributed by Truman Ingersoll and later bought by the Keystone-Mast Company. Ingersoll included the photo in sets of stereoscopic cards showing scenery of the United States. Most of these stereo photos were reproduced in low-quality via lithographic processes, but they were also available as gelatin-silver prints. They were marketed through travelling salesmen; his shop in St. Paul, Minnesota; and the Sears and Roebuck and Montgomery Ward Catalogs. Ingersoll also agreed to have his lithographs

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<sup>55</sup> Text from the back of Truman Ingersoll, *No. 793. Harvesting with a Twenty-Six-Mule Team on a Bonanza Wheat Farm* (Stereoscopic card, late nineteenth or early twentieth century).

<sup>56</sup> Darrah, *The World of Stereographs*, 48-49, 237, Laura Schiavo, “‘a Collection of Endless Extent and Beauty:’ Stereographs, Vision, Taste and the American Middle Class, 1850-1880” (PhD Dissertation, Wesleyan University, 2003). On consumption of stereoscopic views, see Britt Salvesen, “Selling Sight: Stereoscopy in Mid-Victorian Britain” (PhD Dissertation, University of Chicago, 1997).

distributed as premiums with Quaker Oats. He began selling stereoscopic photographs during the mid 1880s, and around 1898 he began to sell mass-produced stereoscopic lithographs in color. They were made in such huge quantities that they remain commonly available to collectors in the twenty-first century. This is not to say that Ingersoll was the first person to mass produce stereoscopic ink prints—this dates to at least as early as 1856, when the first colored wood engravings were made. It was not until 1898, however, with the perfection of halftone printing that ink-printed stereoviews became common. Montgomery Ward and Sears and Roebuck both began to offer stereoscopic ink prints in 1903, and their lines overlapped considerably. This view of a bonanza farm was offered by both—a gray bordered card was distributed by Montgomery Ward and a green bordered one by Sears.<sup>57</sup>

Ingersoll himself most likely took the photograph of a 26-mule team, although it is possible that he purchased the right to print it. The photo is part of a broader interest that he had in bonanza farms. Indeed, his catalog from 1899 includes a series of seven real photographic stereo cards of bonanzas. These were numbered and titled:

M 101. Row of Reapers—Bonanza Farm.

M 102. Row of Reapers Crossing Field—Bonanza Farm.

M 103. The Reapers at End of Day—Bonanza Farm.

M 104. Wagons for Hauling Wheat to the Thresher.

M 105. Harvest Hands at Work. Bonanza Farm.

M 106. Threshing Machines and Straw Pile. Bonanza Farm.

M 107. Harvest Hands at Dinner. Bonanza Farm.

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<sup>57</sup> On the connection with Quaker Oats, see John Waldsmith, *Stereo Views: An Illustrated History and Price Guide*, 2nd ed. (Iola, WI: Krause Publications, 2002), 40-41. On the distribution through national catalogs and the gray and green appearances, see Darrah, *The World of Stereographs*, 53-54.

The image that I am focusing on shows a combine harvester bearing down on the viewer. Unlike the failed stereoscopic photos by Haynes, this image is thoughtfully composed. The head-on view provides the viewer with an object to focus on that recedes into space, fulfilling the expectation for illusionism. The composition causes tension, as the animals threaten to trample us.<sup>58</sup>

Considering the significance of the card as a whole, from the perspectives of insiders to farm culture as well as viewers across the US, the visual properties convey the awesome power of modern harvesting technology, as put into motion by dominance over beasts of burden and other natural forces. Although in this card the intricacies of a mechanized harvest are obscured from view, they are nonetheless the reality that made it compelling. As farmers and laborers viewed the scene, they could relive the realities of controlling such a large and ungainly rig, while people off of the farm might achieve some inkling of the scale, difficulties, and potential of the new approach to growing their food.

## 2.9 CONCLUSION

To wrap up the discussion of bonanza farms, it is important to note that the division between homesteads and bonanzas became less clear as the twentieth century progressed. Although large farms have become the norm in the long story of American agriculture, in the short story they failed. The large farms of the twenty-first century were formed by slow piecemeal consolidation, without the dramatic story of origin that sparked the bonanzas. The majority of the original

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<sup>58</sup> The bonanza farm series is described in Ingersoll, *Ingersoll's Fine Stereoscopic Views and Scopes: Catalogue No. 16.*, 34.

bonanza farms founded on land purchased from railroads by corporate investors disbanded by the end of the 1920s, as they either bankrupted or owners realized that it was more profitable to sell the land in pieces than to farm it on a large scale. When the Dalrymple farm discussed above was disbanded and the land sold piecemeal in 1917, the aesthetics of the institution were rethought. Rather than reveling in the expansiveness of their land, their domination over migrant laborers, or their expensive harvesting technologies the administrators of the Dalrymple farm presented it with the norms of smaller operations (Figure 34 and Figure 35). Indeed, while claiming that the “Dalrymple farm is the ideal home for your family,” they represented it with subject matter that Wood later included in *Dinner for Threshers*—a home, barn, farmyard, cheerful woman, and a few chickens. While the Dalrymple advertisement does not include Wood’s group of men, an emphasis on neighborliness—as conveyed by another home and barn in the background—is nonetheless present. In light of such precedents we can understand Wood’s imagery of neighbors threshing as informed, not only by the tradition of small farms, but also by a history of industrial farmscapes and laborers, funded by distant investors, that had mostly disbanded during the decades that he asks us to ponder by bookending his image with references to both 1892 and the mid-1930s.

One of the most spectacular bonanza farm failures from this era was Arthur C. Townley’s. Little visual culture from his farm survives, but one extant photograph from 1911 or 1912 conforms to the visual paradigms described above (Figure 36). It shows a large field, on flat land, with parallel lines converging at the horizon. It includes several pieces of machinery in the process of “drilling” a furrow into the land and then inserting flax seed into it. Multiple equipment operators are in tandem, as they progress across the field like troops—giving unintended double meaning to the “drill.” The gigantic wheels of tractors loom over the scene as

they pull the implements for plowing and planting. By choosing to position the camera behind the action the photographer emphasizes the factory-like process. Indeed, wheels turn one after the other, creating the illusion of interconnected parts. The photograph marks the high point of Townley's farming career, but a success that was not to last.

Townley actually failed two times—first with a bonanza wheat farm near Cheyenne Wells, Colorado which he was involved with from 1910-1911. Two years later he failed again, with a 7,000 acre flax farm near the town of Beach, North Dakota. It is the latter operation that was captured in a photograph discussed above. Townley planted 8,000 acres of flax in 1912, thus earning him the title of “Flax King,” and he stood to make a \$100,000 profit for the year. But instead bad weather and market fluctuations left him \$80,000 in debt—the equivalent of \$1,740,210 in 2009's buying power. The failures understandably affected Townley's ideology, and he became an enemy of big farming and big business. In the next chapter I will address part of his legacy—imagery produced by a radical small farmers' organization that he founded. This organization—the Nonpartisan League—changed the direction of Midwestern grain farming. It also intrigued Grant Wood enough to draw portraits of two of its most prominent, fictional, sympathizers.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> There has never been a biography of Townley written, but much information on his life can be gleaned from histories of the Nonpartisan League. The core literature on the League includes Kathleen Diane Moom, “Harvest of Discontent: The Social Origins of the Nonpartisan League, 1880-1922” (PhD Dissertation, University of California, Irvine, 1986), Herbert E. Gaston, *The Nonpartisan League* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Howe, 1920), Scott Ellsworth, “Origins of the Nonpartisan League” (PhD Dissertation, Duke University, 1982), Morlan, *Political Prairie Fire*, Larry Remele, “Power to the People: The Nonpartisan League,” in *The North Dakota Political Tradition*, ed. Thomas W. Howard (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1981), 66-92, Charles Edward Russell, *The Story of the Nonpartisan League: A Chapter in American Evolution* (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1920), Ray Goldberg, “The Nonpartisan League in North Dakota: A Case Study of Political Action in America” (Undergraduate Honor's Thesis, Department of Government, Harvard University. Published by Midwest Printing and Lithographing Company, Fargo, 1948). The buying power was calculated using the US Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics Inflation Calculator, available online in 2009 at <http://data.bls.gov/cgi-bin/cpicalc.pl>





Figure 1. Grant Wood, *Dinner for Threshers*, 1934, oil on hardboard, 49.5 x 201.9 cm. Collection of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco.



Figure 2. Currier and Ives, *Horses in a Thunderstorm*, undated. Reilly, *Currier and Ives*, number 3190. Private collection.

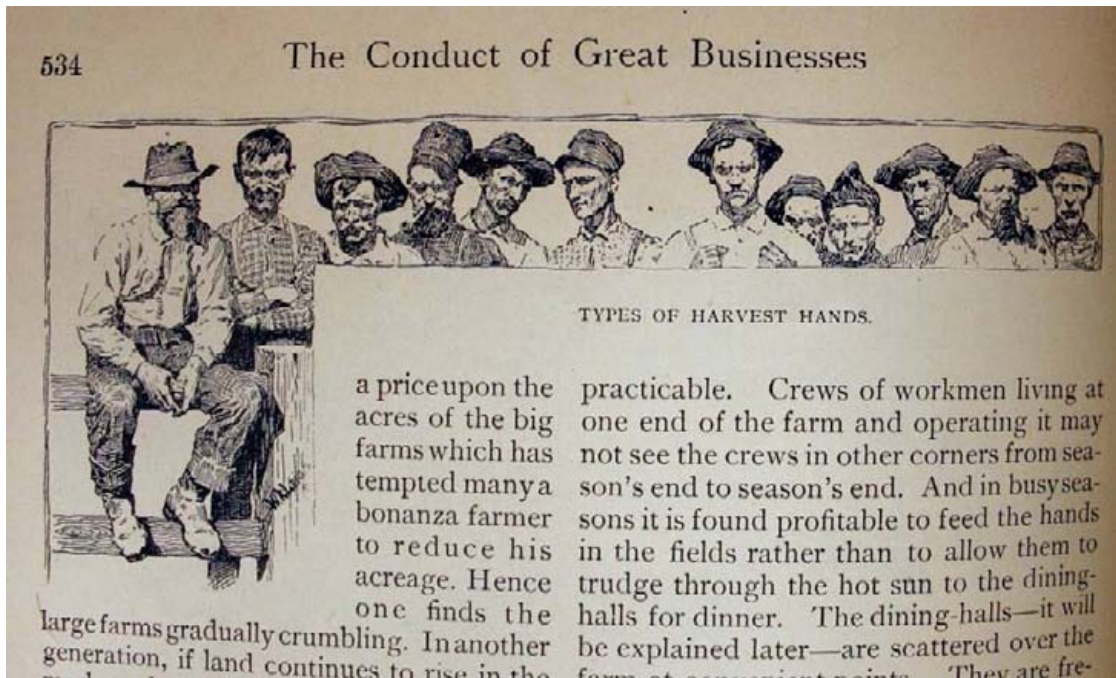


Figure 3. W. R. Leigh, *Types of Harvest Hands*, 1897. White, "The Business of a Wheat Farm," page 534.



Figure 4. Grant Wood, *Spring Turning*, 1936. Private collection.

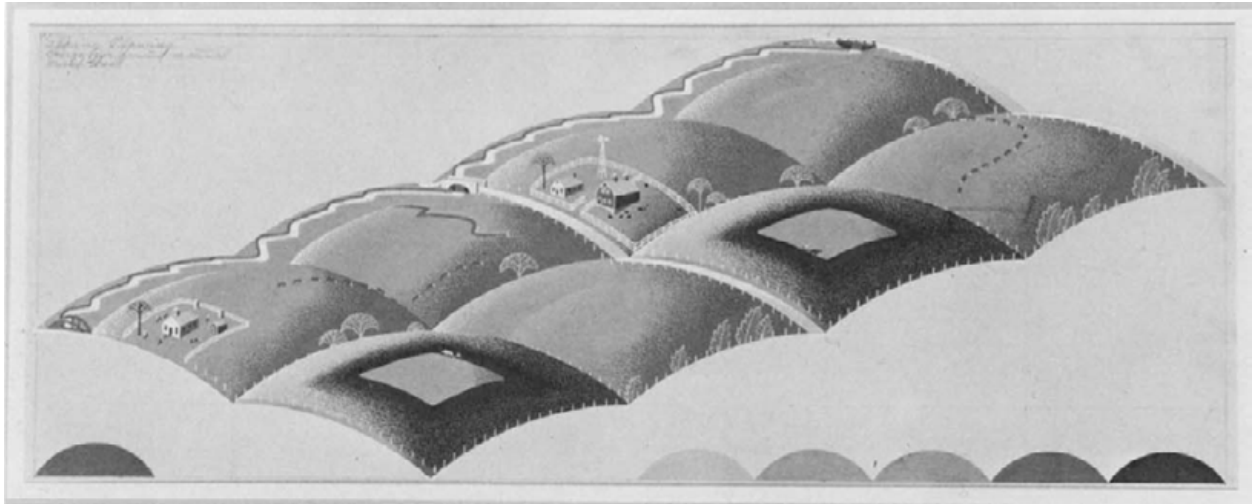


Figure 5. Grant Wood, *Spring Plowing*, textile design, tempera on paper, 16" x 38." Private collection.



Figure 6. F. Jay Haynes (?), *Harvest Scene on Dalrymple's Farm, North Dakota*, 1893. J.W. Buel, *America's Wonderlands*, 1893.



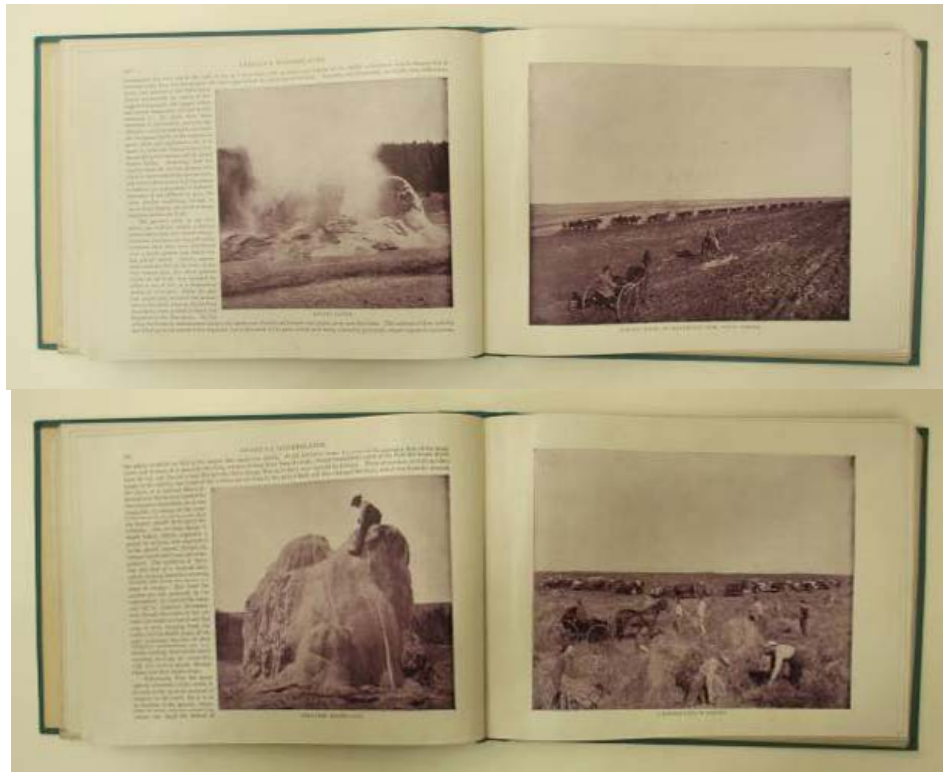


Figure 7. Page spreads showing geysers paired with a bonanza farm in J.W. Buel's *America's Wonderlands*, 1893.



Figure 8. *Between the Rows* by *Farmer Jones*, newspaper column heading. *The Nonpartisan Leader*, August 16, 1917, page 13.



Figure 9. Currier and Ives, *American Farm Scenes*, print 1 of 4, lithograph, C0134, G0146. Private collection.



Figure 10. Currier and Ives, *Prairie Fires of the Great West*, 1871, lithograph. Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, LC-USZC2-2926. Private collection.



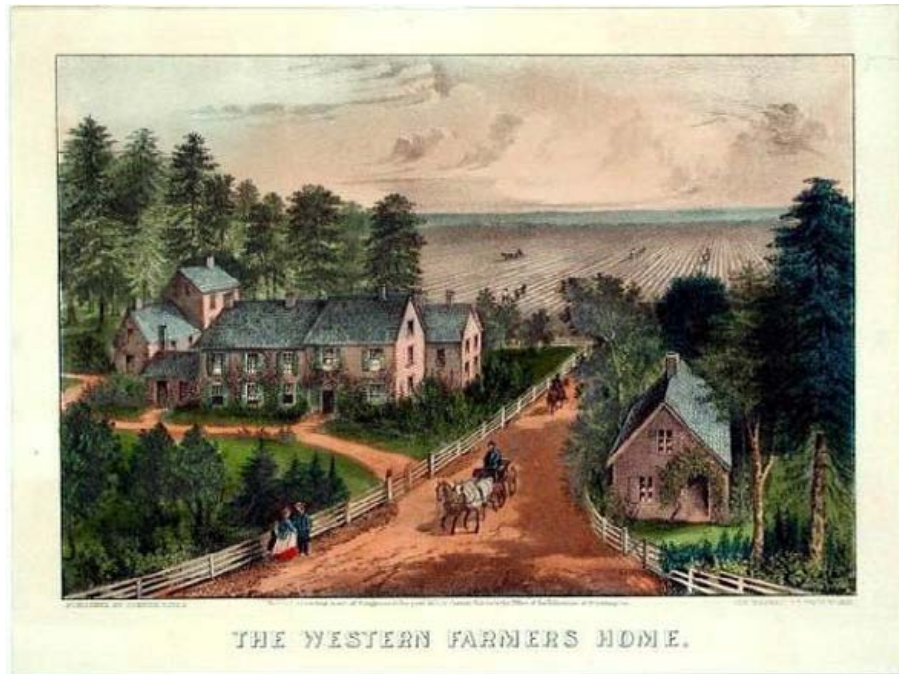


Figure 11. Currier and Ives, *The Western Farmers Home*, 1871, lithograph. Private collection.



Figure 12. *Farming in the West*, United States postage stamp issued in 1898 to commemorate the Trans-Mississippi Exposition of 1898. Collection of Travis Nygard,



**Figure 13.** Photographer unknown, source of the *Farming in the West* postage stamp of 1898. Collection of the  
Institute for Regional Studies, North Dakota State University.



**Figure 14.** Reinhold Adam Schenkenberger, sculpture on the Davison County Courthouse, 1933-1936.

**Photograph by Travis Nygard, 2006.**





Figure 15. *Harvesting in the West*, United States postage stamp issued in 1998 to commemorate the 100 year anniversary of the Trans-Mississippi Issue of 1898. Collection of Travis Nygard.



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## THE BUSINESS OF A WHEAT FARM (THE CONDUCT OF GREAT BUSINESSES—SEVENTH PAPER)

By William Allen White

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY W. R. LEIGH

WHEN one is cataloguing the callings of men one says "the business man, and the farmer," never "the business man and farmer," or the "business man engaged in farming." In daily speech modern men and women pay unconscious tribute to the ghost of the old order—the order which seemed to decree that the farmer's existence depended upon brawn and not upon brain. This thoughtless slighting of the farmer's vocation—which is made manifest in a score of forms in all departments of art, and in the conduct of material affairs—seems curious when one pauses to observe how deeply the farmer of to-day is involved in the meshes of commerce. The successful farmer of this generation must be a business man first, and a tiller of the soil afterward. In him must be combined many talents. He must be a capitalist, cautious and crafty; he must be an operator of industrial affairs, daring and resourceful, and he must play labor's part, with patience and humility. He is in busi-

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Figure 16. W. R. Leigh, painting of wheat field illustrating White, "The Business of a Wheat Farm" in *Scribner's Magazine*, 1897, page 531.



Figure 17. Unknown photographer, *Wheat Field. S. M. Johnson Homestead*, postcard, c. 1910. Collection of Travis Nygard.



Figure 18. Unknown photographer, wheat shocks on the Grandin bonanza farm close to Mayville, North Dakota, c. 1900. Fred Hultstrand History in Pictures Collection, NDIRS-NDSU, Fargo. Reproduction number C120mm-003 copy neg and 2028.488.



**Figure 19.** Unknown photographer, Photograph of 960 acre wheat field on the Fairview bonanza farm, c.1900. Collection of the North Dakota Institute for Regional Studies.



**Figure 20.** Unknown photographer, Cirkut photographs of a Nonpartisan League rally and picnic, 1918. National Nonpartisan League, *Freedom for All Forever*, fold-out inside back cover.



**Figure 21.** Unknown photographer, Cirkut photograph of a gathering of the Society for Equity, 1916. “North Dakota Equity Delegates--All Boosters for the Nonpartisan League and the Leader--and Who’s This? Hanna’s Goat, So They Say,” *The Nonpartisan Leader*, March 9, 1916, 8-9.





Figure 22. F. Jay Haynes, *Red River Valley, Minnesota*, albumen silver prints on card. 7.8 x 13.5 cm.  
Collection of Harvard University Art Museums, Fogg Art Museum, on deposit from the Carpenter Center for  
the Visual Arts, Transfer from the Geology Department Library, 2.2002.3693.

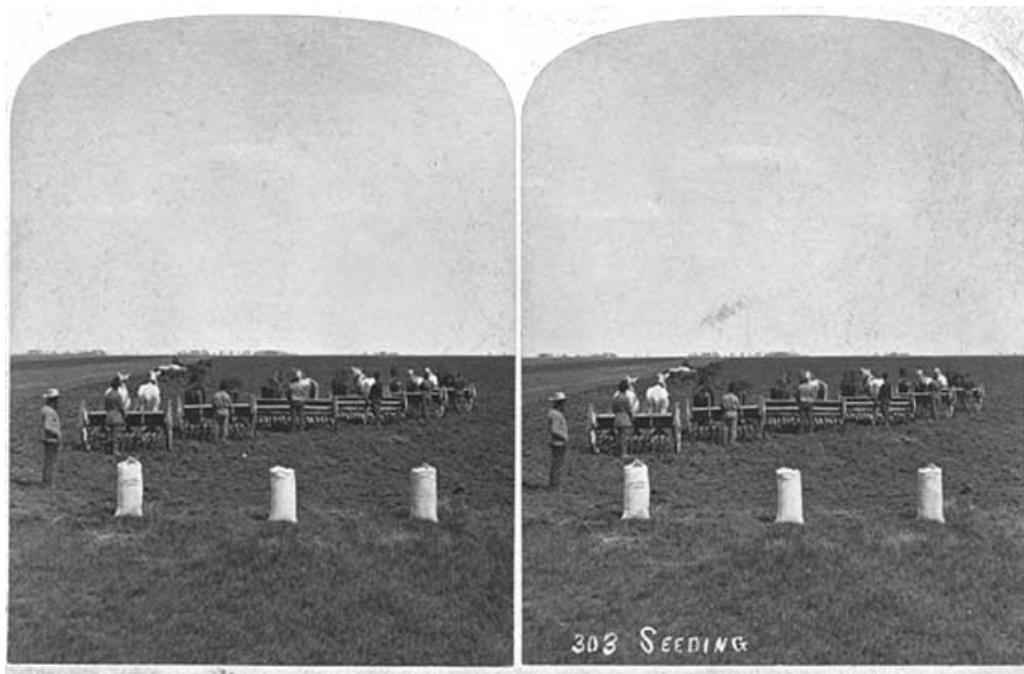


Figure 23. Frank Jay Haynes, *Seeding on a Red River Valley bonanza farm*, c. 1880. Collection of the  
Minnesota Historical Society, Negative no. 44226.



Figure 24. Russell Lee, *Threshing clover seed, a very dusty operation. Near Little Rock, Minnesota*, Farm Security Administration photograph, taken September, 1937. Library of Congress Prints & Photographs Division, call number LC-USF34- 030626-D, digital ID fsa 8b19941.

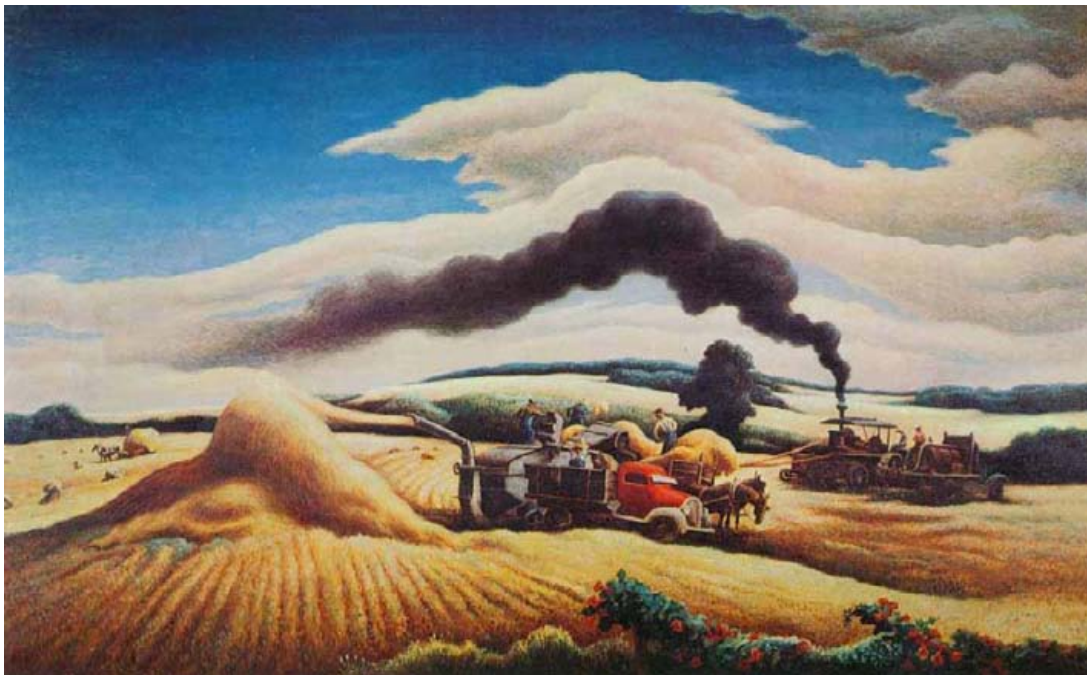


Figure 25. Thomas Hart Benton, *Threshing Wheat*, 1938-39, oil and tempera on canvas mounted on panel, 26" x 42." Collection of the Sheldon Swope Art Gallery.



Figure 26. Grant Wood, *Breaking the Prairie* panels from the *When Tillage Begins Other Arts Follow* murals in the library at Iowa State University, Ames, created from 1936 to 1940. Photograph by Travis Nygard.



Figure 27. Banner for *The Plough Boy*, January 29, 1820.



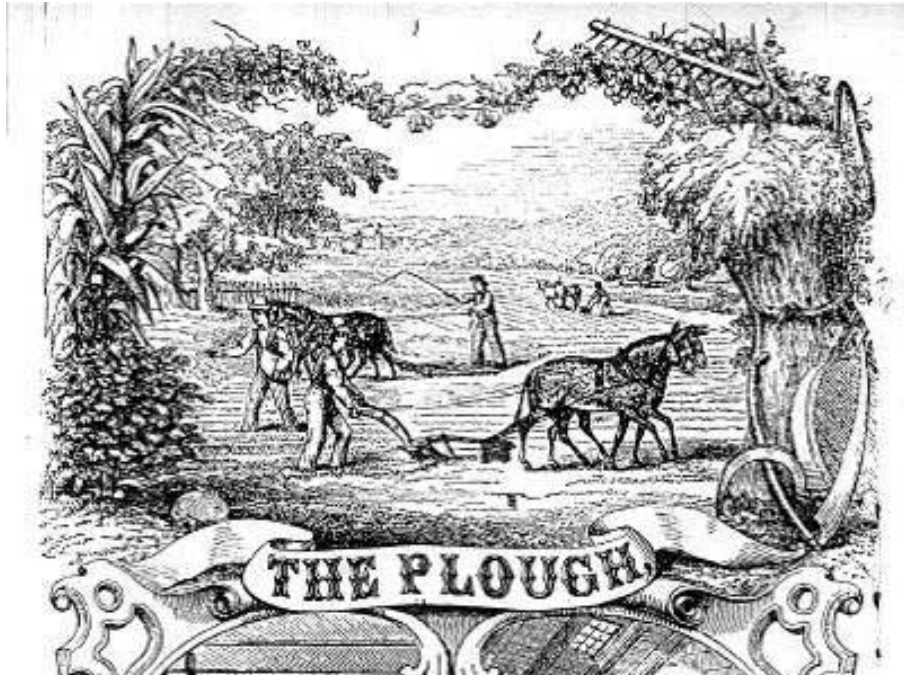


Figure 28. Detail of the front page of *The Plough, The Loom, and the Anvil*, Volume I, 1848.



Figure 29. Photographer unknown, photograph of bundle teams on the Dalrymple farm. Collection of the  
Cass County Historical Society.



Figure 30. Truman Ingersoll (?), *Harvesting with a Twenty-six-Mule Team on a Bonanza Wheat Farm*, lithograph, view 793 in Truman Ingersoll's 100 card set of stereoviews of the USA. Also included in the 800 card set of stereoviews of the world distributed by Sears and Roebuck. Collection of Travis Nygard.



Figure 31. Truman Ingersoll (?), *Bonanza Wheat Farm Harvesting with a 26-Mule Team, Dakota*, view 952 in the Metropolitan Series. Collection of Travis Nygard.



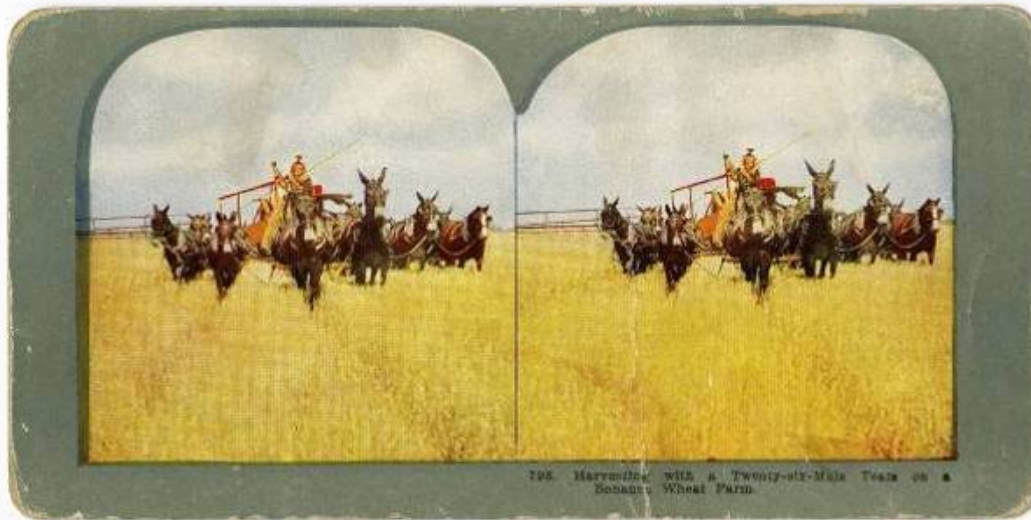


Figure 32. Truman Ingersoll (?), *Harvesting with a Twenty-six-Mule Team on a Bonanza Wheat Farm*, lithograph, view 793 in Truman Ingersoll's 100 card set of stereoviews of the USA. Also included in the 800 card set of stereoviews of the world. Distributed by Montgomery Ward. Collection of Travis Nygard.



Figure 33. *Harvesting with a 26 mule team on a bonanza wheat farm, Idaho*. UCR/California Museum of Photography, Keystone-Mast Collection, Stereographic Photoprints by Geographical Location North and Central America United States Idaho, Number KU79841.



Figure 34. Advertisement to encourage families to buy land that was once part of the 20,000-acre Dalrymple Farm, published in *Wallaces' Farmer*, July 6, 1917, page 18.



Figure 35. Detail of advertisement to encourage families to buy land that was once part of the 20,000-acre Dalrymple Farm, published in *Wallaces' Farmer*, July 6, 1917, page 18.

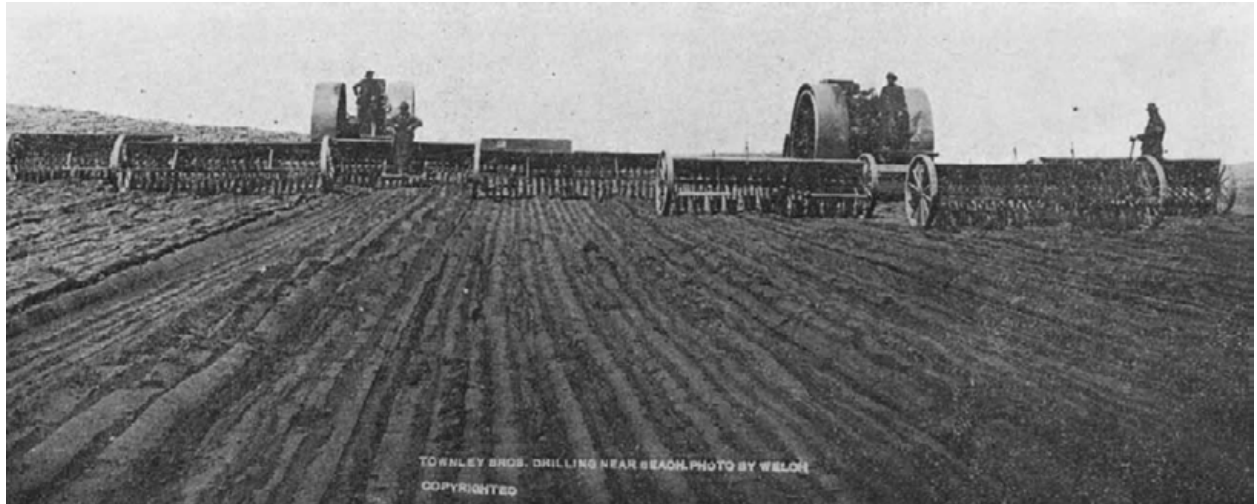


Figure 36. Welch, "Townley Bros. drilling near Beach," photograph, 1912.

### 3.0 CHAPTER THREE: DEBATING WITH IMAGES OF FLOUR MILLING

#### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

Perhaps no food has been a more contested part of modern life than the loaf of bread. As the product most frequently made from wheat, bolstering its consumption and controlling how it was produced and distributed were key issues that were debated by farmers. By examining some of Grant Wood's drawings in conjunction with political cartoons, portraiture, penmanship and photography from the early twentieth century we can reconstruct a debate about wheat distribution that took decades to unfold. During the teens a high-stakes battle for the future of flour milling waged on visual, political, and practical levels. Whether Americans would continue to buy award-winning grain products from private industry, or come to purchase them from state-owned facilities was an open question. Grant Wood was aware of this debate, and he made four drawings that can be understood as the culmination of it. They are some of his illustrations for Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street*. Wood created nine such drawings in 1937, two of which are "portraits" of characters that support socializing American grain distribution. They are titled *The Perfectionist* and *The Radical* (Figure 37 and Figure 38). Companion drawings depict their homes—*Main Street Mansion* and the *Village Slums* (Figure 39 and Figure 40). *The Perfectionist* is intended to be the novel's hero, Carol Kennicott, and *The Radical* is her friend Miles Bjornstam. Given that Wood and Lewis knew each other, thought highly of each other's work,

and valued each other's opinions we can assume that these images are not boiler plate material, but rather carefully constructed. As depictions of people that bolster radical farm politics, *The Perfectionist* and *The Radical* would be easy to dismiss, but this is not what Wood does. In fact, he seems to emphasize them and take them extra seriously. Indeed, amidst the people drawn for *Main Street*, only these two are accompanied by drawings of their homes.<sup>60</sup>

Together Carol and Miles made people nervous at the same time that their agenda was seductive. They tried to change society because they saw truths that others could not. It is thus appropriate that their portraits contain visual similarities. They are cropped from the chest up, with heads cocked slightly to their right. Their mouths convey little emotion, but have a hint of a frown. Their eyes gaze inquisitively to their left as if taking in their surroundings with curiosity or suspicion. Given such special treatment and visual parallels Wood seems to be drawing attention to the most contentious politics in the novel. Understanding them, however, requires backing up in time, such that we can see that Wood's drawings are not the only visual materials employed to manipulate public perceptions of rural radicalism. The drawings are not even the only portraits that were part of this debate. To access this broader framework we must return to the failed bonanza farmer introduced in chapter one—A.C. Townley.

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<sup>60</sup> Sinclair Lewis, *Main Street*, Special ed. (New York: Limited Editions Club, 1920, 1937). My understanding of *The Perfectionist* and *The Radical* builds on the work of Lea Rosson DeLong. Although her critical framework is entirely different from mine, she has written what will nonetheless remain the definitive study of Wood's illustrations for *Main Street*. DeLong, *Grant Wood's Main Street*. See also Crowe, "Illustration as Interpretation," 95-111. The other drawings are the *Sentimental Yearner*, the *General Practitioner*, *The Good Influence*, the *Practical Idealist*, and the *Booster*. As an example of Wood's and Lewis's high regard for each other, note that while Lewis initially refused to visit the University of Iowa to hold a four day writing workshop in 1940 he changed his mind after Wood and Dean Stoddard personally appealed to him. Mark Schorer, *Sinclair Lewis: An American Life* (New York: Dell in arrangement with McGraw-Hill, 1961), 670.

### 3.2 GRANT WOOD AND RADICAL FARM POLITICS

A.C. Townley's radical organization, The Farmers' Nonpartisan League, has largely dropped from the collective consciousness of Americans. Nonetheless, it was one of the most successful radical movements of the twentieth century. It used aggressive campaigning that foregrounded visual materials to frame how people understood the food system. This visual debate began in 1914 when Townley reacted to bankruptcy by throwing himself into organizing rural people under the Socialist Party banner. That same year he left the Socialists because of allegations that he was enrolling people who only poorly understood the organization's principles. He then struck out on his independent organizing crusade.<sup>61</sup>

The Nonpartisan League was broadly progressive, and its members were small-scale farmers that rallied against large-scale corporate farming and "Big Biz" (grain exchanges, elevators, mills, and railroads) that had colluded to fix grain prices. To achieve its agenda the League endorsed political candidates from any party that supported socializing grain distribution and milling—goals ultimately achieved in North Dakota. It also supported women's rights, and

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<sup>61</sup> Specifically, Townley was hired in 1914 to manage the "organization department" of the North Dakota Chapter of the Socialist Party through which people could pay a fee to receive Socialist publications and support its agenda without being card-carrying members. The impetus for creating this department was to target people interested in the Socialists but not yet willing to leave their old political party. The department was disbanded in 1915. For a discussion of the organizing department, see Stanley Philip Wasson, "The Nonpartisan League in Minnesota: 1916-1924" (PhD Dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1955), 63-64. For a history of the Socialists in North Dakota at this time reconstructed from the official party newspaper *The Iconoclast*, see Perry Joel Hornbacher, "The Forgotten Heritage: The North Dakota Socialist Party, 1902-1918" (MS Thesis, North Dakota State University, 1982). The definitive account of the Nonpartisan League remains Robert Morlan's book from 1955. One of the strengths of Morlan's work is that he was able to interview many of the leaders of the League, including Arthur C. Townley and John Miller Baer. He drew heavily on archival materials at the Minnesota and North Dakota historical societies, as well as newspaper articles. The core literature on the League includes Moum, "Harvest of Discontent: The Social Origins of the Nonpartisan League, 1880-1922", Gaston, *The Nonpartisan League*, Ellsworth, "Origins of the Nonpartisan League", Morlan, *Political Prairie Fire*, Remele, "Power to the People: The Nonpartisan League," 66-92, Russell, *The Story of the Nonpartisan League*, Goldberg, "The Nonpartisan League in North Dakota: A Case Study of Political Action in America".

indeed it was a League-endorsed legislature and governor that passed North Dakota's suffrage bill in 1917. By the end of 1918 this organization had become an international phenomenon, with chapters in nineteen US states and two Canadian provinces. While not all small-scale farmers were members, given this widespread success we can assume that nearly all of them had familiarity with the organization.

The official story of the League's birth—which may be apocryphal—is that Townley and Albert E. Bowen founded it at a convention of The American Society for Equity held in Bismarck in 1914. (The Equity was an Indiana-based movement that encouraged farmers to hold grain off of the market until fair prices were available.) The platform for the League was written on a scrap of paper, and the first member was Fred Wood—a person not related to Grant Wood to the best of my knowledge—who signed on for \$2.50. Fred Wood was able to supply the League with automobiles, and his endorsement legitimated the organization in the eyes of his neighbors, who also joined. Through grass-roots work membership boomed—dues being reinvested to buy more cars and hire experienced organizers from the Socialist Party. Negative publicity was avoided by keeping the movement secret—organizers went so far as to avoid staying in hotels out of fear that their presence would be noted by small-town newspaper editors. It is this organization that Grant Wood's *Perfectionist* and *Radical* supported.<sup>62</sup>

Should I wish to frame *Main Street* and Grant Wood's illustrations for it as exclusively about Nonpartisan League politics it would be easy to do by focusing on Sinclair Lewis's ties to the organization and the numerous mentions of it in the book. Such an approach would be irresponsible, however, because the League is one of several major threads in the novel. It is

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<sup>62</sup> For accounts of the League's founding, see Wasson, "The Nonpartisan League in Minnesota", 65-68, Ellsworth, "Origins of the Nonpartisan League", Morlan, *Political Prairie Fire*. In the context of the Equity and other farmers' organizations, see Moum, "Harvest of Discontent: The Social Origins of the Nonpartisan League, 1880-1922."

filled with commentary on aspects of small town life and American culture that are not appropriate to develop here, such as immigration, religion, and nationhood. Nonetheless, the characters know all about the politics of flour milling, as did Sinclair Lewis, and these politics push the story forward.<sup>63</sup>

The Nonpartisan League was a major part of Lewis's life when he was writing *Main Street*. The novel is widely assumed to be autobiographical, with its setting of Gopher Prairie based on Lewis's hometown of Sauk Center, Minnesota, in Stearns County—an area where the League was prominent. Lewis befriended leaders of the organization and even brokered the first book deal about it, written by the League's director of publications, Herbert Gaston. Afterwards he jovially wrote to Alfred Harcourt, the book's publisher, "Say, fella, you better send me copy of *Nonpartisan League*. Don't forget I'm the father and mother of that book—who suggested it? Heh? (If it doesn't sell, my Heh may not be so loud ....)" In 1955 his ex-wife, Grace Hegger Lewis, recalled that while living in the Minneapolis-St. Paul area from 1917 to 1919 they "were seen with disapproval at a meeting of the Nonpartisan League." Then, in March of 1919 Lewis was asked by George Horace Lorimer to write a feature article on the League to be published in the *Saturday Evening Post*. Lewis ultimately turned down the commission, but nonetheless

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<sup>63</sup> The text of the novel even comments on its own unusual structure. "The chart which plots Carol's progress is not easy to read. The lines are broken and uncertain of direction; often instead of rising they sink in wavering scrawls; and the colors are watery blue and pink and the dim gray of rubbed pencil marks. A few lines are traceable." And later in the novel we learn that she "had fancied that her life might make a story. She knew that there was nothing heroic or obviously dramatic in it, no magic of rare hours, nor valiant challenge, but it seemed to her that she was of some significance because she was commonplaceness, the ordinary life of the age, made articulate and protesting." Lewis, *Main Street*, 351.



attended League meetings that summer while living in Mankato. Clearly Lewis's perspective on the League, as voiced by his characters, is drawn from personal contact.<sup>64</sup>

The novel's small townsfolk repeatedly jab at the League by name or condemn its agenda. A banker, doctor, preacher, booster, and sheriff each voice their disapproval. Carol's uncle Whittier ranted "I don't know where folks get these new-fangled ideas. Lots of farmers in Dakota getting 'em these days. About co-operation. Think they can run stores better 'n storekeepers! Huh!" The town "booster" Jim Blausser ranted that "I want to add that this Farmer's Nonpartisan League and the whole bunch of socialists are right in the same category, or, as the fellow says, in the same scategory, meaning This Way Out, Exit, Beat It While the Going's Good, This Means You, for all knockers of prosperity and the rights of property!" The drug store owner Dave Dyer spoke for the majority of Gopher Prairie's upper class when he noted that "What they ought to do is simply to hang every one of these agitators." Despite this profound opposition on the part of her peers Carol ultimately comes to understand that "Large experiments in politics and in co-operative distribution, ventures requiring knowledge, courage,

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<sup>64</sup> Lewis's biographer Richard Lingeman went so far as to claim that "All the research he did on the league that summer [of 1919] found expression in *Main Street*" and further noted that "Few of the reviewers saw how deeply Lewis had probed the economic structure of a small town," which included an "exploitative relationship to farmers and the land." The best reading of *Main Street* in light of Lewis's biography that I have seen, which draws heavily on archival materials about Lewis, including drafts of his manuscripts is by James M. Hutchisson, "Main Street 1905-1920," in *The Rise of Sinclair Lewis, 1920-1930* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), 9-46. For a particularly interesting but morbid comparison of *Main Street* to the realities of life in Sauk Centre, with details of innumerable small-town tragedies, see James Lundquist, "The Sauk Centre Sinclair Lewis Didn't Write About," in *Critical Essays on Sinclair Lewis*, ed. Martin Bucco (Boston: C.K. Hall, 1986), 221-33. On Lewis' interactions with the Nonpartisan League, refer to the biography by Richard Lingeman, *Sinclair Lewis: Rebel from Main Street* (New York: Random House, 2002), 110, 12, 22-23, 27-28, 59-60, 405. The quote about the League is on page 127 of Lingeman who cites a letter from Lewis to George Horace Lorimer, dated March 21, 1919, in the collection of the Minnesota Historical Society. Grace Hegger Lewis, *With Love from Gracie: Sinclair Lewis, 1912-1925* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1955), 115-16. Gaston, *The Nonpartisan League*. For a series of letters between Lewis and Harcourt about this book written in 1919 and 1920 see Sinclair Lewis, *From Main Street to Stockholm: Letters of Sinclair Lewis, 1919-1930*, ed. Harrison Smith (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1952), 1, 6, 26.

and imagination, do originate in the West and Middlewest, but they are not of the towns, they are of the farmers.” Her insight is firsthand, built on farm visits with her physician husband, as well as a street corner conversation that she overheard in which a farmer described his plight. The task of this chapter is to excavate the story of visual materials related to this plight, produced since the Nonpartisan League’s founding in 1914. It will bridge the gaps that would otherwise prevent us from understanding that Wood’s portraits were part of a longstanding struggle. In other words, understanding that they are the products of rhetoric.<sup>65</sup>

### 3.3 RHETORIC AS A CRITICAL FRAMEWORK

As a case study in visual rhetoric, I will produce a narrative that intertwines the stories of two early twentieth century flour mills that developed parallel to each other. Like all people involved in rhetoric, the politicians and millers that argued for these institutions took positions and defended them persuasively. This story is not about objective truths, but about how people developed intellectual frameworks for understanding their worlds, and then began posturing

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<sup>65</sup> See Lewis, *Main Street*, 40, 41, 46, 199, 269, 338, 41. Although he is discussing potatoes when the League usually focused on wheat, the farmer on the street corner’s experience otherwise reads like the standard laundry list of the organization’s talking points—even including disinformation campaigns. “Sure. Course I was beaten. The shipper and the grocers here wouldn’t pay us a decent price for our potatoes, even though folks in the cities were howling for ‘em. So we says, well, we’ll get a truck and ship ‘em right down to Minneapolis. But the commission merchants there were in cahoots with the local shipper here; they said they wouldn’t pay us a cent more than he would, not even if they was nearer to the market. Well, we found we could get higher prices in Chicago, but when we tried to get freight cars to ship there, the railroads wouldn’t let us have ‘em—even though they had cars standing empty right here in the yards. There you got it—good market and these towns keeping us from it. Gus, that’s the way these towns work all the time. They pay what they want to for our wheat, but we pay what they want us to for their clothes. Stowbody and Dawson foreclose every mortgage they can, and put in tenant farmers. The *Dauntless* lies to us about the Nonpartisan League, the lawyers sting us, the machinery-dealers hare to carry us over bad years, and then their daughters put on swell dresses and look at us as if we were a bunch of hoboes. Man, I’d like to burn this town!” Quotes are in ———, *Main Street*, 185, 216.

against people who differed from them. The type of posturing that this story reconstructs was undertaken on the visual level, but rhetoric more commonly is associated with oral and written debate. This is not surprising, given that language can be used to present precise ideas. We should not, however, dismiss visual information or underappreciate its power. Within its social contexts, and sometimes combined with textual labels, the meanings of visual communication can be punchy and powerful. Political cartoons, for example, use labeled stock symbols and characters to convey unambiguous meaning, and their effectiveness depends upon that content being immediately recognizable.

A rhetorical approach is also appropriate because it nods to the fact that the term “agribusiness” is commonly used to refer to debates about food production and business. Within American education, programs in agribusiness focus on the practicalities of scientific farming, business management, and food distribution. While in this context the material is usually taught in an evenhanded tone of voice, on a popular level agribusiness is often framed polemically. Such critiques of the contemporary food system are often dystopic, presenting agribusiness as a threat to security, the environment, and the well-being of humankind. Regardless of the merits of these arguments, it is clear that agribusiness signals contention.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Examples of agribusiness used as a polemical anchor for debate including: Fred Magdoff, John Bellamy Foster, and Frederick H. Buttel, *Hungry for Profit: The Agribusiness Threat to Farmers, Food, and the Environment* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000), Lisa M. Hamilton, *Deeply Rooted: Unconventional Farmers in the Age of Agribusiness* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2009), Helena Norberg-Hodge, Todd Merrifield, and Steven Gorelick, *Bringing the Food Economy Home: Local Alternatives to Global Agribusiness* (London: Zed Books, 2002), Karl Weber, *Food, Inc.: How Industrial Food Is Making Us Sicker, Fatter and Poorer—and What You Can Do About It* (New York: Public Affairs, 2009), C. David Coats, *Old Macdonald’s Factory Farm: The Myth of the Traditional Farm and the Shocking Truth About Animal Suffering in Today’s Agribusiness* (New York: Continuum, 1989), A. V. Krebs, *The Corporate Reapers: The Book of Agribusiness* (Washington, DC: Essential Books, 1992), Ingolf Vogeler, *The Myth of the Family Farm: Agribusiness Dominance of U.S. Agriculture* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1981).

While rhetorical analyses can assume a naive viewer, in this chapter I will be reconstructing how a person well-informed about the food system would react to visual material. In the case of the Nonpartisan League, this material included portraiture, such as a mass-produced likeness of A.C. Townley; handicrafts, such as crocheted doilies; and political drawings, such as John Miller Baer's cartoons. The League's official newspaper, *The Nonpartisan Leader*, was heavily illustrated—printed with up to four colors of ink—and a full-page political cartoon usually filled the front. The cartoons were often done by Baer, whose propagandistic imagery rallied people around League causes. Before joining the League Baer had established himself as a cartoonist for North Dakota newspapers near the town of Beach and illustrated a journal of humor, poetry, and opinion titled *Jim Jam Jems*. He applied this expertise to League causes, beginning in 1915, and many of his images merit scrutiny. To begin I will address a cartoon with a history intertwined with the quintessential icon of American flour milling—Betty Crocker. This fictional spokesperson was a key player in the debates about flour, bolstering the agenda of one of the largest flour producers in the country—the Washburn-Crosby Milling Company known in the twenty-first century as General Mills.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> The definitive study of John Miller Baer's career remains to be written, but information can be gleaned from a variety of sources, including: "Baer, John Miller," in *Biographical Directory of the American Congress 1774-1971* (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 1971), 538, David Vienna, "Cartoonist John Baer, 83, Dies, Coined FDR's 'New Deal' Slogan," *The Washington Post*, February 23, 1970, B8, "John Miller Baer," in *State of North Dakota Legislative Manual*, ed. Thomas Hall (Bismarck: Bismarck Tribune Company for the State Printers and Binders, 1919), 556, Bill G. Reid, "John Miller Baer: Nonpartisan League Cartoonist and Congressman," *North Dakota History* 44, no. 1 (1977): 4-13, Stephen Hess and Milton Kaplan, *The Ungentlemanly Art: A History of American Political Cartoons*, Rev. ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1975), 24, Charles P. Stewart, "Caricaturist Who Cartooned Self into Congress and Then out Again Still Powerful Figure at Capital," October 30 1969?, Central Press Association news release in the John M. Baer Papers, Chester Fritz Memorial Library, University of North Dakota, collection 719, folder 1, King Features Syndicate, "World-Famous Artist Crashed Congress with a Lead Pencil," October 30 1969?, news release in the John M. Baer Papers, Chester Fritz Memorial Library, University of North Dakota, collection 719, folder 1, Jack Hagerty, "John M. Baer, Once N.D. Congressman, Still Active at 83," *Grand Forks (ND) Herald*, October 8, 1969, 3, Martin A. Dillmon, "John M. Baer, Labor's Cartoonist," *The Painter and Decorator* 61 (1947): 23-24, "The John Baer Story," *The Railway Carmen's Journal*, February 1969, 33-35, Jon C.

Materials from the Nonpartisan League and Washburn-Crosby cannot provide us with details of grass-roots meetings or board-room debates, but they offer something else—a public conversation that people could follow. In this context Crocker can be thought of as part of a symbolic negotiation between one of the largest food producers in the world and one of the most successful democratic movements of the twentieth century. She, as a signature and portrait, functioned as an alternative to the Nonpartisan League’s story of urban millers. Regardless of the idiosyncratic facts of her initial creation—the archival record is vague, but the name may have first been used on junk mail sent by a regional manager—the social context is crucial for understanding why she would skyrocket to prominence, through the great effort of the staff at the company. Washburn-Crosby was under attack and needed to either defend its old corporate image or invent a new one. The staff seem to have chosen the latter route. With this in mind, Crocker may be seen as an attempt to reframe the company as wholesome while it was being scapegoated for undermining American farm life.

The story of Betty Crocker’s birth has been frequently told. In 1921 the Washburn-Crosby Milling Company was flooded with mail. It had printed a puzzle in *The Saturday Evening Post* and promised to give anyone that completed it a pin cushion shaped like a Gold Medal Flour sack (Figure 41). Although most queries could be answered without a letter some contestants had asked for specific baking advice. Members of the advertising department, led by Samuel Gale, wanted to use a woman’s name when responding to these queries to better identify with homemakers. To honor the former company director William G. Crocker the department

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Gordon, “John Miller Baer: Congressman-Cartoonist,” *International Journal of Comic Art* 9, no. 2 (2007): 247-57. The Minnesota Historical Society owns issues of *Jim Jam Jems* dated January 1913, December 1914, January 1915, March 1915, June 1915, August 1915, May 1916, and January 1928, all of which feature Baer’s work on the covers and interior.

took his surname and appended it to the wholesome Betty. An internal contest was held in which female staff members submitted samples of their handwriting. The prettiest script, by Florence Lindeberg, was selected for her signature—a variant of which still adorns her products (Figure 42).<sup>68</sup>

These facts about Crocker’s invention are as difficult to verify as the story of the Nonpartisan League’s birth—an account of this era was not written down until decades after the fact. Even if the story is accurate, however, it is not enough to explain why it was logical to revamp the company’s image at this point in time. Given only this set of facts, starting with an exciting contest from a premier magazine, we might erroneously assume that the impetus for inventing Crocker’s character was the enthusiasm of the American population for traditional home life. Crocker could be framed as the culmination of the spirit of her age and the result of spontaneous creativity by an energetic employee. A different story that takes farm politics and debates about flour production into account, however, can be reconstructed if we look elsewhere—and especially at the Nonpartisan League.

### 3.4 ARGUING WITH POLITICAL CARTOONS

A drawing of a flour mill by John Miller Baer was published on the front page of *The Nonpartisan Leader* on December 14, 1916 (Figure 43). It shows a city street without people in

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<sup>68</sup>The history of Betty Crocker has been most fully examined by Susan Marks and Laura Shapiro, both of whom based their stories on official accounts in the General Mills archives. Laura Shapiro, “Is She Real?,” in *Something from the Oven: Reinventing Dinner in 1950s America* (New York: Viking, 2004), 169-209, Susan Marks, *Finding Betty Crocker: The Secret Life of America’s First Lady of Food* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2005). For an account embedded in the broader history of General Mills see James Gray, *Business without Boundary: The Story of General Mills* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1954), 170-83.

an industrial area of town. Trains fill the foreground, a mill and grain bins take up most of the middle, and in the background are unidentifiable buildings and smokestacks. Because of shading with oil crayon this night scene is dark and intimidating. Mounted on the side of the mill a three-story billboard is illuminated, based on a Gold Medal Flour advertisement, which poses a question:

*eventually*

#### STATE OWNED MILLS

Why not now?

Taken alone this drawing seems to be straightforward political propaganda—the League’s state-owned mill will save us from peril. This agenda, indeed, propelled the organization forward and launched Baer’s political career.<sup>69</sup>

Looking more closely at Baer’s life as both a cartoonist and a politician can provide clues about why this image was important. His accomplishments were numerous, and his drawings for the Nonpartisan League made during the teens and twenties were of prime importance. In 1917 the League endorsed Baer for a seat in the US House of Representatives during a special election brought about by the death of Congressman Henry I. Helgesen of North Dakota. He won and was re-elected in 1918. Baer thus gained the distinction of being the only professional cartoonist to have ever served in the US Congress. His campaigns were entertaining events in which he drew on stage—a practice he called giving “chalk talks.” As one of the most public and outspoken members of Congress Baer lampooned his peers in drawings sold to Hearst Newspapers, the Newspaper Enterprise Association, and King Features. While accounting for Baer’s success, cartooning was also blamed for his failure at re-election in 1920. The practice evidently ran

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<sup>69</sup> John Miller Baer, cover of *The Nonpartisan Leader*, December 14, 1916.

counter to the dignity and discretion required of politicians. As he himself explained “I cartooned myself into congress. Then I cartooned myself out again.”<sup>70</sup>

Although Baer served only two terms the experience enmeshed him in politics and public culture for a lifetime. Indeed, when looking back on his fifty-four-year-long career as a cartoonist, a reporter’s summation that he was “the country’s most formidable pictorial champion of the rights of agriculture and industrial labor” seems justified. It is difficult to imagine a cartoonist closer to the history of farming specifically or the era’s politics as a whole. He designed the first emblem for the United Nations and the official seal of the AFL-CIO; he wrote a column syndicated by the International Labor News Service titled “Baerfacts;” he became the official cartoonist for the transportation union’s newspaper *Labor*; and his cartoons were syndicated across the nation. In 1931 he sent a drawing to Franklin Roosevelt showing a farmer and laborer disgusted, throwing up their cards and demanding a “New Deal!” as they play poker against the big businessmen and grain gamblers that the Nonpartisan League had rallied against for years (Figure 44). Thus, at least in name the New Deal can be traced to his cartooning. Although the specific drawing sent to Roosevelt had been published in *Labor*, it is based on an earlier one from *The Leader*. Such work was typical of Baer’s creative output and the broader Nonpartisan League. His cartoons included parodies of great art by Vincent van Gogh, Jean-Francois Millet, and Archibald Willard. He referred visually to classical mythology, literature, the circus, colonialism, patriotism, and religion. And, most importantly for this

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<sup>70</sup> Quotes are from King Features Syndicate, “World-Famous Artist Crashed Congress with a Lead Pencil,” October 30 1969?, News release in the John M. Baer Papers, Chester Fritz Memorial Library, University of North Dakota, collection 719, folder 1; Hagerty, “John M. Baer, Once N.D. Congressman, Still Active at 83,” *Grand Forks (ND) Herald*, October 8, 1969, 3.



discussion, he used buildings as icons of institutional power and used portraiture to convey the identity of farmers.<sup>71</sup>

Returning to the cartoon in question about flour milling, an examination of images circulating within American popular culture reveals that it is not as straightforward as it first appears. It is a parody. The cityscape is directly copied from a Washburn-Crosby advertisement that ran in *The Saturday Evening Post* and probably elsewhere in 1916 (Figure 45). Rather than bolstering state-owned mills, however, the text originally read:

*eventually*

GOLD MEDAL FLOUR

Why not now?

While all visual parodies have some level of ambiguity in them, within the context of this radical newspaper it is clear that Baer positioned the League in direct opposition to the large flour producer, and conversely positioned the as-yet-unrealized State Mill and Elevator as an alternative. By taking a celebrated advertisement and subtly altering its text, Baer turns the image into an ironic statement that depends on the familiarity of his readers with milling. He effectively strips the company of its dignity and invites contemplation of alternatives.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Although neither discusses the League, this connection with the New Deal was mentioned in his obituary and in Hess and Kaplan, *The Ungentlemanly Art*, 24, Vienna, "Cartoonist John Baer, 83, Dies, Coined FDR's 'New Deal' Slogan," B8. Quotes are in Charles P. Stewart, "Caricaturist Who Cartooned Self into Congress and Then out Again Still Powerful Figure at Capital," October 30 1969, Central Press Association news release in the John M. Baer Papers, Chester Fritz Memorial Library, University of North Dakota, collection 719, folder 1.

<sup>72</sup> I follow Linda Hutcheon's definitions of quotation, plagiarism, forgery, parody, and satire in which each are unique phenomena that reference another person's work. Quotation is reverent; plagiarism and forgery are deceptive; parody is ironic; and satire, finally, is both ironic and belittling. Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms* (New York: Methuen, 1985).

The Gold Medal Flour ad in question was part of a great campaign that began in 1907 when the advertising manager at Washburn-Crosby, Benjamin S. Bull, coined the “eventually ... why not now?” slogan. Not recognizing its potential immediately, Bull threw the paper it was written on away. By happenstance it was retrieved by the company President’s son, James Ford Bell, who encouraged its adoption. The result was one of the most successful advertising campaigns of the twentieth century. Hundreds of layouts featuring it were used to push Gold Medal Flour. The company saturated the visual environment in America, running the ads in diverse venues. Versions of it appeared in national magazines, the agricultural press, and trade journals. Indeed, *The Saturday Evening Post*, *The American Co-operative Journal*, and *The Northwestern Miller* each contained them. The image and slogan thus entered collective consciousness, like the “Got Milk?” campaign of the late twentieth century.<sup>73</sup>

Although I argue that John Miller Baer’s parody was one of the most significant, it was far from alone. Indeed, the “eventually” campaign’s success is attested to by the fact that it was co-opted to promote products and ideas as diverse as perforated metal, magazines, guns, motor cars, presidential candidates, embalming, the Irish Republic, oil, women’s clothing, peace, plaster, banking, underwear, church, pearls, newspapers, home ownership, eggs, vented indoor clothes driers, stethoscopes, glue, the Republican party, laxatives, floor scrapers, light bulbs, linoleum, trucking, silver, sunshine, Christmas shopping, love, military enlistment, marriage, phonographs, executing war criminals, better college teaching, boilers, car batteries, custom tailoring, and tobacco processing equipment. One of the snappiest parodies was produced by Washburn-Crosby’s chief competitor (Figure 46 and Figure 47). It copies the composition, duotone colors, and angled script of a layout from 1915 to retort:

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<sup>73</sup> I looked at hundreds of layouts, preserved on microfiche, in the archives of General Mills.

*Because*

### Pillsbury's Best

Clearly the campaign was in the foreground of people's minds, but we might ask why, given this popularity, we should focus on the Nonpartisan League example.<sup>74</sup>

Baer's *Nonpartisan Leader* cover would have been of particular concern to the staff at Washburn-Crosby for several reasons. Because his cartoon was about flour milling, it amounted to a direct attack on the company. Furthermore, most of the parodies were not realized with production values comparable to Baer's cartoons in *The Nonpartisan Leader*. Yet another important fact is that the Nonpartisan League had a large readership, and thus a large cultural impact. We know that the staff at Washburn-Crosby were aware of the cartoon because there is a copy of it, and the other parodies listed above, in the archives of the public-relations department at General Mills. To reconstruct how the staff members there might have reacted, however, and to understand the visual and political acumen embedded in this particular parody, we must look closer at the Nonpartisan League's story.

*The Nonpartisan Leader* was an influential publication in rural America, and to understand this it is useful to think of periodicals as existing within family trees whose writers, editors, and readers reacted to and imitated each other. In the case of *The Leader* the textual

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<sup>74</sup> All of these parodies with the exception of Pillsbury's are in the folder "1.1 Eventually Why Not Now Slogan" in the General Mills Archives. See also a fact sheet titled "Eventually ... Why Not Now?" in the General Mills Archives, no date. The parodies listed above are all in the archives of General Mills, in a file from the Public Relations Department. The Gold Medal Flour ad was published January 20, 1915 in *The Northwestern Miller*, inside back cover. The Pillsbury flour ad was published on September 15, 1915 in *The Northwestern Miller*, 685. Pillsbury was an independent company until 2001, at which time it was purchased by General Mills and became a subsidiary brand. Concurrent with the consolidation much of Pillsbury's business archives were transferred to the Minnesota Historical Society in St. Paul. In all probability the flour from Pillsbury and Washburn-Crosby was indistinguishable during the early twentieth century. The companies used the same type of wheat—purchased at auction in Minneapolis—and the same type of milling equipment—steam-driven steel rollers.

content was closely related to that of *The Iconoclast* and *Pearson's Magazine* while the visual content was derived from *The American Co-operative Journal* and *The Masses*.

*The Iconoclast* was the newspaper of the Socialist Party of North Dakota, which A.C. Townley had served as an organizer for. Socialism in North Dakota is particularly significant historically, as it was more successful there than in surrounding agricultural states. Unlike most branches it did not focus on the problems of organized labor in cities and instead turned its attention to the rural economy. Ideas about socializing grain distribution and processing that were picked up by the League were present in this earlier movement.<sup>75</sup>

*Pearson's*, on the other hand, was a successful general interest magazine with both British and American editions. It billed itself as "The Magazine Which Prints the Facts That Others Dare Not Print" and during the 1910s it was the sole surviving periodical dedicated to exposing corruption and exploitation by muckraking journalists. Townley made an agreement with the publishers of *Pearson's* to provide members of the League with a subscription and to closely follow the organization's activities. Thus, before *The Leader* was in production, *Pearson's* served as the vehicle for information on the League. The magazine featured articles about the League in most issues, written by Charles Edward Russell, which were later adapted to become a book.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> The definitive study of the Socialist Party in North Dakota, which relies heavily on *The Iconoclast* is Hornbacher, "The Forgotten Heritage: The North Dakota Socialist Party, 1902-1918."

<sup>76</sup> The history of *Pearson's Magazine* remains mostly unwritten. A discussion of its downfall is included in Charles Edward Russell's autobiography, in which he credits the magazine of being the last venue in which exposés of "Big Business" could be published after banks refused to serve muck-racking journals. Charles Edward Russell, *Bare Hands and Stone Walls: Some Recollections of a Side-Line Reformer* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1933), 189-90. See also Louis Filler, *The Muckrakers*, New and enlarged ed. (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1976), 370-72. Articles for *Pearson's* were the source of the book by Russell, *The Story of the Nonpartisan League*.

Despite these parallels in content, *The Leader* did not imitate *The Iconoclast* or *Pearson's* visually. *The Iconoclast* was sparsely illustrated and poorly designed. *Pearson's* had abandoned pictures altogether and was printed on cheap paper because its editor, Arthur West Little, did not want to be shackled to the whims of advertisers. *The Leader*, however, featured photographs and cartoons on nearly every page, and to understand it we must look at visually-stunning progressive periodicals.<sup>77</sup>

*The Leader's* edgy use of cartoons and photographs comes from *The Masses*. That magazine featured heated debates about communism, psychoanalysis, and feminism, and its pages were adorned with art by Pablo Picasso, George Bellows, John Sloan, and many other preeminent individuals. It was a premiere leftist magazine of its era, and although it ceased publication in 1917 it still enjoys a reputation for high quality. Information about the specific locations where *The Masses* were distributed has been lost, but we know that it was available through branches of the Socialist Party. As such, A.C. Townley was almost certainly aware of it.<sup>78</sup>

Given the punchy characteristics of *The Masses* it is unsurprising that Townley sought out the help of one of its contributors, Charles Edward Russell, when he established *The Leader*. Russell was a veteran of editing and authorship, having worked for both Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst. Impressively, at the height of Russell's career in the late nineteenth century he was the editor of the most widely-distributed American newspaper—the *New York*

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<sup>77</sup> My observations about the visual properties of *The Iconoclast* come from paging through the periodical.

<sup>78</sup> An excellent book on *The Masses* was written by Rebecca Zurier, and she describes its distribution through the socialist party on page 66. Rebecca Zurier, *Art for the Masses: A Radical Magazine and Its Graphics, 1911-1917* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988). It could be argued that *The Masses* continued in spirit after 1917 under the name *The Liberator*, which was founded in tandem with *The Masses'* demise by many of the same people.

*World*. Russell was dedicated to uplifting the quality of life for oppressed people world-wide, and he viewed small-scale farmers as exploited. He conveyed these values visually through a pseudo-Cirkut photograph that was used as the frontispiece to his book *The Uprising of the Many* published in 1907 (Figure 48). The photograph was captioned “Types of the many at the bottom of the human pile whose condition is becoming an impulse toward a more human civilization.” The image is a collage of small photographs arranged in a horizontal band that requires unfolding to view. By appending them without white space it suggests a unified exposure. It is as if his camera has panned the world. Russell helped to set up *The Leader’s* headquarters in an abandoned church in Fargo, and he mentored its first editor, Herbert Gaston, for five weeks. Russell’s expertise no-doubt guided *The Leader* to its excellent edgy style. But while *The Masses* served as a model for *The Leader’s* visual form, it is important to note that *The Masses’* visual content included little farm-related or rural imagery.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>79</sup>Townley assertively introduced himself to Russell, who was on a speaking tour with a chautauqua troupe in 1915. After persuading Russell to accept a ride to the next town in Townley’s car he pitched the idea of founding *The Leader* to him. Wasson, “The Nonpartisan League in Minnesota”, 62, 70. Zurier notes that Russell was an early writer for the magazine, that he continued to send articles after a tumultuous rethinking of the journal in 1912, and that he served as an editor. However, it should be noted that because *The Masses* staff was non-hierarchical it is difficult to know what editing means. Russell never got named in the magazine as one of its editors (I checked the full run as microfilmed by the New York Public Library) but nonetheless he probably was present at editorial meetings. Zurier, *Art for the Masses*, 38, 196 note 26. Russell discusses his involvement with *The Nonpartisan Leader* in his autobiography: *Russell, Bare Hands and Stone Walls*, 323-45. The definitive biography of Russell is by Robert Miraldi, *The Pen Is Mightier: The Muckraking Life of Charles Edward Russell* (New York: Palgrave, 2003). Also note that Russell wrote a book about the Nonpartisan League using articles first published in Pearson’s. Russell, *The Story of the Nonpartisan League*. The fold out photograph is in Charles Edward Russell, *The Uprising of the Many* (New York: Doubleday, Page and Company, 1907). A logical place to turn for an explanation of Russell’s involvement with *The Masses* is his autobiography and Robert Miraldi’s recent biography, but unfortunately they do not mention it. Rhetoric of world-wide emancipation is also reflected in *Main Street*. Carol, for example, says “I believe all of us want the same things—we’re all together, the industrial workers and the women and the farmers and the Negro race and the Asiatic colonies, and even a few of the Respectables. It’s all the same revolt, in all the classes that have waited and taken advice. I think perhaps we want a more conscious life. We’re tired of drudging and sleeping and dying. We’re tired of seeing just a few people able to be individualists. We’re tired of always deferring hope till the next generation. We’re tired of hearing the politicians and priests and cautious reformers (and the husbands!) coax us, ‘Be calm! Be patient! Wait! We have the plans for a Utopia already made; just give us a bit more time and we’ll produce it; trust us; we’re wiser than you.’ For ten thousand years

For content the editors of *The Leader* adopted the visual vocabulary of the cooperative elevator movement, promoted through *The American Co-operative Journal*. Like *The Leader* this journal often filled its covers with imagery to propagandize for grain elevators. Also like *The Leader* it used the Atlantean symbol of cooperative enterprise (Figure 49 and Figure 50). A solitary individual would be crushed under the weight of the world, but through cooperation humankind can support anything. Most importantly for the debate about flour milling, *The Co-operative Journal* sensitized rural Americans to thinking of buildings as symbols. Sometimes this practice was more explicit than in the Gold Medal Flour parody by John Baer. For example, on a cover published in July of 1914 a farmer is posed as the Statue of Liberty holding up an elevator (Figure 51), and in a cartoon published inside *The Leader* on December 14, 1916 we see a farmer crushed under a globe-like bundle that includes a warehouse, a terminal elevator, and a packing plant (Figure 52). These latter drawings are not of specific buildings, but Baer's is, thus revealing a tighter commentary on the built environment.<sup>80</sup>

### 3.5 REPRESENTING FLOUR MILLS

The Gold Medal Flour ad and Baer's parody of it depict an actual place. It is the Washburn "A" Mill in Minneapolis where Gold Medal Flour was manufactured—the largest such mill in the

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they've said that. We want our Utopia now—and we're going to try our hands at it. All we want is—everything for all of us! For every housewife and every longshoreman and every Hindu nationalist and every teacher. We want everything. We sha'n't get it. So we sha'n't ever be content." Lewis, *Main Street*, 163.

<sup>80</sup> I examined *The American Co-operative Journal* from 1911-1917 (volumes 7-12). On the use of elevators as symbols in the periodical, see Hal S. Barron, "To Reap the Whirlwind: The Social and Ideological Bases of Farmers' Grain Elevators," in *Mixed Harvest: The Second Great Transformation in the Rural North, 1870-1930* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 107-52.

world when it was completed in 1880. It is in the water-driven Milling District located next to Saint Anthony Falls—a place chosen for practical reasons. This was the only major waterfall on the upper Mississippi. Train tracks followed the river bank from mill to mill. In this advertisement we actually see the second manifestation of the A Mill from amidst these tracks—a vantage point with an unobstructed view. The building was first erected in 1874, but a flour explosion in 1878 reduced it to rubble and destroyed much of the District. Eighteen people died in the accident, and the tragedy served as a catalyst for safety reforms in the industry. The facility was resurrected in 1880, larger than before, with dust collectors to minimize danger.<sup>81</sup>

The accuracy of the drawings can be confirmed if we compare them to a Farm Security Administration photograph taken about 25 years later. Marion Post Wolcott captured the A Mill in August 1941 (Figure 53). It may be happenstance that she chose the same angle and cropping, but the resemblance is strong. The stepped form of the mill itself, three cylindrical grain bins in front of it, railroad tracks, and smokestack all match. Baer has omitted the illuminated “Gold Medal Flour” sign on the mill’s roof, but the advertisement and photo both include it prominently. Although the three-story “eventually” advertisement had been removed from the

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<sup>81</sup> For an art-historical analysis of photographs and paintings depicting Saint Anthony Falls, see Janet L. Whitmore, “A Panorama of Unequaled yet Ever-Varying Beauty,” in *Currents of Change: Art and Life Along the Mississippi River, 1850-1861* (Minneapolis: Exhibition catalog for the Minneapolis Institute of Arts distributed by the University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 25-27. The 1880 building burned in 1991; the cause was a homeless person’s campfire. Although only the exterior walls survived it was salvaged and is now the home of the Mill City Museum, which focuses on the history of flour production. The museum is well done, and my only criticism is that it omits the history of labor relations within the mills in favor of a less controversial focus on the process of milling. For a brief labor history focusing on the International Union of Flour and Cereal Mill Employees, see Shannon M. Pennefeather, ed., *Mill City: A Visual History of the Minneapolis Mill District* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2003), 112-14.



side of the mill by 1941, a ghostly circle of paint remains on the masonry. Wolcott's work can also send us back to the story of the Nonpartisan League and its flour-socializing agenda.<sup>82</sup>

The same month that Marion Post Wolcott photographed the A Mill she captured the North Dakota State Mill and Elevator of Grand Forks (Figure 54). Although the latter photo is taken a larger distance from its subject, it likewise emphasizes transportation of commodities by foregrounding the railroad. By positioning herself amidst the dramatically-foreshortened tracks, Wolcott adds visual interest at the same time that her image draws attention to the fact that this is not a bustling cityscape. Even without comparison to the Minneapolis Mill District the State Mill of North Dakota seems isolated and unique—an institution surrounded by little more than an expanse of tall grass and a few power lines. Perhaps Wolcott—an artist known for her sense of humor and interest in bustling industrial centers—was striving for a composition least like the millscape of Minneapolis. Indeed, the sheer number of mills in Minneapolis was notable. In 1928 Washburn-Crosby had absorbed 26 competitors there and renamed itself General Mills, and the Pillsbury Company remained a large-scale competitor in the District. Thus, although Wolcott focused on a single building, what she saw surrounding the A Mill was a cavalcade of industry.

Rather than arising from convenient access to natural resources, the Grand Forks mill was motivated, in part, by a tragic controversy. In 1916 a wheat rust epidemic (fungus) resulted in

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<sup>82</sup> Although they do not focus on the images I am analyzing, information on the photographer can be found in Marion Post Wolcott, *The Photographs of Marion Post Wolcott* (Washington, DC: Library of Congress in association with GILES, 2008), Paul Hendrickson, *Looking for the Light: The Hidden Life and Art of Marion Post Wolcott* (New York: Knopf, 1992), F. Jack Hurley, *Marion Post Wolcott: A Photographic Journey* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989), Marion Post Wolcott, *Marion Post Wolcott, Fsa Photographs* (Carmel, CA: Friends of Photography, 1983), Linda Wolcott-Moore, ed., *The Photography of Marion Post Wolcott* (Website created by Wolcott's daughter, hosted on J. David Sapir's site *Fixing Shadows*, available online: <http://people.virginia.edu/~ds8s/mpw/mpw-bio.html>, 1999). Her photographs for the FSA have been digitized and are in the collection *America from the Great Depression to World War II: Black-and-White Photographs from the FSA-OWI, 1935-1945*, (American Memory, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, available online: <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/fsahtml/fahome.html>, 1998).

much of the crop being small and shriveled. The leaves of infected plants turned rust-orange in color—hence the name—but the kernels remained fungus-free. These infected leaves could not produce nutrients needed for full development of the plants, but the flavor of the crop remained largely unaffected because the fungus did not attack kernels of grain. Nonetheless, when farmers sold their shriveled grain at their country elevators it was deemed only suitable for animal feed, and they were paid little. This assessment was in accordance with advice from the United States Department of Agriculture. Specifically, baking tests done at the Minnesota Agricultural Station in 1904 showed that rust-blighted wheat was compromised. It could have protein content as high as 19% or as low as 11%, and that protein would be abnormal—containing little gliadin. The agency explained:

The light-weight wheat when badly affected by rust has had its bread-making qualities impaired so that it will not make a high grade of flour. . . . Owing to their poor milling and bread-making qualities and a tendency toward a high protein content the farmer will find the badly rusted wheat more valuable for [animal] feeding purposes than as a marketable crop.

Once this “animal feed” reached the auction houses of Minneapolis, Winnipeg, and Chicago, it was reluctantly purchased by millers unable to acquire better-quality grain. Washburn-Crosby and others then ground it for human consumption. They conducted baking tests to determine if, and how, it could be used for bread. Their happy conclusion was that the flour required an extra 30 minutes to rise but otherwise responded normally to baking. Although unexplained at the time, this makes gastronomic sense. During the process of kneading, gluten molecules (protein) bond together into long, tough, elastic strands. Gases produced by the yeast fill the dough with bubbles that push against this gluten. The excess protein in the shriveled grain made the dough

stronger and caused it to resist rising—thus requiring the longer time. The result was a tougher—but reportedly palatable—loaf. With a batch of viable flour, mills continued to charge their standard prices and reaped a huge profit.<sup>83</sup>

The disparity between low prices at the grain elevator and standard prices on the grocery store shelf incensed farmers, and the Nonpartisan League used two pieces of visual evidence to escalate the situation. First, *The Leader* published a photograph of bread loaves made from undamaged wheat compared to loaves made from the shriveled crop (Figure 55 and Figure 56). The photo was the documentation of tests done at the North Dakota Agricultural College (now North Dakota State University) by a prominent League member, Professor Edwin Ladd. Independently of the millers he had concluded that the flour could be used productively. The loaves are the same size in the picture, and the 1916 crop was thus reported as being equivalent to or better than the previous years.<sup>84</sup> The research was then framed by the League as evidence of a conspiracy amongst the “Grain Combine”—elevators, auction houses and millers—and the rage farmers felt is understandable.<sup>84</sup>

Secondly, *The Leader* reproduced a postcard that Washburn-Crosby had sent to bakers that explained how to make good bread with the year’s flour (Figure 57). An objective viewer would likely find the card non-inflammatory. It simply encouraged bakers to continue using Gold Medal Flour, noted the increased rising time, explained that the product had a lower-than-normal moisture content, and suggested a bread recipe. In *The Leader*, however, it was damned:

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<sup>83</sup> *The Nonpartisan Leader*, January 25, 1917, 14. In baking, gliadin is one of the proteins that affects the strength of a dough. On the USDA research, see H. Snyder, “Milling Tests of Wheat,” *Experiment Station Record* 90 (1904–1905): 1102.

<sup>84</sup> On Ladd’s baking tests see *The Nonpartisan Leader*, January 25, 1917, 14.

This card is an admission by the big mills of Dr. Ladd's assertion that the present Northwest spring wheat crop, though light and shriveled because of rust, makes even better flour than last year's crop. Despite this [...] farmers are being forced to sell the bulk of the crop as 'feed' wheat at skin-game prices. The 'feed' wheat grades under which the bulk of this excellent milling crop is being sold are not authorized by law and are a violation of the legal grades of Minnesota and Wisconsin, under which the farmers of the Northwest are supposed to market their crop.

Thus, the Nonpartisan League caused a public relations nightmare for Washburn-Crosby in which it was accused of exploitation, deception, and illegality.<sup>85</sup>

The Washburn-Crosby company was indeed profiting from the situation, and the farmers got a bad deal. It is difficult to know if and how staff members at the company were deceiving the public or skirting the law. The evidence produced by the Nonpartisan League to support such allegations was thin, but we know that the staff at Washburn-Crosby included powerful people in the Minneapolis business community who acted in their own self-interests. If we assume that these businessmen were upstanding and ethical, then they might be nothing more than scapegoats. If we assume, however, that they engaged in questionable business practices, the implications are more ominous. In either case, foul play is not needed to explain why farmers were suffering. Washburn-Crosby and other millers rarely negotiated prices with farmers directly—they relied instead on the public auction houses for grain. Thus, the misfortune of farmers can be blamed, at least in part, on a capitalist marketplace. Like the farmers, millers would have been keenly concerned with the ramifications of a blighted crop, and they would

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<sup>85</sup> For a reproduction of the post card see *The Nonpartisan Leader*, November 23, 1916, 5.

logically want to address this issue with their customers. The postcard that the League so strongly condemned could, thus, have been sent in good-faith to explain how bakers should modify their recipes that year. Washburn-Crosby would, furthermore, have been particularly concerned with maintaining its reputation for manufacturing a high quality product.

The company had achieved its stature during the nineteenth century when regulation of the food industry was weak. When many flours were inconsistently milled its was finely ground, when many were chemically bleached its was naturally white, and when many were heavily contaminated with insects its was more pure. As a result it won the “Gold Medal” at the Grand Miller’s International Exhibition of 1880 held in Cincinnati—a trade show that featured displays of milling equipment and a competition for the best flour. For the home baker of the early twentieth century, distinguishing Gold Medal Flour from that produced by other companies with high quality-control standards using steel rollers to grind wheat—such as Pillsbury’s Best—would have been a difficult task. The important fact, nonetheless, is that Gold Medal was high quality flour from an industrial-scale miller.<sup>86</sup>

This is not to say that Washburn-Crosby’s reputation was perfect. Its product was sound, but its corporate image was increasingly in need of a makeover as the teens progressed. An emblematic caricature of William G. Crocker—Betty’s namesake—drawn by H.B. Thomson can illustrate the point (Figure 58). It was created only a year before the wheat-rust scandal and suggests that William Crocker—and by implication the larger company—had a reputation among farmers as a controlling, secretive, and old-fashioned powerhouse. The caricature was

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<sup>86</sup> William C. Edgar, the editor of the *Northwestern Miller* trade journal, wrote the definitive early history of the Washburn-Crosby Company. William C. Edgar, “The Birth of a Brand: The Miller’s International Exhibition Fifty Years Ago,” *The Northwestern Miller*, June 4, 1930, 376-77, ———, *The Medal of Gold: A Story of Industrial Achievement* (Minneapolis: Bellman Company, 1925). See also Gray, *Business without Boundary*. For the broader history of milling in the area see Pennefather, ed., *Mill City*.

part of a portfolio depicting Minneapolis-based businessmen. Inclusion in the collection affirmed the men's importance at the same time that the depictions mocked them. In the case of Crocker, he has been deemed the "Czar" of the animal-feed market. A quasi-limerick by E.R. Buell accompanying the drawing explains this:

Crocker is the Czar of feed.  
He knows things he does not need.  
Locks them in a book and he  
Nonchalantly keeps the key.

The drawing shows the man seated upon a book of financial and trade secrets, with fellow businessmen at his feet and surrounded by bags of Gold Medal bran and middlings. (Bran is the hull of wheat or other grains that is removed when making white flour. Middlings are a vaguely-defined mixture that can include bran, flour, and contaminants removed before milling. Both products can be fed to cows.) One can imagine Crocker himself taking pride in his mastery of the trade, and his friends enjoying the satire. Farmers, however, would balk at this type of image that celebrates tight control of the animal feed that they wished to purchase. The cartoon, in fact, has a strong visual resonance with Baer's personification of the "Grain Combine"—an overweight, well-dressed, man who controls the marketplace (Figure 59).<sup>87</sup>

Over the five years between when this cartoon of William Crocker was drawn and the invention of Betty Crocker the Nonpartisan League was growing and becoming a more formidable organization. Increasingly it was able to shape the opinions of Americans on both political and consumer levels. The League was most successful politically in North Dakota,

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<sup>87</sup> H.B. Thomson and E.R. Buell, *Just for Fun: A Port-Folio of Cartoons* (Minneapolis: H.B. Thomson, 1915), no pagination.

where in 1918 it gained control of both legislative houses and the executive branch. Debate was tumultuous, but its goal of erecting a state-owned grain elevator and flour mill was approved by legislators in 1919 and affirmed when the people voted on a referendum in 1921. The state bought a small four mill in Drake and another in Fargo in 1919 for experimental purposes. Thus farmers would soon have a viable alternative to selling their wheat by auction in Minneapolis, Winnipeg, and Chicago. Although it is not clear to what degree North Dakotans were still miffed at Washburn-Crosby for the events of 1916, it is notable that the state hired engineers from the company's rival, Pillsbury, to design the State Mill in 1920. The possibility that voters in Washburn-Crosby's own state of Minnesota might push to socialize milling was becoming probable, as A.C. Townley had helped to found a sister organization there—the Farmer-Labor Party—which was gaining in popularity. On this political level alone Washburn-Crosby had reason to be nervous, and so it is unsurprising that it began a make-over of its corporate image by inventing Betty Crocker. When the State Mill began to grind its first wheat in 1922 she had made her modest debut to greet it—in the form of a highly-contrived signature.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> The definitive history of the State Mill and Elevator is by E Bruce Hagen, "The North Dakota State Mill and Elevator Association: History, Organization, Administration, and Operation" (MA Thesis, University of North Dakota, 1955). The idea for a state-owned terminal elevator in North Dakota predates the Nonpartisan League, but other organizations were unable to actualize it. Indeed, the idea had been first put forth by the Farmers' Alliance in 1887—another farmer's protest movement—but legislation didn't pass. (The original Farmers' Alliance was founded in 1876 in Texas, and a second division—the Northwestern Farmers' Alliance—was founded in Chicago in 1880. It is this latter division that was active in the northern plains and made the call for state-owned elevators.) The North Dakota Banker's Association later advocated the same cause, proposing elevators be built in Wisconsin or Minnesota. The Banker's Association had investigated grain distribution in 1906. A proposal passed the ND legislature, was ratified by public vote in 1912, and amended to include in-state elevators in 1913. The State Board of Control was asked to investigate the cost and potential locations for an elevator, but disparaged the idea instead. The legislation was reversed, and according to rumor farmers were told to "Go home and slop the hogs." The "slop the hogs" slur was repeated numerous times by members of The Nonpartisan League to build political momentum, attributed to different people. See Wasson, "The Nonpartisan League in Minnesota", 51-60. Four major studies of the Farmer-Labor party are Farrell Dobbs, *Teamster Politics* (New York: Published for the Anchor Foundation by Monad Press, 1975), Millard L. Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism: The Third-Party Alternative* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1979), Richard M. Valelly, *Radicalism in the States: The Minnesota Farmer-Labor*

### 3.6 POSTURING WITH PENMANSHIP

If we compare the signature used on Betty Crocker's products in 2009 with the original from 1921 it is clear that the script has been reworked (Figure 42). But what does this mean? Although simple, the fact that a signature was worthy of aesthetic reconsideration illustrates the fact that people view handwriting, and especially names, as reflections of the personality that wrote them. According to the conventional story of Crocker's birth her signature was chosen because it is pretty, but upon closer examination it is anything but. Clumsy, unprofessional, idiosyncratic, young, and feminine. That is how she would have been perceived at the time.

Scripts can be read as indications of the writer's standing in a changing society, and this was especially true of the early twentieth century—an era of transition in handwriting. Penmanship has a complex and counterintuitive history. While in the twenty first century many people view writing as simply a functional way to convey ideas, during earlier eras it was more ideologically loaded. During the early twentieth century, for example, the importance of handwriting is testified to by the fact that it was worthy of display at the Century of Progress Exposition. The A.N. Palmer Method Company commissioned Grant Wood to create a five-panel display on composition board for the venue in 1933, titled the *History of Penmanship* (Figure 60). The cycle began with *Stone Age Picture Writing* and ended with the *Modern Method of Writing*. The company's best penman, William C. Henning, made large paper strips of Palmer Method script to go underneath Wood's panels. The first four paintings in the chronology show men, but the last focuses on a woman writing with a dip pen, framed by her office window. She

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*Party and the American Political Economy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), Thomas Gerald O'Connell, "Toward the Cooperative Commonwealth: An Introductory History of the Farmer-Labor Movement in Minnesota (1917-1948)" (PhD Dissertation, Union Graduate School, 1979).



is downtown, as indicated by a series of skyscrapers outside. We might thus ask ourselves if this is the type of person that signed Betty Crocker's name. Without delving into the pseudoscience of graphology we can read traits of the writer from it, such as age, gender, and education level, as well as whether the writer internalized the norms of writing for her era. To access this information, however, we need a more finely-grained history of writing than the millennia-long version that Wood provided.<sup>89</sup>

During the mid-to-late nineteenth century penmanship was usually taught differently to men and women. Of the men, different "hands" were learned for different professions. The prettiest script—a business hand—was Spencerian (Figure 61). It was developed by Platt Rogers Spencer in 1848 and remains known in the twenty first century through the logo for Coca-Cola. It was a beautiful calligraphy that was sometimes extra-embellished and framed for decoration in the home. The earliest and most ornate forms of Spencerian writing cannot even be accomplished with metal pen nibs. Their hairlines require a handcrafted quill from the wing of a turkey or swan. Hallmarks of this script are a diagonal thrust, oval-shaped letters, lines that transition from thick to thin, and ornately-flourished capital letters.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> William E. Henning, *An Elegant Hand: The Golden Age of American Penmanship and Calligraphy*, ed. Paul Melzer (New Castle, DE: Oak Knoll Press, 2002), 228. One of Wood's students and the author of the aforementioned book, William E. Henning, was also the son of the renowned penman William C. Henning; see Paul Melzer, "Editor's Preface," in *An Elegant Hand: The Golden Age of American Penmanship and Calligraphy*, ed. Paul Melzer (New Castle, DE: Oak Knoll Press, book by William E. Henning, 2002), ix-xi. The Palmer Company featured a middle panel, *Brush of the Medieval Monk*, in its semi-scholarly book by Carroll Gard, *Writing Past and Present: The Story of Writing and Writing Tools* (New York: The A.N. Palmer Company, 1937), 31. Unsurprisingly A.N. Palmer himself is celebrated in a chapter on "Modern Handwriting"—pages 70-72. The other two panels by Wood were titled *Stylus and Wax Tablet of the Ancient Greeks* and *Colonial Penman*. All were 32 x 42 inches in size, and all are now in The Tempel Smith Collection. For reproductions of them and a few sentences of basic facts, see Corn, *Grant Wood*, 146-47.

<sup>90</sup> On Spencer specifically, see Henning, *An Elegant Hand*, 5-12, Tamara Plakins Thornton, *Handwriting in America: A Cultural History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 47-67. For a speculative discussion about

Spencer's method of writing could be learned in numerous schools across the nation, including his own Spencerian Commercial Academy in Pittsburgh. His mode of teaching was to drill students while reciting his poetry. With each syllable their arms would rhythmically create an arc or oval. After a few syllables a full letter emerges. Thus students internalized graceful shapes along with inspirational words, such as:

He who would be a writer, fine  
Must take a deal of pains  
Must criticize his every line,  
And mix his ink with brains.

Through sheer rote students internalized the ideas.<sup>91</sup>

At turn-of-the-century business colleges students studied penmanship for two hours per day, and they engaged in several more hours of writing that amounted to practice. While such extensive training may seem absurd to readers accustomed to doing nearly all of their writing on a word processor, it had a practical purpose. Before the widespread adoption of the typewriter numerous people were required to write all day, and endurance was paramount. An improperly-trained cleric will tense their fingers and wrist, thus suffering writer's cramp and repetitive-strain injuries. A well-trained one, however, can scrawl indefinitely because they will keep their hand loose and still. Rather than extending and contracting the fingers, the stylus is manipulated with rhythmic rocking of the forearm anchored on a desk. Thus, we should understand the beautiful

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whether Louis Madarasz was the Spencerian penmanship master who wrote the first Coca-Cola logo, see Henning, *An Elegant Hand*, 31-34.

<sup>91</sup> Poem is quoted in Henning, *An Elegant Hand*, 7.

flowing lines of nineteenth-century writing, not only as the result of aesthetic concerns, but as the visual manifestation of healthful writing practices.<sup>92</sup>

Although Spencerian business script would have been old-fashioned by the time that Betty Crocker's signature was created, many middle-aged employees at Washburn-Crosby would have been trained in that style. This includes, in all probability, William G. Crocker. If the company's advertising department wanted a pretty script, they could have easily chosen to have Betty Crocker sign in the Spencerian, but that is not what they did. The shape of her letters is circular rather than ovoid; the slant is vertical rather than diagonal; the lines are uniformly thin rather than variable; and her capitols are simple rather than embellished. So what hand did she sign with? To answer this question we should return to the story of the A.N. Palmer Method Company which paid for Grant Wood's penmanship cycle.

Austin Norman Palmer slowly came to dominate the world of penmanship instruction. He began teaching handwriting at the Cedar Rapids Business College and the area's public schools in 1881. He founded the trade journal *The Western Penman* three years later. While Palmer appreciated ornamental calligraphy, he is historically significant for the plainest of the plain lettering (Figure 62). He disparaged his own handwriting, noting that in school he was "one of the poorest penmen" and "probably *the* poorest." He explained that, compared to his friend William E. Dennis, "The strokes I made lacked symmetry and grace." After giving up on making a living by creating ornamental calling cards, "[I] turned my attention to the plain, unshaded, coarse pen style, which I believe everyone should learn." And indeed, through marketing acumen and serendipity nearly everyone *did* learn. During the early twentieth century summer schools

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<sup>92</sup> On the length of time devoted to teaching penmanship see Delbert Tysdal, "Foreword," in *An Elegant Hand: The Golden Age of American Penmanship and Calligraphy*, ed. Paul Melzer (New Castle, DE: Oak Knoll Press, book by William E. Henning, 2002), vii-viii.

were set up to instruct teachers in the Palmer Method—the largest of which was in Cedar Rapids. Three fourths of school children were being taught the method by the 1920s, and his cursive letter forms remain the usual set taught in American schools in the early twenty first century.<sup>93</sup>

Palmer's pedagogy, however, has largely been abandoned. He taught a rigorous, physical, masculine, approach to writing. For him writing was not a decorative art but a skill that required athletic training. He adopted Spencer's strategy of moving the entire arm and perfected it to build endurance and speed. Rather than the slow elegance of Spencer's variable width lines—which had required careful manipulation of a dip nib's pressure—Palmer's lines were suited to the quick uniformity of stiff-nibbed fountains and ballpoints. If a steel-nibbed dip pen was used, however, he believed that a single loading of ink should be able to make 2,000 ovals. Students practiced copying letters, words, and sentences from his instructional manuals. One from 1908, for example, prompted students to write "Mills and Milligan are good millers" (Figure 63). Could this, then, be the way that Betty Crocker wrote?<sup>94</sup>

Betty Crocker had the signature of a whimsical young female doodler. She uses Palmer hallmarks, such as round letters and even lines. We thus know that she is younger than middle aged. The tightness of her script suggests that she was accustomed to writing on a small scale, as women were encouraged to do for letter-writing. However, she does not have the flowing form of a true Palmer expert, and she innovates in numerous ways. Some of her letters have unusual curls. Her capitals are non-standard. She hurriedly crosses both T's together. And the signature is

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<sup>93</sup> On Palmer, including the quotes, see Henning, *An Elegant Hand*, 29, 54, 126-40. See also Thornton, *Handwriting in America*, 66-69, 149-75.

<sup>94</sup> Two thousand ovals may seem like a lot. Note, however, that I am far from skilled at using a dip pen, but within a few hours of practice I was able to make nine hundred ovals with a single dip. Quotation is in Austin Norman Palmer, *The Palmer Method of Business Writing* (New York: The A. N. Palmer Company, 1908), 87.

slightly bowed upwards on the ends. We can thus infer that she probably did not attend a business college where all personal idiosyncrasies were drilled away. To that extent, Crocker would have been perceived as an exciting young woman not overly concerned with tradition or convention—a fresh and non-threatening personality.

With this new persona the staff at Washburn-Crosby were set to reframe the company in a new light, and the staff did so with gusto. They made a wholehearted effort to make Betty Crocker seem real. The amount of time and effort that poured into the endeavor is impressive. They trained employees to write her signature. They gave her a voice on a radio show—first broadcast on Minneapolis’ WCCO in 1924 and later nationally syndicated. Also in 1924 they hired home economists to tour the country impersonating her. For legal reasons the home economists were forbidden to explicitly say that they were Crocker herself, but they were told to be vague about their own identities and not to correct people who made that assumption. As early as 1925 the advertising department had a stock rendering of Crocker that was run in the *Saturday Evening Post*. Then, in 1936, came the effort that is most directly related to Grant Wood’s drawings for *Main Street*. At that time the company hired the nationally-renowned commercial artist Neysa McMein to paint a composite portrait of Crocker, using the female staff members of General Mills as inspiration. While all of this exuberance might seem strange out of context, when the Nonpartisan League is considered the effort underscores the unstated urgency of the campaign—a complete rethinking during difficult times.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> The best history of these efforts is by Marks, *Finding Betty Crocker*, 5-45.

### 3.7 POLITICIZING HOME DÉCOR

Pushing the debate forward brings in the broad significance of portraits. This type of imagery was used frequently within the visual banter related to flour production. One way of showing this is by focusing on cartoons from the *Nonpartisan Leader* newspaper. They suggest that farmers had a sophisticated understanding of portraiture, including its ability to manipulate an audience and to uplift or deride an individual. Portraits in these cartoons expose deception, including a farmer portrayed as a villainous Bolshevik (Figure 64); they position aristocratic individuals as metaphors for governance (Figure 65); they use old imagery to communicate growing strength (Figure 66); and they employ dignified poses to convey autonomy (Figure 67). The farmers thus understood that portraits evoke the conditions of their creation and the histories of the artist and sitter. They can become powerful or marginal through their dissemination, and are embedded in cultural stories. We can thus assume that the display of real portraits in the home of small-scale farmers was done with thoughtful deliberation. One portrait hung in this way was a mass-produced image of the Nonpartisan League's leader, A.C. Townley.

Townley disliked being photographed, but he acquiesced to having his picture taken as a promotional tool (Figure 68 and Figure 69). The result was a studio portrait framing him from the shoulders up in a three-quarter view. Rivalled only by full-frontal compositions, this type of image had served as documentation for law enforcement, was incorporated into identification cards, was reproduced in school yearbooks, and functioned as tools for people to remember their loved ones. Because Townley was notoriously camera-shy, only a handful of photographs of him are known. In the portrait in question he seems to be somber. Assuming that the photo was taken around the time that it was published in *The Leader*, amidst rising opposition and conspiracies

against the man, such emotions are understandable. As one of the most frequently-created types of portrait it would also carry connotations that its audience would intuit.

Poses in photographic portraits, such as Townley's, convey meaning because the conventions of body position changed over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Many of the earliest photographic portraits of middle-class people imitated the conventions of aristocratic painting—including three-quarter views with props in palatial settings. A transition occurred throughout western cultures, however, as image-making became ever more prevalent through advances in technology (the physionotrace, daguerreotype, calotype, and albumen print) and people became accustomed to the profile and frontal poses used in record keeping. These latter poses ultimately became embraced by common people for their personal enjoyment. The French artist Honoré Daumier once satirized this transition in a pair of drawings contrasting the abrupt full-frontal “pose of the natural man” with the twisted “pose of the civilized man” (*Pose de l'homme de la nature* and *Pose de l'homme civilisé* published in *Croquis Parisiens* in 1853) (Figure 70). By the late 1880s the Kodak camera was being marketed to amateurs using celluloid film, and the full-frontal pose soon became associated with sentimental snapshots. We can thus infer that Townley's image, featuring a twisted three-quarter positioning, is intended to imbue the man with formality and dignity.<sup>96</sup>

The dignity embodied in Townley's image was not the only way he could have been depicted, and especially given the controversial context of its distribution we can assume that displaying the portrait was a bold move of support for the man. In 1921 Townley was in prison—falsely convicted of being un-American and pro-German during World War I. League members

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<sup>96</sup> For the history of conventional poses, including the Daumier cartoons, see John Tagg, “A Democracy of the Image: Photographic Portraiture and Commodity Production,” in *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984, 1993), 34-59.

were encouraged to rally behind him and his organization by sending donations and renewing their subscriptions to *The Leader*. Upon doing so they were sent the formal portrait to display in their homes. The strategy is in accordance with other attempts by the League to mold the domestic environments of members, and we can thus infer that the home was a symbolic battle ground in both the visual debates about flour production and the wider issues of rural politics.<sup>97</sup>

Particularly through materials aimed at women, the League shaped the appearance of the home. While one might assume that a rural organization would carefully enforce traditional gender roles, the League and many other farm organizations were moderately feminist. Indeed, the League was a strong advocate for suffrage. This fact, in addition to numerous ways that the organization was empowering to women, can explain some of its success. The historian Charles Postel claims that only churches attracted more participation from women than farmers' organizations. Besides suffrage, these organizations promoted education and professional training for women. The Populist Party that thrived at the turn of the century, for example, declared itself to be a rural "Confederation of Industrial Organizations" that formed at conferences held in Cincinnati and St. Louis in 1891 and 1892 respectively, and included groups of feminists as well as Black people, factory workers, and temperance advocates. Although Populism is often framed as a conservative or even reactionary movement dedicated to perpetuating traditional rural life, many of its members were highly literate and advocating progressive change in their society. Another antecedent to the Nonpartisan League was the Farmers' Alliance—an organization which women flocked to and in which they enjoyed voting,

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<sup>97</sup> An example of a solicitation for subscriptions to the *Leader*, which promised to give a portrait of Townley to the League member along with their paper, was printed in *The Nonpartisan Leader*, February 6, 1922, page 9.



speaking, and office-holding rights on par with men. The League can thus be understood as a later manifestation of the tradition of women's empowerment through rural organizations.<sup>98</sup>

Women held leadership positions within the Nonpartisan League at both high end and grass-roots levels. Marian LeSueur was particularly prominent. As the national education director she developed a curriculum for League organizers, and she edited *The Leader* with her husband Arthur. Local branches of the League organized clubs geared specifically towards women. League membership was for an entire household, with women and men having equal voting rights. Much of the legislature was League-endorsed that passed the 1917 suffrage bill in North Dakota, and the League-endorsed governor Lynn Frazier signed it into law. Standing next to Frazier were leaders of suffrage organizations and women from his and A.C. Townley's families. The vigorous debates on the "Farm Women's Page" of *The Leader* included discussions of birth control as well as the practicalities of home and family life.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> On women in rural organizations, see Charles Postel, *The Populist Vision* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 69-102. Key earlier scholarship on Populism does not focus on womanhood, but is nonetheless insightful. It includes Lawrence Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment: A Short History of the Agrarian Revolt in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), ———, *Democratic Promise: The Populist Moment in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), John Donald Hicks, *The Populist Revolt: A History of the Farmers' Alliance and the People's Party* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota press, 1931), Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R.* (New York: Knopf, 1955). Studies that map out the relationships of farmers' organizations to each other include Theodore Saloutos and John D. Hicks, *Twentieth Century Populism: Agricultural Discontent in the Middle West 1900-1939* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1951), Carl C. Taylor, *The Farmers' Movement: 1620-1920* (New York: American Book Company, 1953), Patrick H. Mooney and Theo J. Majka, *Farmers' and Farm Workers' Movements: Social Protest in American Agriculture* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1995).

<sup>99</sup> For academic histories that differentiate how the League challenged some gender roles while enforcing others see Karen Starr, "Fighting for a Future: Farm Women of the Nonpartisan League," *Minnesota History* 48 (1983): 255-62, Kim E. Nielsen, "'We All Leaguers by Our House': Women, Suffrage, and Red-Baiting in the National Nonpartisan League," *Journal of Women's History* 6, no. 1 (1994): 31-50, Eagle Glassheim, "To Fuel a Fire: Gender, Class, and Ethnicity in the North Dakota Nonpartisan League 1915-1921" (History Honors Thesis, Dartmouth College, 1992). For biographical material on League women see Gretchen Beito, "'I Am a Farmer's Wife, Not a Farmerette': Letters to the *Nonpartisan Leader*, 1917-1920," *Plainswoman* 5, no. 2 (1981): 4-5, 17, Chapters in the book *Women on the Move*, ed. Pearl Andre, produced for the International Women's Year for North Dakota Democratic-NPL Women in 1975 are also insightful; see especially Aldyth Ward, "What One State Has

This widespread participation by women within rural politics should be noted when looking at imagery of farms from the early twentieth century, such as Grant Wood's *Dinner for Threshers* that was introduced in chapter one (Figure 1). In this painting women are arguably more prominent than the men. While the men are seated and engaged with each other, a woman holding a bowl of potatoes swoops across the foreground. The doorframe that she passes through is bisected in Wood's composition, and if it had been painted on a wall—as was originally intended—she would literally be in the viewers' space. While cooking is a traditional task for women, in the context of a family farm it was also a highly-revered one. As discussed in *The Leader*, cooking for threshers was undertaken with great seriousness and required at least three weeks of preparation. With few convenience foods available and the need to feed a large crew multiple times per day for the better part of a week, the task was surely daunting. *The Leader* noted that providing *good* food for these neighbors at harvest time was a matter of great personal pride. Thus, the home entered the realm of rural politics and served as a showcase for these peoples' identities. We can imagine Townley's portrait hanging in such an environment, surrounded by other examples of Nonpartisan-League décor.<sup>100</sup>

One of the cleverest feminist strategies of the League involved lace-making. The idea of using women's handicrafts to mobilize people politically dates to the nineteenth century, and it is probable that some of the League women knew this. Nineteenth-century suffragists embroidered

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Done for Women (Reprinted from the *Nonpartisan Leader* November 1919),” 57-59, Lavern Schoeder, “Women in the Nonpartisan League in Adams and Hettinger Counties,” 47-50, Quentin Burdick, “Lydia Cady Langer,” 56, and “Biographical Sketches,” 60-86. Opinion pieces about women in the League include Ann Markusen, “Who Were Your Grandmothers, John Hanson? A Review of *Northern Lights*,” *Quest: A Feminist Quarterly* 5 (1980): 25-35, Marcella Andre, “They Won the Right to Vote ... But Little Else,” in *Women on the Move*, 35-46. On the suffrage bill see Ralph L. Harman, “How the Suffrage Bill Passed,” *The Nonpartisan Leader*, February 1, 1917, 8.

<sup>100</sup> A Farmer's Wife, “When the ‘Thashers’ Come: Farmers’ Wives Are Hostesses Towards Men Who Garner the Grain,” *The Nonpartisan Leader*, August 16, 1917.

support for women's rights onto their parasols, handkerchiefs, and other personal items. In the case of the League, the editor of *The Leader's* Women's Page, Alberta Toner, solicited photographs of and patterns for crochet doilies, table cloths, and runners beginning on May 10, 1917. She reproduced three photographs of them, each featuring a declaration of devotion to the League worked into the designs. Each piece was completed in filet-work, which is an easily-learned and adapted form of lace-making. It involves creating a net of threads and filling individual squares with extra stitches. Once the basic technique is mastered a needle-worker can develop her own patterns on gridded paper.<sup>101</sup>

Two of the pieces reproduced in *The Leader* were broadly supportive of the League and one specifically supported House Bill 44—legislation intended to enable state-owned enterprise by changing the constitution of North Dakota. The legislation is referred to by number, and a band of decorative curls filled the bottom edge (Figure 71). (Although this specific bill failed, a similar one later passed.) The most elaborate example was a diamond-shaped tablecloth with delicate fan edging (Figure 72). It featured the League's motto "We'll Stick" across the center—a slogan that encouraged farmers to "stick together." The motto was omnipresent in League materials aimed at both women and men, and it was coined by the prominent League organizer Viola Stramblad. She was a well-educated woman who had homesteaded in North Dakota under her own name as a single woman at age thirty three in 1902. To encourage lace-making, her motto was punned by Alberta Toner as "We'll Stitch." Besides the diamond tablecloth, Toner

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<sup>101</sup> On the history and typology of lace, see Pat Earnshaw, *A Dictionary of Lace* (Princes Risborough: Shire Publications, 1982), ———, *The Identification of Lace*, 2nd ed. (Aylesbury: Shire Publications, 1984). See also the classic study by Bury Palliser, *History of Lace*, 4th ed. (New York: Dover Publications, 1911, 1984). Palliser's book was first published in 1865 and revised until 1911. For the history of suffragist parasols and other politically motivated needlework see Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (New York: Routledge, 1989).

reproduced a table runner with “Nonpartisan League” written across it, created by Agnes McDonald (Figure 73). Perhaps because it lacks edging she declared, “It’s just very simple and needs no directions at all.” She then elaborated that the lace was “Just like the Nonpartisan League itself—simple and plain.”<sup>102</sup>

A lengthy explanation accompanied the diamond-shaped table cloth. Its headline read “Knitting or Women’s Rights? What Will the Women of 2007 Prize Most From 1917?” and the answer is clear. If a woman wanted to be remembered for her work for women’s emancipation, she must incorporate the Nonpartisan League into her handicrafts. Through such strategies progressive ideas could be sneaked into the future. Granddaughters will take women’s rights so much for granted that they will “have to look it up in an encyclopedia to see what it means, as they have to look up Shay’s Rebellion nowadays.” Exploiting the fact that industrial garment production had obliterated the need for needlework, however, had potential to change this. Women would no-doubt forget how to make these objects. Thus, “handiwork of the gray-haired women” will be kept as “heirlooms in the family.” By piggybacking on the sentimental attachment to beautiful objects they could keep the memory of League women alive.

Although the League’s feminism was moderate, opponents framed it as radical. For example, *The Red Flame*—an anti-League magazine—tied the organization to Ellen Key and

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<sup>102</sup> My assertion that the former is a tablecloth and the latter a runner are based on estimation of their size. To understand the pieces I experimented with filet-crochet myself. Using standard cotton crochet thread and a size ten hook I determined that a square is about one fourth of an inch wide. For reproductions of these pieces of lace see “Knitting or Women’s Rights? What Will the Women of 2007 Prize Most from 1917?,” *The Nonpartisan Leader*, October 4, 1917, 13, Alberta B. Toner, “‘We’ll Stitch’,” *The Nonpartisan Leader*, August 2, 1917, 12, ———, “A Lace Pattern Story,” *The Nonpartisan Leader*, May 10, 1917, 11. Viola Stamblad’s original slogan was slightly longer—“We’ll Stick, We’ll Win.” Information on Stamblad’s slogan comes from her daughter Thelma Liessman Vantine, and facts of her life are supported by homesteading paperwork. For a discussion of Stamblad along with other female homesteaders that were dedicated to the League, see H. Elaine Lindgren, *Land in Her Own Name: Women as Homesteaders in North Dakota* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991, 1996), 117, 228-30, 72-73.

other controversial figures. The League did include Key's work on the shelves of bookmobiles that toured the countryside, but this educational campaign provided farmers with comprehensive access to scholarly and political thinking, rather than bolstering a single agenda. Bookmobiles were a cutting-edge approach to education at the time. The concept dates to 1905, only 15 years before the League set one up. Materials for the League bookmobiles were chosen in consultation with the librarian Charles E. Strangeland of New York and included some of the best national and foreign publications. In retrospect it was a paragon of democratic access to information. Perhaps at its most inflammatory, *The Red Flame* once personified the League as a murderous giant waving a bloody knife to destroy democracy and religion (Figure 74). Although not violent, Key's ideas about free love were nonetheless unsettling and had become known nation-wide through celebrities, such as Frank Lloyd Wright. *The Red Flame* published a cartoon by C.C. Colehour of Battle Lake, Minnesota showing a schoolteacher perched on her desk reading Key's writing while her students embrace and kiss (Figure 75). The teacher is salacious, with bobbed hair, a plunging neckline, hobble skirt, and heels. The chalkboard states that History, Geography, and Math have been replaced with the "History of the Nonpartisan League: Free Love," and the caption sternly inquires, "Fathers, mothers, what do you think of it?" Other illustrations attempted to undermine the League's integrity by alluding to communism and sympathy with Germans. This latter criticism culminated with the imprisonment of Townley mentioned previously, and ironically it may have boosted League membership because German immigrants joined the organization in droves during World War I.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Although the phrase "free love" has been associated with sexual indulgence since the nineteenth century, there is little about sexuality in Ellen Key's writing. Her argument was that divorce laws should be liberalized and that people who love each other should live together unwed. For her key ideas, see Ellen Key, *Love and Ethics*, trans. Mamah Bouton Borthwick and Frank Lloyd Wright (Chicago: Ralph Fletcher Seymour Co., 1912). Other advocates of free love, such as Victoria Woodhull, were overtly sexual. Scholarship on Woodhull is vast, but for an

### 3.8 PAINTING BETTY CROCKER

It is with these progressive home environments well-established that Neysa McMein was hired to create the image of Betty Crocker that evolved to adorn cookbooks and products during the height of her popularity at mid-century (Figure 76). While McMein had a national audience to address, and therefore cannot be understood exclusively within the context of the Nonpartisan League, Crocker nonetheless emerged from an era in which these issues were alive and prominent. Like Townley's iconic image, this portrait came from an effort to incorporate portraiture into home-décor. Upon request consumers were sent ready-to-frame prints of her, and

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introduction I recommend the biography by Mary Gabriel, *Notorious Victoria: The Life of Victoria Woodhull, Uncensored* (Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books, 1998). The cartoon was published in *The Red Flame*, January 1920, 100. It is reproduced in the context of a discussion of *The Red Flame* by Nielsen, "'We All Leaguers by Our House'," 40-44. *The Red Flame* cover with a giant was the April, 1920, issue. Bookmobiles originated in Washington County, Maryland, where the librarian Mary Titcomb fitted a horse-drawn wagon with enough shelving to hold 250 books. Her "book wagon" travelled a 500 mile route over four days and was managed by the library's janitor, Joshua Thomas. Her wagon was hit by a train in August 1910, but Thomas and the horses amazingly escaped injury. The list of titles on the League bookmobiles was itemized in the *New York Times*. Nationally prominent titles included the *Political Science Quarterly*, *Annals of the American Academy of Social Science*, *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, *Journal of Sociology*, *Journal of Political Economy*, *Columbia University Studies*, *The Survey*, *The Nation*, *The New Republic*, *The Dial*, *La Follette's*, *Capper's*, *Science*, *School and Society*, *Science Monthly*, *Atlantic Monthly*, *American Federationist*, *The Public*, *The Civic Federation*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Review of Reviews*, *The Literary Digest*, *The National Geographic Magazine*, *The New York Times*, *Minneapolis Journal*, and *The Christian Science Monitor*. Several foreign journals were also included, such as *Preussische Jahrbuecher*, *Archiv fuer Soziale Gesetzgebung*, *Journal des Economistes*, *Fabian Society Publications*, *Samtiden*, *Kirke og Kultur*, *Tilskueren*, *Manshester Guardian*, and *The London Herald*. Although not listed by title in the *Times*, the League also bought publications from the Association for Labor Legislation; the Co-operative Society of America; the Carnegie foundations; the departments of Commerce, Labor, and Agriculture; the Bureau of Education; the State of North Dakota; the Bureau of Public Research; and the Bureau of Municipal Research as well as "typical journals of the various non-conformist groups, such as the single taxers, the I.W.W., the anarchists, and the socialists." They even sought out "all publications by associations, political and educational, advocating of opposing measures that may be or are subjects for legislation, especially in the Northwest." The article which lists these publications is an attack on the Nonpartisan League, and the reporter mentioned them in order to explain that they had caused a "rumpus" and "much indignation" among the citizenry. Nevertheless, what strikes me is the variety and high quality of the reading material, which is commendable. Charles A. Selden, "Terrorism and Fraud of the Non-Partisan League," *New York Times*, January 4, 1920, section 9, page 10. For a succinct history of bookmobiles, see Eleanor Frances Brown, "Bookmobiles—Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow," in *Bookmobiles and Bookmobile Service* (Metuchen: Scarecrow Press, 1967), 13-44.

many probably took General Mills up on the offer. To the extent that these strategies for manipulating the appearances of living environments were parallel we can continue to see this history as a visual debate.

Members of the advertising department at General Mills no-doubt valued that McMein was one of the artists best able to display identities and manipulate emotion. She was a sought-after illustrator and public figure, and she was one of the few who were most responsible for creating the vision of American womanhood during the early twentieth century. She started her career as a cover artist for the *Saturday Evening Post*, which she drew five dozen covers for, and later signed an exclusive contract with *McCall's*. As a national celebrity she integrated herself into the culture of artistic and intellectual elites in New York. Her apartment was a hot spot because of a still in her bathtub during prohibition, and parties there featured the French game charades.<sup>104</sup>

Staff at General Mills probably also appreciated that McMein used her status to promote well-being in the world, such as lending her image to a drive to send flour abroad. A photograph released by the American Photo Service featured McMein pleading onlookers to “Buy a barrel of flour to save the starving in the Near East” (Figure 77). She stands to the side of the easel where she has scrawled the command “Say it with flour” above her signature on a printer’s layout. The smaller typeset is a fundraising appeal from the American Committee for Relief in the Near

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<sup>104</sup> For a critical treatment of Neysa McMein, see Carolyn Kitch, *The Girl on the Magazine Cover: The Origins of Visual Stereotypes in American Mass Media* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 136-60. The definitive biography of her is by Brian Gallagher, *Anything Goes: The Jazz Age Adventures of Neysa Mcmein and Her Extravagant Circle of Friends* (New York: Times Books, 1987). For reproductions of all of her known work and a biographical essay, see Norman I. Platnick, *The Lady Seldom Smiles: A Collector's Guide to Neysa Mcmein*, 3.8 ed. (Bay Shore: Enchantment Ink, 2007). For basic facts see also her obituary “Neysa Mcmein Dies; Portrait Painter: Noted Artist Created Posters for Use in World Wars—Did Magazine Covers,” *New York Times*, May 13, 1949, 23.

East—the largest organization that sent food aid abroad in the years after World War I—released March 26<sup>th</sup>, 1921. Its major goal was to abate the endemic hunger accompanying the Armenian Genocide. The fact that McMein was working on drawings for the *Saturday Evening Post* (upper right corner, Figure 78) and the *Woman's Home Companion* (upper left, Figure 79), underscore her mainstream cultural presence. To understand this hire it is worth reflecting on how the politics of flour milling had evolved since the founding of the League.<sup>105</sup>

The fact that Betty Crocker's portrait was made at a specific time—the 1930s—should not be forgotten because the Nonpartisan League had evolved in several profound ways. The organization endured tumultuous events during the early 1920s which gave it an unstable reputation by the time that McMein's drawing was done. During construction of the State Mill and Elevator financial problems were caused by an anti-League organization, the Independent Voter's Association. The group referred to itself as the IVA, and among League members they were known as the "Poison IVAs." They lobbied for funds to be pulled from the North Dakota State Bank in 1920, forcing the sale of state bonds to build the Mill and Elevator. Later, conflicting financial audits of state institutions—including the Bank and Drake Mill—prompted a recall election. IVA candidates fared well amidst the controversy. Thus, on October 28<sup>th</sup>, 1921 the holders of major League-endorsed offices were stripped of their power. This included Governor Lynn J. Frazier, Attorney General William Lemke, and Commissioner of Agriculture and Labor John Hagen. Candidates from the IVA replaced them—Governor R.A. Nestos,

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<sup>105</sup> The photograph's release date is on a stamp from the Newspaper Enterprise Association located on the back. The *Saturday Evening Post* cover is from September 17, 1921. The *Woman's Home Companion* cover is from April 1920. The most detailed account of American Committee for Relief in the Near East's activities during this time period is by James L. Barton, *Story of Near East Relief (1915-1930)* (New York: Macmillan, 1930). The charity remains active during the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, having renamed itself the Near East Foundation. Its official webpage is <http://www.neareast.org/>.



Attorney General Svenbjorn Johnson, and Commissioner of Agriculture and Labor Joseph A. Kitchen. With fewer elected officials, the League in North Dakota was in crisis for the next decade. Ironically, although the newly-elected officials opposed the State Mill and Elevator, the election also marks the triumph of the Nonpartisan League's agenda among mainstream voters. This is because seven measures put to public vote concurrent with the recall created a mandate to finish the construction and begin operation of the Mill and Elevator. Work on the Mill resumed in the spring of 1922, and on October 30<sup>th</sup> it produced its first flour amidst unfounded rumors that the milling equipment was not functional and that its demonstration was a farce. Such critics believed that the flour was ground in advance, dumped into hoppers, and simply poured out for the cheering crowd. Also during the 1920s the League's sister organization—The Farmer-Labor Party—was thriving in Minnesota and expanding into surrounding states. During the 1930s the League resurged in North Dakota under the guidance of the state's former Attorney General William Langer. Perhaps the most important accomplishment of Langer's era was a ban on corporate farming enacted in 1932. All of these chaotic happenings would have framed the organization in the public mind as unpredictable.<sup>106</sup>

When the League was attacking Washburn-Crosby as a reckless, masculine, fat, capitalist during the teens and twenties it was useful for the company to posture as a non-threatening young woman. As the League itself became unstable, however, it was favorable to adopt the

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<sup>106</sup> The events leading up to the State Mill and Elevator are repeated in many histories of the League, but for one of the most thorough and authoritative accounts, which was reconstructed from articles in the *Grant Forks (ND) Herald* newspaper and the archives of the institution itself, see Hagen, "The North Dakota State Mill and Elevator Association", 135-43. On the rumor see Edward Converse Blackorby, "Political Factional Strife in North Dakota from 1920-1932" (MS Thesis, University of North Dakota, 1938), 72-73. For a history of opposition to the League see D. Jerome Tweton, "The Anti-League Movement: The IVA," in *The North Dakota Political Tradition*, ed. Thomas W. Howard (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1981), 93-122. On the "poison IVAs" nickname see Wasson, "The Nonpartisan League in Minnesota", 82. The North Dakota legislature passed the Anti-Corporate Farming Act in 1932, making it the second state to forbid such ownership; Oklahoma did so in 1907.

converse. Unlike the playful signature of 1921, McMein's portrait of 1936 is sophisticated and severe. It is an appeal to identify with a confident and professional home economist. As such, the portrait represents a return to some of the more conservative business-related traits that her namesake, William G. Crocker, embodied.

At a glance the first portrait of Betty Crocker by Neysa McMein is as conventional as the photograph of A.C. Townley. In each of these images the compositions match, extraneous props and symbolism are excluded, and the clothing is conservative. Looking at where McMein's first portrait of Crocker was published, it is clear that this was to be a portrait in the fullest sense of the word, and that it was to compete for the same type of spots in the home where the likeness of A.C. Townley might be placed. The public debut of McMein's portrait of Crocker, which ran in full color on the back of the *Saturday Evening Post* on October 31, 1936, explained that it had been commissioned to commemorate Crocker's "fifteenth year of service to the women of America. Fifteen years of helping women become better cooks, better homemakers. Fifteen years of making friends by the thousands everywhere." Homemakers could request a free booklet of fifteen prize recipes, which came with a voucher to receive a color reproduction of McMein's painting. This was an image to frame, display, and cherish—not a throw away print on a piece of commercial ephemera. The painting was venerated in the advertisement by surrounding it with an intricate gold frame. For a family that had been committed to the League, her portrait might replace or hang beside Townley's, and for a family without League-affiliation hers might be the first flour-related portrait to adorn their wall. In either case, from a historical distance we see the story of mass-produced portraiture and flour milling continue.

Much like Towney's photo depends on an intuitive understanding of the history of painted portraiture, McMein's painting depends on an understanding of photography. While

normally considered as separate media, there was considerable blending between the two forms of visual expression. McMein's image draws on a history of composite portraiture, including manipulating film with multiple exposures, as well as the phenomenon of images painted from photographs. Of particular concern to this discussion are portraits that blended traditional fine arts media—painting and drawing—with mass-production—advertisements and books. Creative output from the modern era is often described in negative and dichotomous terms—a “death” and subsequent “mourning” of the fine arts—especially painting—caused by the advent of photography. Thinking of this situation dialectically, however, also implies synthesis and expanded possibilities for expression. This is what the portrait of Crocker and others that I will discuss reflect—a creative reworking of the visual and sociological norms of painting, drawing, and photography.<sup>107</sup>

Blending of photography and more traditional media was standardized during the late nineteenth century and thrived during the time that Townley's and Crocker's portraits were produced. A case study of two of the best such portraits—oil paintings rendered from photographs—can serve to sensitize us to this mindset (Figure 80 and Figure 81). They were commissioned before 1916 by Henry Wallace of Des Moines, Iowa—a man whose family will become increasingly important in this dissertation for their contributions to the development of agribusiness.

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<sup>107</sup> The death and mourning of painting was best-theorized during the 1980s, but writers grounded their analysis in the technologies of the mid-nineteenth century that enabled mass-produced imagery. See especially Yve-Alain Bois, “Painting: The Task of Mourning,” in *Endgame: Reference and Simulation in Recent Painting and Sculpture*, ed. David Joselit and Elisabeth Sussman (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1986), 29-49, Douglas Crimp, “The End of Painting,” *October* 16 (1981): 69-86. For reactions to this death by artists and other critics see Douglas Fogle, ed., *Painting at the Edge of the World* (Minneapolis, MN: Exhibition catalog from the Walker Art Center, 2001).

Along with his bother and son, Henry Wallace founded the largest newspaper of the Corn Belt, *Wallaces' Farmer*, in 1893—a periodical initially named *The Farm and Dairy*. He was asked by Theodore Roosevelt to serve as either Secretary of Agriculture or on his Country Life Commission. He chose the latter. His son, Henry Cantwell Wallace, served as Secretary of Agriculture under Warren Harding, and his grandson, Henry Agard Wallace, held the same position under Franklin Roosevelt before becoming Vice President. All three Henrys helped to run *Wallaces' Farmer*, and Henry Agard founded Pioneer Hi-Bred—a seed company that eventually became the largest in the United States. Clearly this was an agribusiness dynasty.<sup>108</sup>

The portraits are of Henry Wallace himself and his late wife Nancy Cantwell, and I will focus on Henry's because it was tied to public representations of the man. Although the painted portraits were probably created for display in the home, the photographic sources were reproduced professionally. One of them—reversed horizontally—was used for the torso (Figure 82). It is a three-quarter view from the shoulders up, not entirely unlike Townley's. Wallace is wearing a formal suit jacket, vest, and black bow tie. He is lighted from the right side, and the background is a midtone gray. The photo was so well-liked that it was reproduced on the front

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<sup>108</sup> Research by John Fry indicates that the top four farm newspapers in the Midwest were *Wallaces' Farmer*, the *Prairie Farmer*, the *Missouri Realist*, and the *Iowa Homestead*. In 1895, *Wallaces' Farmer* was a new publication, with only 7,500 subscribers. However, by 1920 it boasted 65,200. At least until 1920 the *Iowa Homestead* had the most subscribers, with 30,000 in 1895 and 138,194 in 1920. Although a competitor of the Wallace family, until 1895 the family was involved in both periodicals, as the first generation Henry Wallace was the editor of the *Iowa Homestead*. Fry surveyed 166 groups of primary sources in Iowa and its surrounding states (Minnesota, Wisconsin, Illinois, Missouri, Nebraska, Kansas, and South Dakota) and found that *Wallaces' Farmer* was the most frequently discussed periodical, with the *Iowa Homestead* a close second. In 1929 the Wallace family purchased the *Iowa Homestead* and merged it with their business to create *Wallaces' Farmer and Iowa Homestead*. Thus, it became the uncontested leading farm journal in the region. The combined name was kept until 1957, at which time it reverted to the *Wallaces' Farmer* name. As of 2009 *Wallaces' Farmer* remains in publication and based on Des Moines. On the national scene, the *Breeder's Gazette*, *Farm Journal*, and *Country Gentleman* were the three most widely discussed journals in Fry's survey, but they were discussed only half as often as the regional publications, indicating their lesser importance. John J. Fry, "Reading, Reform, and Rural Change: The Midwestern Farm Press, 1885-1920" (PhD Dissertation, University of Iowa, 2002), 8, 303, 16, 23-25.

page of *Wallaces' Farmer* upon his death on February 22, 1916 at the age of 80. The second photo was used for the head and legs, as well as the chair (Figure 83). It shows Wallace, again in a three-quarter view, holding a newspaper in his right hand and pensively stroking his chin with the left. The photo was used several times posthumously in 1919 to advertise the book *Letters to the Farm Boy*—a collection of his moral lessons. Probably because the painter did not have photos of the arms and hands to copy from, these areas are loosely rendered on the canvas.<sup>109</sup>

It is probable that these two paintings were created by an artist at the Chicago Portrait Company, which advertised in the family newspaper. They could, however, have been created by a similar business, such as the Syracuse Portrait Company, the Roman Oil Portrait Company, the Commercial Portrait Company, the Aetna Copying Company, or the Pacific Portrait Company. They all produced a wide range of framed photography, drawings, and paintings for the home—both portraits and landscapes. In any case, gaining insight into mass-portraiture is the important goal for us, and any of these companies can be used as a representative example.<sup>110</sup>

The Chicago Portrait Company was founded in 1893, and it was a powerhouse in the industry—the largest business in the US that made paintings from photographs. An advertisement from 1920 claimed that it employed 2,000 people. Legal proceedings indicate that it had revenues of two and a half to four million dollars annually from 1919 to 1921 that came from a customer base of 250,000-300,000 people across the nation. While it may seem

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<sup>109</sup> The head photo used to advertise the book was in *Wallaces' Farmer*, February 21, 1919, 521. The torso photo appeared on the cover of *Wallaces' Farmer* on March 3, 1916. Wallaces' writings were reissued many times. The edition I examined is Henry Wallace, *Letters to the Farm Boy*, 4th ed. (New York: Macmillan Company, 1897, 1906).

<sup>110</sup> The list of peer businesses is from Circuit Court of Appeals, Seventh Circuit, “Chicago Portrait Co. V. Federal Trade Commission,” (4 F.2d 759; 1924 U.S. App. LEXIS 2362; December 23, 1924).

ostentatious to commission such a portrait, the company emphasized that its work was for all types of people:

It matters not if you are a merchant prince, a millionaire, a judge, a blacksmith, a tiller of the soil, a mechanic at the bench, or a laborer in the streets, your children reverence [sic] your name, and your portrait to them has more of the tender and loving heart value than that of anyone else on earth. Let them see their mother, that dear old wrinkled face. Let them study the sweetness of her life thru sorrow and care and unselfish devotion. [...] And don't forget the baby, the "sunshine of the home," the bright eyes, the dimpled cheeks, the little hands raised lovingly for the smile, and in the evening of life you may look upon the picture and once more see the happy little face.

Rather than showcasing elitism or pretentiousness, a commission was to be thought of as "a golden opportunity to show love and respect for those who are dear." Such sentiments are conveyed in a half-page advertising image produced by Palenske S & W that was published in *Wallaces' Farmer* (Figure 84). It pictures a family basking in the presence of their new portrait, beaming at both the original photograph of a young soldier and the company's "perfect likeness" of him mounted in an oval frame above the mantle.<sup>111</sup>

Besides soliciting with newspaper advertisements the company trained travelling representatives to help people select which photographs could be best-reinterpreted as a painting

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<sup>111</sup> The company's size is noted in the aforementioned Circuit Court of Appeals, Seventh Circuit, "Chicago Portrait Co. V. Federal Trade Commission." The sentimental quote about families is from Chicago Plan Commission, Chicago's Reconstruction Plan. Devoted to Chicago's Economics, Hygienic Reconstruction and Attractive Development (Chicago: Franf J. Campbell, 1919), unpaginated advertising section. The happy family is illustrated in a Chicago Portrait Company advertisement published in *Wallaces' Farmer*, February 13, 1920, 581.

or drawing. Salesmen encouraged potential customers to admire the details of sample images. One script, for example, asked a buyer to:

Notice how the artist has brought out the features. Notice how the hair is painted. You can see every stroke of the artist's brush, with just enough color in the face to give it life and warmth. The background is taken from our famous sepia paintings. It seems to set the person right out into space. This wonderful painting is our special handmade Tritone.

Given the large number of such salesmen, nearly everyone in the U.S. was familiar with the phenomena.<sup>112</sup>

Although the Chicago Portrait Company had a code of ethics, it used controversial hard-selling techniques. It had a “salesman's creed” that encouraged professional integrity, good service, self-improvement, education, optimism, financial responsibility, and gentlemanliness. While most representatives may have adhered to these principles, accusations of deceptive business practices plagued the company. These included rigged lotteries and bait-and-switch scams. These led to a court battle with the Federal Trade Commission in 1924. Regarding the lotteries, a federal judge commented that:

The alleged ‘drawing’ is a sham device conceived for the sole purpose of making prospective customers believe that if they draw lucky numbers they will have the advantage of securing pictures at prices greatly below what petitioner's other

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<sup>112</sup> The script was analyzed in the case Circuit Court of Appeals, Seventh Circuit, “Chicago Portrait Co. V. Federal Trade Commission.” For a biographical sketch of Benjamin Sonnenberg—an esteemed publicity and public-relations professionals who got his start with the Chicago Portrait Company working door-to-door in the Midwest—see Geoffrey Hellman, “A House on Gramercy Park,” in *Life Stories: Profiles from the New Yorker*, ed. David Remnick (New York: Random House, 2000), 214-15.

customers must and do pay for them, while in fact there is no chance or lottery about it.

Another problem was that customers paid for the portraits up front but bought a frame upon delivery—a strategy that made the purchase seem cheaper than it ultimately would be. Once finished the company sent postcards to customers announcing that a representative would be in town briefly to deliver their painting, with the clause about frames literally in small print (Figure 85). Conflict sometimes resulted because customers felt forced to buy frames at high prices.<sup>113</sup>

This mass-market for portraits from photographs would inform artists engaged in more traditional portrait-making as well as the viewers who saw them. Grant Wood's paintings, for example, contain a sophisticated interaction with photography. *American Gothic* from 1930 has the stiff postures seen in Victorian-era photographs, and *Victorian Survival* from 1931 is a direct copy of one. Nonetheless, art historians and critics have been reluctant to frame him in this way. *Time Magazine*, in fact, posthumously declared the idea that Wood "copied his paintings from photographs" to be "ridiculous." On one level *Time* is correct—there is no indication that Wood required photographs as a *crutch* when rendering and every indication that he was competent working from life. Nonetheless he is precisely the type of person who would be interested in new photographic technology. Wood followed scientific developments, and during the 1930s a photograph of him was featured in numerous newspapers connected to a machine at the University of Iowa which recorded his brain waves. Ironically, Wood's portrait of Henry Agard

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<sup>113</sup> Chicago Portrait Company, "The Salesman's Creed," in *A Project Book in Business English*, ed. Luella Bussey Cook (New York: Henry Holt, 1920), 10-11. Conflicts about prices are well-recorded in legal proceedings. See especially Circuit Court of Appeals, Seventh Circuit, "Chicago Portrait Co. V. Federal Trade Commission." In addition to potentially deceptive salesmanship, a second problem was whether the company's delivery staff needed peddling licenses (they did) or must collect sales taxes on the frames (they must). See, for example, the summation written by Judge George Moffett Harrison, "Roselle V. Commonwealth," in *Virginia Appeals: Decisions of the Supreme Court of Appeals of Virginia*, ed. Maury Baldwin Watts (Richmond: Court case heard on September 16, 1909 and published by the Appeals Press, 1910), 599-602.



Wallace commissioned by *Time* in 1940 was itself derived from a photo (Figure 86 and Figure 87). It is even possible that Wood was aware of the pair of Wallace portraits described above, and that he was inspired by them when creating the *Time* cover. Wood and Henry Agard Wallace were friends, and the latter inherited the portraits sometime after his grandfather's death in 1916. With this background on portraiture in mind, we can return to McMein's likeness of Betty Crocker (Figure 76).<sup>114</sup>

When Betty Crocker's first portrait was created, McMein was instructed to merge the facial features of female staff members at General Mills. Thus, while she was a fictional person, her likeness would be an accurate reflection of the people who answered her mail, developed her recipes, and spoke for her on the radio. Such a strategy would make her appear more universal, thus resonating with more households. It would also make her likeness more literally real, thus presenting her character in a less deceptive way. Honesty and deception were concerns of longstanding debate at the company, and they date to when Crocker's signature was first penned. To avoid being accused of fraud the legal department advised staff to never sign Crocker's name alone, and to always acknowledge a larger collective. Thus they presented many voices that emanated from her kitchen. The deceptiveness of men signing Crocker's name was of special concern, as she had been invented, in part, to identify with female homemakers.

Knowledge of composite portraiture was well-developed by this time, albeit more so among photographers than painters. During the late nineteenth century numerous composite photographs were made by Francis Galton and his followers by exposing a plate multiple times.

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<sup>114</sup> Quotation is from the obituary "Iowa's Painter," *Time Magazine*, February 23, 1942, available online: <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,884493,00.html>. The portrait of Wallace appeared on the cover of *Time Magazine* on September 23<sup>rd</sup> 1940. Clippings of Wood's brain waves are in the Grant Wood Scrapbooks, 1900-1962, compiled by his sister Nan, microfilmed on Reel 1216 of the Archives of American Art.

Each sitter was positioned in the same spot as the one before, with special attention paid to the locations of the eyes and nose. After several such sittings, a negative would contain an image with averaged features, and only ghostly haloes of those features furthest from the norm. The technique was used for numerous purposes, including eugenic manipulation; identification of criminals; and, most importantly for this narrative, understanding beauty. The more people who are correctly photographed, the more beautiful an image seems to become, as the asymmetries and disproportionate features of individuals are averaged away. There is thus good reason to use composites for any image that is intended to be received positively.<sup>115</sup>

A question is naturally raised, then, if McMein used such techniques in her drawing of Betty Crocker. Although it is difficult to argue from negative evidence, I believe that the answer is no. There is no indication in the archives of General Mills that she used photographic technology in her preparatory work for the portrait, and the resulting image suggests that she did not rigorously combine facial features. Careful portraiture would also have been out of character for McMein at this point in her career. While she created numerous portraits near the end of her life, during the 1920s and 1930s she was not distinguished for depicting the idiosyncrasies of a person's physique needed for a precise likeness, but rather for creating magazine covers with women on them containing a distinct and beautiful facial type, as is present on the *Saturday Evening Post* and *Woman's Home Companion* covers mentioned above (Figure 78 and Figure 79). Soft jaw lines, rosy cheeks, wide eyes, and pouty lips were some of her hallmarks, and these are all prominent in Crocker's portrait.

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<sup>115</sup> For a discussion of composite photography see the work of Josh Ellenbogen, "Photography and the Imperceptible: Bertillon, Galton, Marey" (PhD Dissertation, University of Chicago, 2005).

We may thus infer that McMein understood the mandate to blend facial features as a task without a clear solution, and that it was a *de facto* license to contrive a portrait in any way that she wished. To make Crocker seem superficially like a staff member at General Mills, McMein dressed her in a conservative jacket with lapels, and she rendered Crocker's hair with some gray. The face that she produced is unremarkable and would have been appropriate for the cover of any women's magazine. While it is possible that McMein studied the appearance of employees for inspiration, there is nothing in the finished image that makes this clear. Indeed, given that the portrait of Crocker is not a transparent merging of employee features, and it appropriates McMein's familiar visual vocabulary, as viewers we are left without any visual indication that this was a blended image. It is thus more appropriate to think of the blending as a rhetorical strategy to emphasize her beauty and likeability, rather than a factual account of the image's creation. After all, this story is in effect a repackaging of one of the most longstanding artistic concepts in Western thought—rendering an ideal form by merging attributes of many prototypes. Indeed, since the first art historian, Pliny the Elder, described the ancient Greek painter Zeuxis's inability to find a woman beautiful enough in Heraclea to serve as a model for a portrait of the legendary Helen of Troy, merging people has been a common strategy. Zeuxis settled for five maidens to collectively serve as his prototypes.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> The story of Zeuxis survives from antiquity in the work of Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, trans. John Bostock and H.T. Riley (Perseus Digital Library at Tufts University, available online: <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/cgi-bin/ptext?lookup=Plin.+Nat.+toc>, c.77, 1855 ), book 35, chapter 36. For a discussion of Zeuxis, and his legacy in Western artistic thought and expression, see the work of Elizabeth C. Mansfield, *Too Beautiful to Picture: Zeuxis, Myth, and Mimesis* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007). She discusses numerous examples of the Zeuxis paradigm in both literature and art, from antiquity to the twenty first century. During the modern and contemporary era, she pays particular attention to the grotesque monster Frankenstein and the performance artist Orlan's plastic surgery. For Zeuxis's legacy in ancient art see Stelios Lydakos, "Zeuxis," in *Ancient Greek Painting and Its Echoes in Later Art* (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2002, 2004), 131-36.

Such universalizing is manifest in the earliest official descriptions of Betty Crocker's character that I am aware of, written during the mid-1940s. They could not be more different than the unpredictable young woman of 1921. A 1944 memo that circulated internally at General Mills encouraged: "The development of the personality of Betty Crocker as a person of intelligence, with a thorough and complete grasp of her professional field, but at the same time a simple and modest woman who is a friend of the homemakers whom she serves and does not 'talk down' to them." The following year, 1945, one General Mills employee described Crocker as a 38-year-old "well-educated, well-traveled, and ambiguously married" woman, who "must not indicate any sectarian or political views aside from general opinions on non-controversial subjects in which she shares the opinion of the public." It was this serious, noncommittal, version of Crocker that endured from the thirties onward.<sup>117</sup>

### 3.9 GRANT WOOD'S NONPARTISAN LEAGUE SYMPATHIZERS

During the mid-1930s, when both Betty Crocker and the State Mill and Elevator were well-established, we have reached the moment when Grant Wood drew his *Radical* and *Perfectionist* (Figure 37 and Figure 38). These are thus, fundamentally, images that look to the past. They are reflections both on the content of Lewis's novel, published sixteen years earlier, and also on the role of these characters in a society that had continued to evolve. While not propagandistic, we

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<sup>117</sup> First quote is from an inter-department Memorandum from S. C. Gale to Mr. Sydney Anderson, February 23, 1944. General Mills Archives, folder "1930s-50s, Origins of BC (according to James Quint), trademark info, postwar expansion program." Second quote is from a document by Cliff Samuelson titled "Preliminary Thoughts Regarding Definition of Betty Crocker to be Reviewed and Written Up," dated September 19, 1945. General Mills Archives, folder "1930s-50s, Origins of BC (according to James Quint), trademark info, postwar expansion program."

can thus understand Wood's move to emphasize the plight of these Nonpartisan League sympathizers as a subtle attempt to keep the memory of their struggles alive and to acknowledge the cultural shifts that they brought about. Together, Carol and Miles, through depictions of their lives and homes, can be understood as marking both the triumphs and misfortunes of the era.

For Wood, this seems to have been a history that was unsettling—a fact conveyed visually. Each drawing carefully avoids the conventions of studio portraiture. Rather than a circular composition framed by props, in *The Radical* Wood has abruptly obscured any living space by presenting us with a wall. *The Perfectionist* is no more typical. Here we do indeed have a circular composition and depth, as Wood treats the picture plane as a literal window. But the scene is presented from slightly below eye level, and we are forced like a peeping Tom into Carol's space at the same time that she gazes back.

Neither character is wholeheartedly celebrated or derided, and these portraits serve as emblems—containing symbolism that becomes meaningful in conjunction with the titles. Miles is standing against a wall in a workshop filled with tools—the vertical wall boards creating a claustrophobic space. Such a shallow composition evokes the artistic values of an earlier generation, and especially the still life paintings of John Frederick Peto and William Harnett celebrated in the late nineteenth century. An awareness among rural people of the norms embedded in this type of presentation can be demonstrated by looking at other imagery from the era, such as an advertisement is for the Plano Company, known for manufacturing high-quality corn binders and other harvesting equipment (Figure 88). This business was founded in 1881 in Peoria, Illinois by William H. Jones, and the company relocated to Chicago in 1893. It thrived during the 1890s, and when the International Harvester Company was formed in 1902 Jones transferred his efforts there—serving as the company's vice president. The specific

advertisement, from about 1900, uses the outmoded aesthetics of Peto and Harnett to show “relics of the past” that have been “put out of business by the Plano Husker and Shredder and Plano Corn Binder.” The declaration is tacked to a piece of wall, along with the tools of manual-labor. A machete for chopping off corn stalks hangs across the picture plane, extending from the upper left to the lower right. A pair of worn out leather gloves with metal hooks embedded into them—used to efficiently pierce and shred husks—hangs behind the machete. In the upper right corner are two other tools for husking—pegs held in the palm and secured with thumb loops. Returning to the *The Radical* by Wood, we can see other references to the past and laboring in his attire. A handlebar mustache is paired with a blue denim work shirt under a fleece-lined leather coat and a corduroy cap—practical attire. Symbolically, in the background a hammer and sickle hang next to each other, uncrossed, but nevertheless hinting at communism. Carol is seated, peeking out of a window framed by cutwork lace curtains, and the interior of the room is dark. Her hair is piled on her head in a braid, and she is wearing a blue short-sleeved summer dress. Her home seems well in line with the previously mentioned aesthetics of League women who crochet. Symbolically, the center button of this perfectionist’s dress is slipping through its hole.<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> Miles’s details are in accordance with what the novel tells us about his person. Miles is a “tall, thick, red-mustached bachelor, opinionated atheist, general-store arguer, cynical Santa Claus. [...] He was known as ‘The Red Swede,’ and considered slightly insane.” He wore a “brown dogskin coat and black plush cap. [...] His square face was confident, his foxy mustache was picaresque. He stood erect, his hands in his side-pockets, his pipe puffing slowly. He was forty-five or -six, perhaps.” The first quotation is on page 66, and the second is on page 93. On this type of mustache see Alison Lurie, “The Beard and the Mustache: From Virtue to Villainy,” in *The Language of Clothes* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983), 170-72. Quotations are from Lewis, *Main Street*, 66, 93. For discussions of American still life paintings, see the work of Johanna Drucker, “Harnett, Haberle and Peto: Visuality and Artifice among the Proto-Modern Americans,” *Art Bulletin* 74, no. 1 (1992), John Wilmerding, *Important Information Inside: The Art of John F. Peto and the Idea of Still-Life Painting in Nineteenth-Century America* (Washington DC: Exhibition catalog from the National Gallery of Art, 1983), Alfred V. Frankenstein, *After the Hunt: William Harnett and Other American Still Life Painters, 1870-1900*, Rev. ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), Doreen Bolger, Marc Simpson, and John Wilmerding, eds., *William M. Harnett* (Fort

Just as astutely as Wood's drawings of Carol and Miles convey their cultural status, his drawings of their homes—*Main Street Mansion* and *Village Slums*—convey meaning (Figure 39 and Figure 40). We literally look up to the rich and look down on the poor. When depicting Carol's home Wood places us uncomfortably close to a building, such that it fills our personal space. Our eye level is slightly below the top of the porch walls. At a glance the building seems complicated because walls, roofing, and a pipe criss-cross the picture plane forming a zipper of lines. Our eyes are drawn upward by the vertical thrust of a pillar, trellis, gable, and chimney. Like in the better-known *American Gothic*, Wood focuses our attention on a decorative window—this time ovoid. This home is far from a "mansion," but the tight cropping creates the impression of sprawl. It is in fact a double-pile Victorian home—ample space for a family, but not a palatial complex like those erected by the Vanderbilts and other barons of the Gilded Age. Miles' home in the *Village Slums* is, in contrast, a brutal acknowledgement of a small town underclass. We look at the neighborhood as a bird, with the foreground of the drawing filled with snow-covered rooftops. The focal point is a water well topped by a hand-pump. Several of the households depend on it, as testified to by paths of trampled snow. In contrast to the composition of *Main Street Mansion*, intended to overwhelm us with an extreme close-up, *Village Slums* is the inverse. We are funneled into a bleak and empty space. It is the most impoverished part of town. Miles described his neighborhood as a "Fine mess. No sewage, no street cleaning, and the Lutheran minister and the priest represent the arts and sciences." Neither home is idealized.<sup>119</sup>

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Worth, TX: Exhibition catalog from the Amon Carter Museum distributed by H.N. Abrams, 1992), William H. Gerdtz and Russell E. Burke, *American Still-Life Painting* (New York: Praeger, 1971). On the Plano Company see the biographical essay by Josiah Seymour Currey, "William H. Jones," in *Chicago: Its History and Its Builders* (Chicago: S.J. Clarke Publishing Company, 1912), 16-19.

<sup>119</sup> Quoted in Lewis, *Main Street*, 93.

Carol's home is a hodge-podge of styles, as is appropriate for the home of a woman discontented with her surroundings. The novel tells us that Carol lives in her husband's boyhood Victorian house, and throughout the book they struggle to make it more up-to-date through furniture, Japanese décor, and a new porch. Such efforts are implicit in the drawing. The structural core of this building conforms to the norms of Americans around 1880, but the home seems to have undergone piecemeal renovations over the next 50 years. An ovoid Italianate window made from wood fills the gable—a detail common in Second Empire homes from 1855 to 1885. The gable's steep Queen Anne roof line, prevalent from 1880 to 1910, collides with the low pitch of a Craftsman-style porch roof supported by battered square pillars resting on masonry bases—a type built from about 1905 to 1930. The masonry could have been expensive stone, but given that Lewis describes Gopher Prairie as a town filled with false facades made from pressed tin and other imitative materials, along with the fact that the blocks are conspicuously regular in shape, we can deduce that these are cast "rock-face" concrete blocks—a cheaper but attractive substitute. Such ensembles would have been a common sight when Wood made the drawing in 1936. Given this eclecticism, a viewer in the 1930s would understand the mansion to be the product of ongoing and successful cultural negotiation by a family with reasonable, but not endless, resources.<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> On Craftsman houses, see Virginia McAlester and A. Lee McAlester, *A Field Guide to American Houses* (New York: Knopf, 1984), 452-63. On Italianate see 210-229, on Second Empire see 240-253, and on Queen Anne see 263-287. An interesting side note is that Carol shared the same taste in home-décor with Sinclair Lewis. They each favored easily-available Japanese exotica. Carol's living room featured a "Japanese obi with an intricacy of gold thread on stiff ultramarine tissue" while Lewis owned copies of Edo-era prints. The quotation is from Lewis, *Main Street*, 55. Lewis' Japanese prints are on permanent display at the Sinclair Lewis Interpretive Center in Sauk Center, Minnesota. He favored twentieth-century copies of well-known art, such as views of Mount Fuji by Hokusai and Hiroshige. For the history of rock-faced concrete blocks, see the work of Pamela H. Simpson, "Stone for the Masses: Concrete Block in the Early Twentieth Century," in *Cheap, Quick, and Easy: Imitative Architectural Materials, 1870-1930* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1999), 9-29.



*Village Shums*, however, evokes the most tragic and cold-hearted events described in *Main Street*. The background is filled with a collection of small front-gabled homes. Most are single-story one-room-wide “shotgun” dwellings that fill their lots, although the largest one may be a mass of tiny rooms. Such low-income neighborhoods appeared in the South by 1880 and quickly spread throughout the nation. The central focus of the image, however, is not the houses. It is the water pump surrounded by latrines. Miles, after marrying and fathering a child, continues to live in poverty with his family. He knows that he is pumping “bum water,” but they continue to drink it because a neighbor, Oscar Eklund, refuses them access to his well. Oscar taunts: “Sure, you socialists are great on divvying up other folks’ money—and water!” Ironically, Oscar refused Miles’ offer to pay him for the use of the well. His wife, Bea, and toddler, Olaf, thus develop typhoid fever—caused by bacteria in fecal matter—and Carol nurses them through agonizing deaths. Carol was the only person on friendly terms with Miles during the ordeal, and after around-the-clock care-giving she is too exhausted to attend the funeral. She thus gazes from her window—much like Wood renders her—and watches his funeral procession. “There was no music, no carriages. There was only Miles Bjornstam, in his black wedding-suit, walking quite alone, head down, behind the shabby hearse that bore the bodies of his wife and baby.” Shortly thereafter he curses the town and leaves to start over on the Canadian prairie.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> On gable-front shotgun homes see McAlester and McAlester, *A Field Guide to American Houses*, 90-91. Quotation is from Lewis, *Main Street*, 260, 62.

### 3.10 CONCLUSION

With the benefit of hindsight, as Grant Wood read Lewis's account of the recent past in *Main Street*, with the task of illustrating the novel before him, he would have been able to personally recall the types of imagery discussed throughout this chapter. By imbuing his drawings with the visual conventions of this earlier era, he evokes the Nonpartisan League's agenda of socializing grain distribution and milling as well as the interests of industrial millers. While in their heyday these organizations visually responded to each other, co-opting and transforming each others' messages, by the middle of the 1930s the competition came to a stalemate. As the Nonpartisan League's power waxed and waned, it became clear that both the private giants of flour milling, such as General Mills and the Pillsbury Company, as well as the North Dakota State Mill would grind wheat for the populace.

This debate has focused on what farmers thought about their crops—especially wheat—after it had left the farm, and how their reaction changed the history of flour milling. It is thus the story of food after the harvest. Such a story is, however, only one end of the narrative about cereal crops. An equally important, and complimentary, set of concerns about grain took place at the beginning of each season—what should be planted. By looking at this other stage in the food system, and by interrogating the visual culture of another crop—corn—we can further enrich our understanding. Such is the topic of chapter three.



**Figure 37.** Grant Wood, *The Perfectionist*, illustration for Sinclair Lewis's novel *Main Street*, Limited Editions Club, 1936.



**Figure 38.** Grant Wood, *The Radical*, illustration for Sinclair Lewis's novel *Main Street*, Limited Editions Club, 1936.

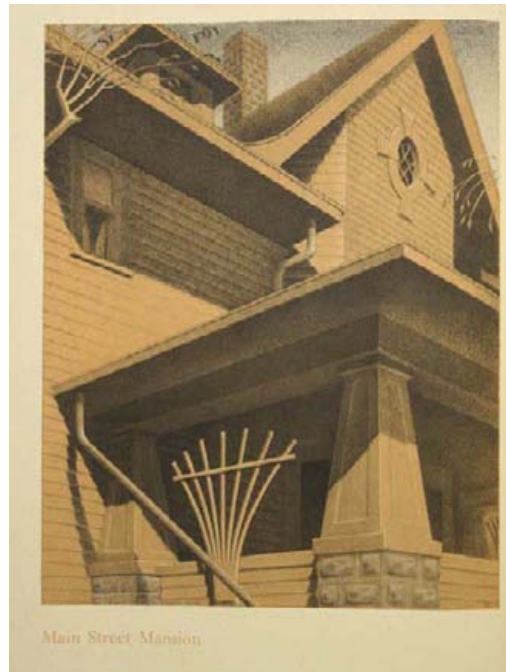


Figure 39. Grant Wood, *Main Street Mansion*, illustration for Sinclair Lewis's novel *Main Street*, Limited Editions Club, 1936.



Figure 40. Grant Wood, *Village Slums*, illustration for Sinclair Lewis's novel *Main Street*, Limited Editions Club, 1936.



Figure 41. Puzzle published in the *Saturday Evening Post* advertising Gold Medal Flour, 1921.

Betty Crocker

Figure 42. Betty Crocker's signature, as written in 1921, The Washburn-Crosby Milling Company.

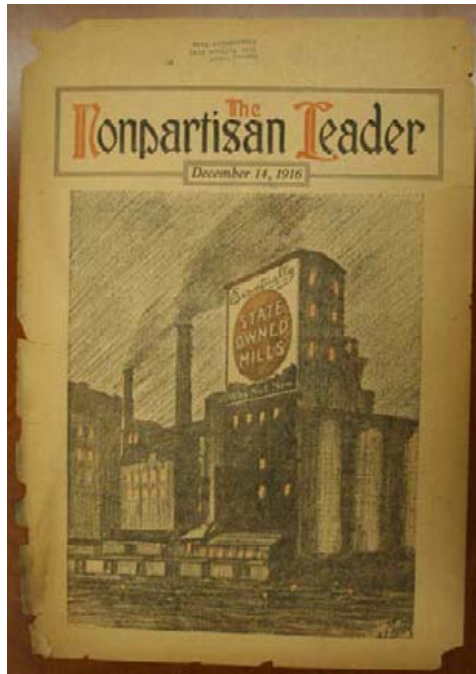


Figure 43. John Miller Baer, cover of *The Nonpartisan Leader*, December 14, 1916.



Figure 44. John Baer. Cartoon credited with coining FDR's phrase the "New Deal." Published in 1931.



Figure 45. Gold Medal Flour ad published January 22, 1916 on the back cover of *The Saturday Evening Post*.

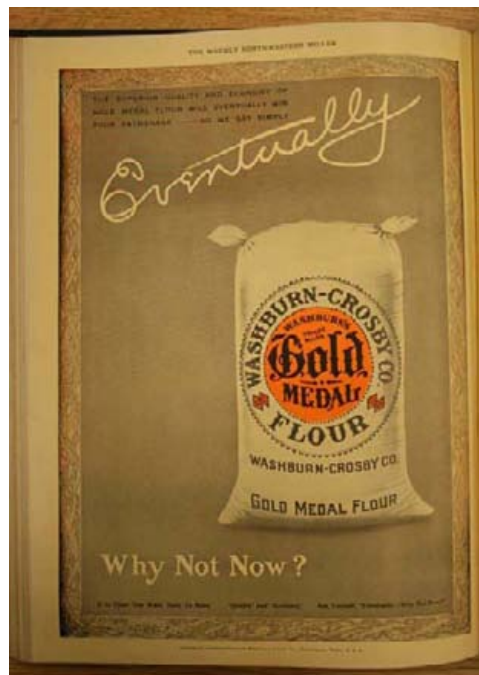


Figure 46. Gold Medal Flour ad published January 20, 1915 in *The Northwestern Miller*, inside front cover.



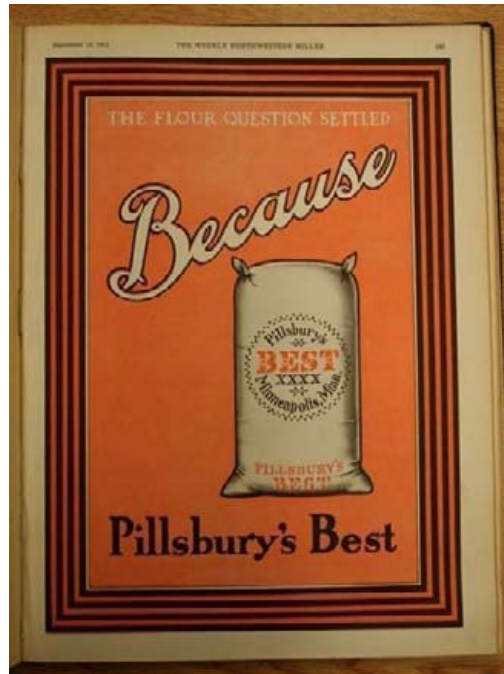


Figure 47. Pillsbury flour ad published on September 15, 1915 in *The Northwestern Miller*, page 685.



Figure 48. Frontispiece of *The Uprising of the Many* by Charles Edward Russell, 1907.



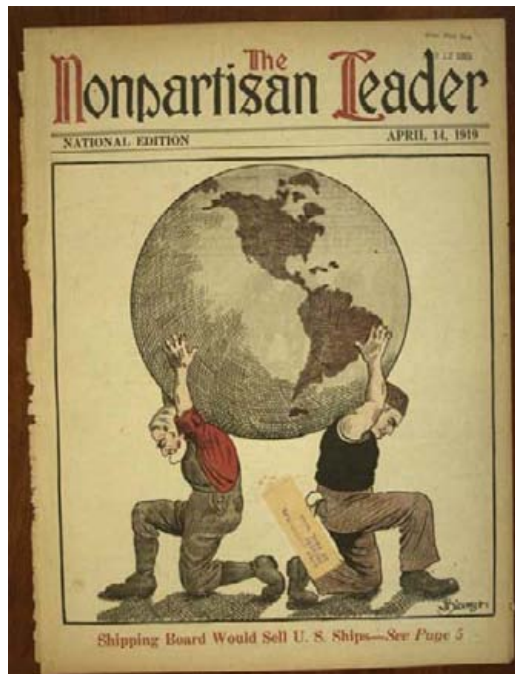


Figure 49. J. Bicknese, cover of *The Nonpartisan Leader*, April 14, 1919.

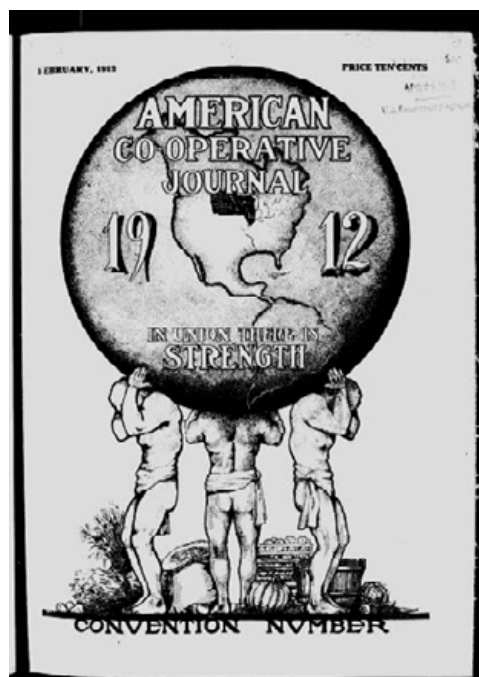


Figure 50. Cover of the *American Co-operative Journal*, February 1912.



Figure 51. Cover of the *American Co-operative Journal*, July, 1914.



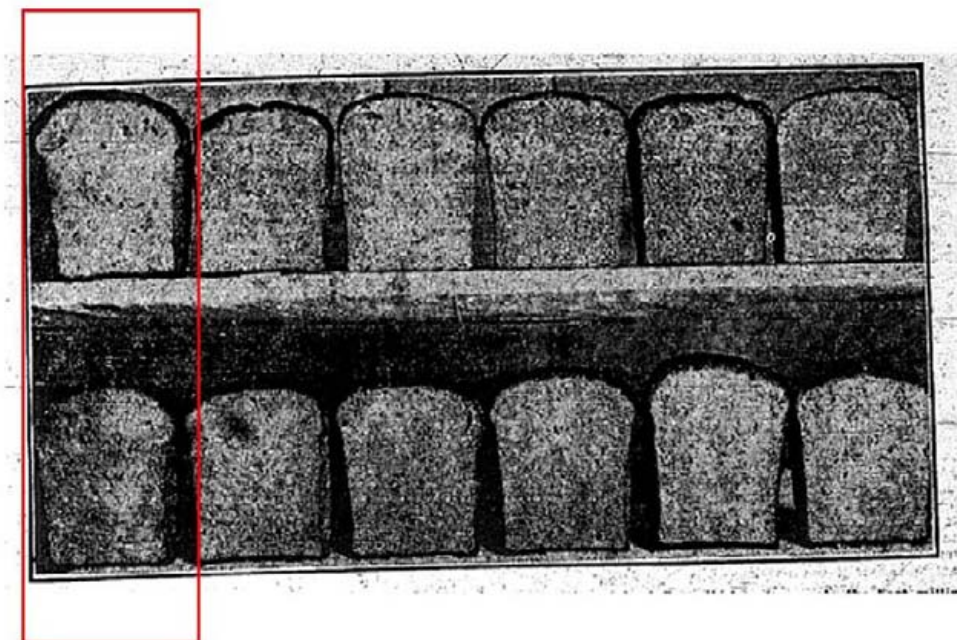
Figure 52. John M. Baer, *The Producer's Burden*, in *The Nonpartisan Leader*, 1918. Clipping in the collection of the Institute for Regional Studies, North Dakota State University.



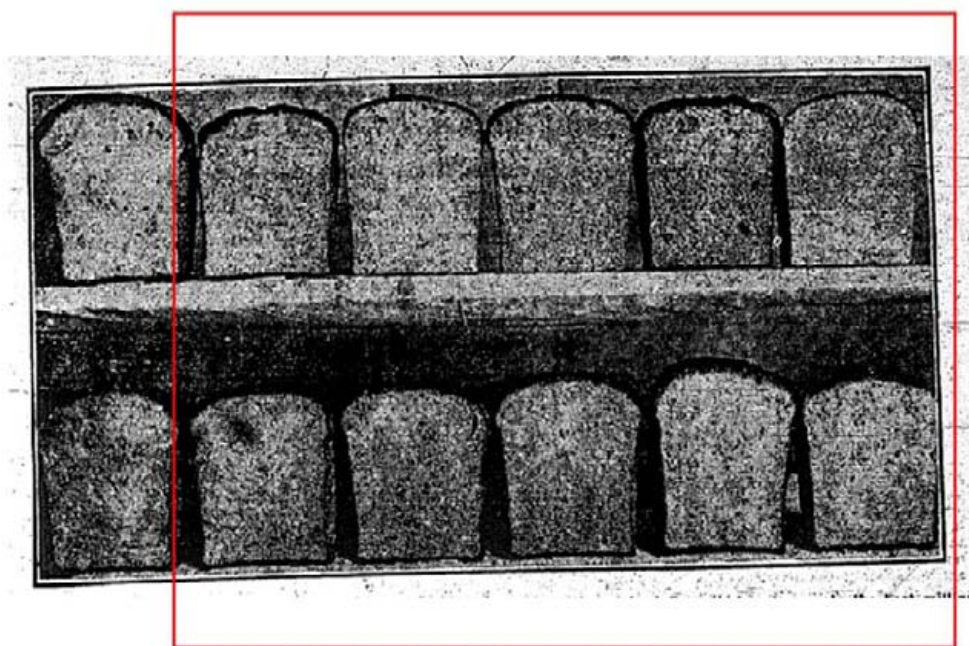
**Figure 53. Marion Post Wolcott. Flour mill in Minneapolis, Minnesota. FSA Photograph. August 1941.**  
**Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA-OWI Collection, LC-USF34-057817-D DLC.**



**Figure 54. Marion Post Wolcott. Flour mill in Grand Forks, North Dakota. FSA Photograph. August 1941.**  
**Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA-OWI Collection, LC-USF34-057882-D DLC.**



**Figure 55.** Results of a baking test by Edwin Ladd showing a “standard loaf, made from standard flour that comes up to the best milling requirements.” Published in *The Nonpartisan Leader*, January 25, 1917, page 14.



**Figure 56.** Results of a baking test by Edwin Ladd showing loaves “baked from flour from light-weight wheat.” Published in *The Nonpartisan Leader*, January 25, 1917, page 14.



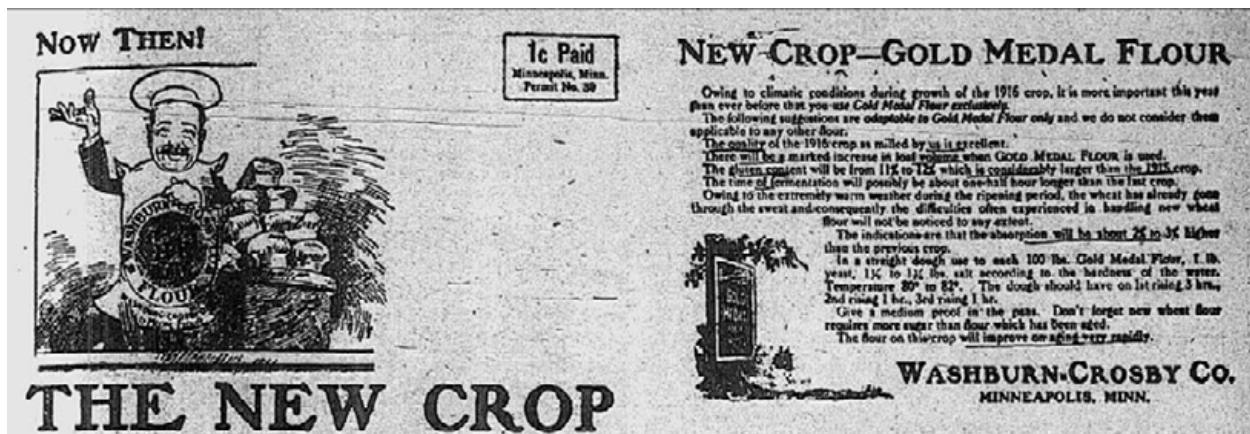


Figure 57. Postcard sent by Washburn-Crosby, published in *The Nonpartisan Leader*, November 23, 1916, page 5.

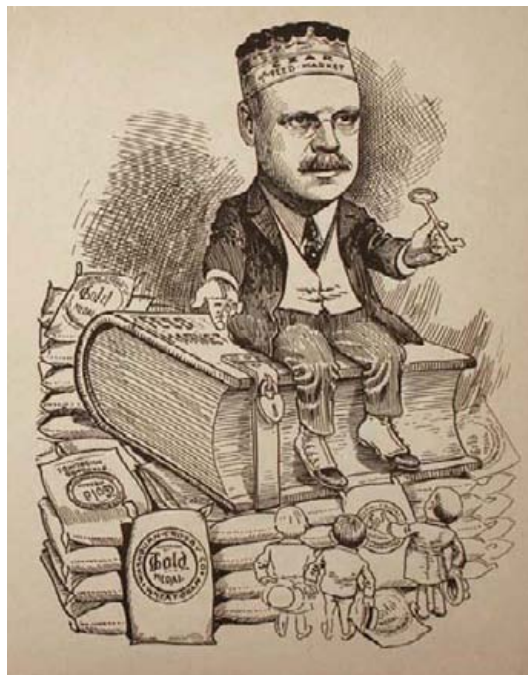


Figure 58. Caricature of William G. Crocker by H.B. Thomson published in *A Portfolio of Cartoons*, 1915.

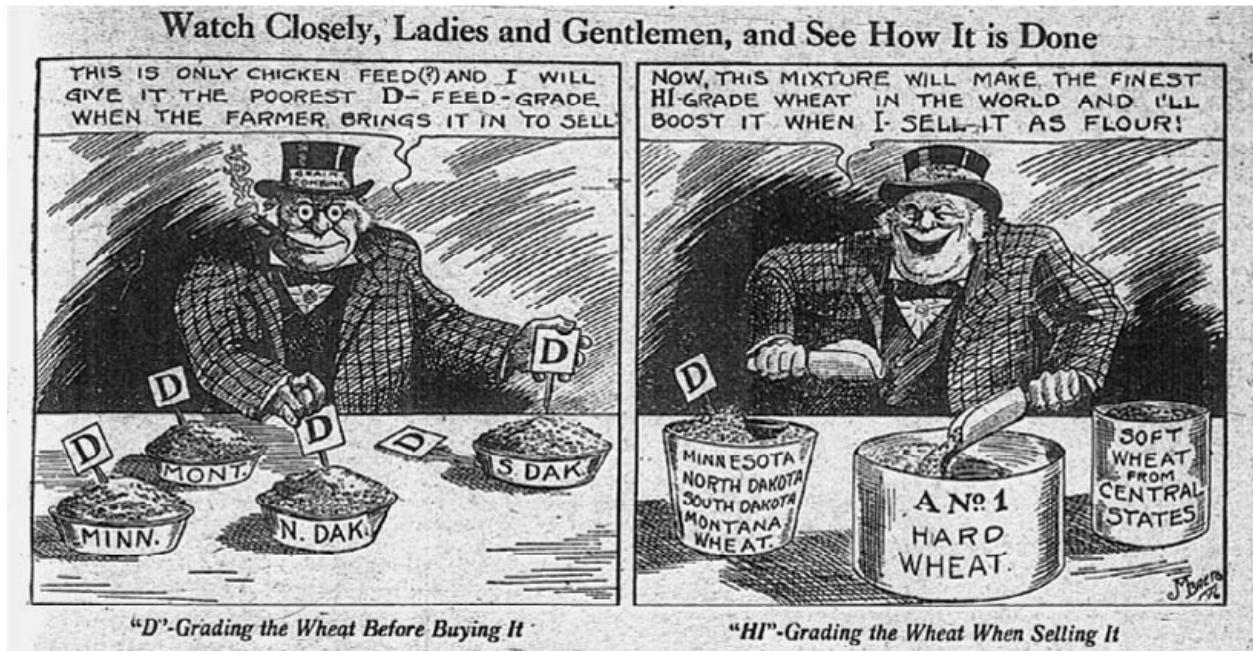


Figure 59. Political cartoon by John Miller Baer, published in *The Nonpartisan Leader*, December 21, 1916, page 3.

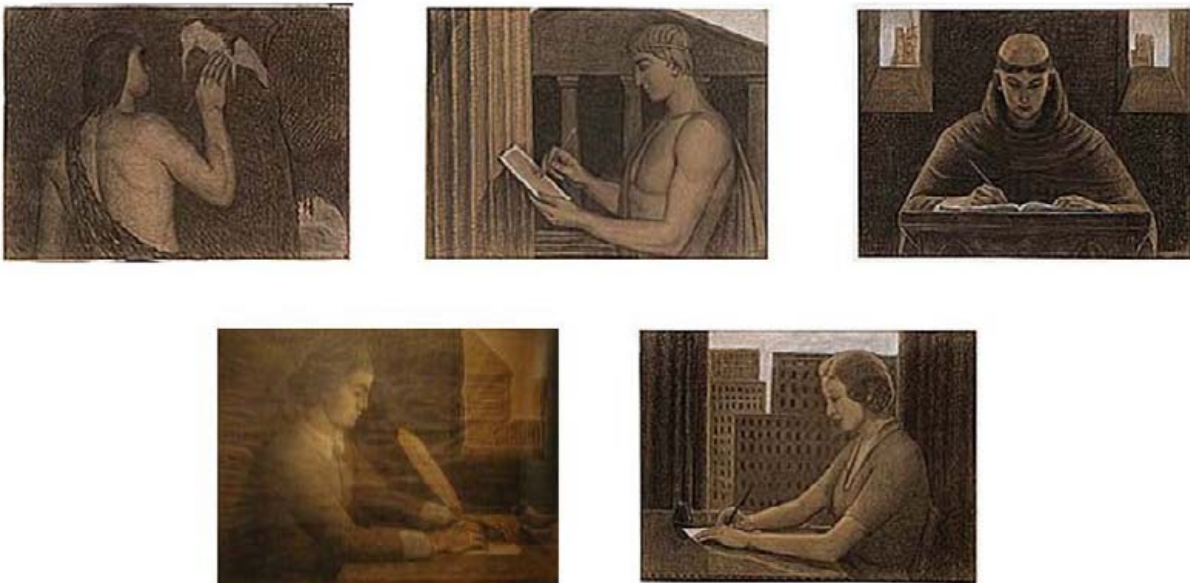


Figure 60. Grant Wood, *History of Penmanship*, drawings for a mural cycle commissioned by the A.N. Palmer Company, 1933.





Figure 61. Example of writing that uses the *Spencerian System of Penmanship* on the title page of an instruction manual, 1873.

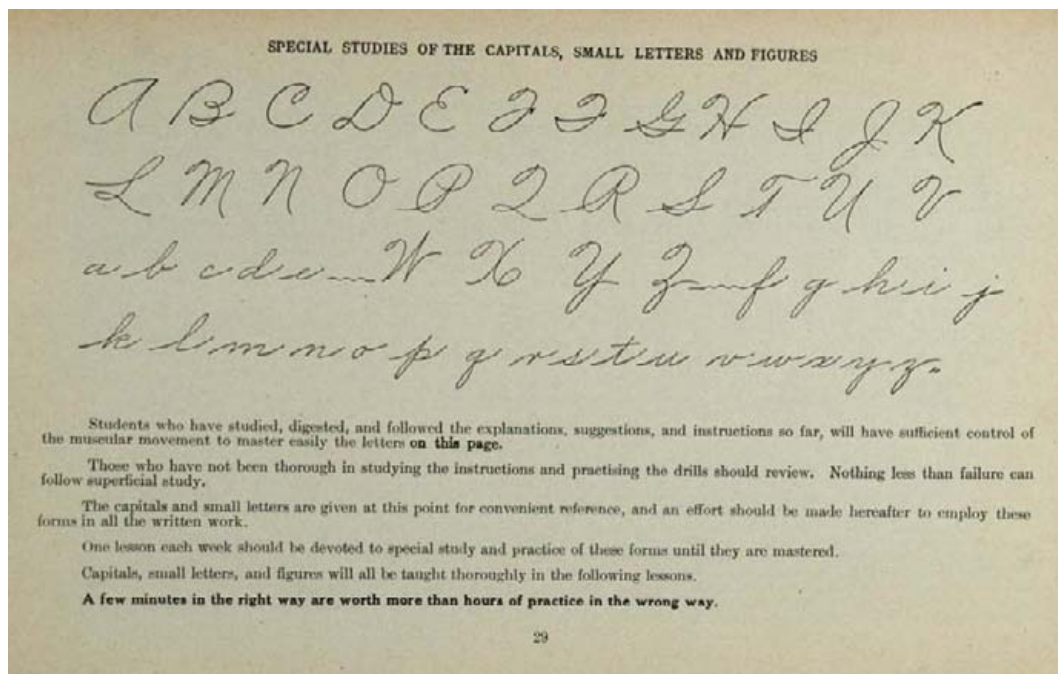


Figure 62. Letter forms by A.N. Palmer, as published in *The Palmer Method of Business Writing*, 1908, page





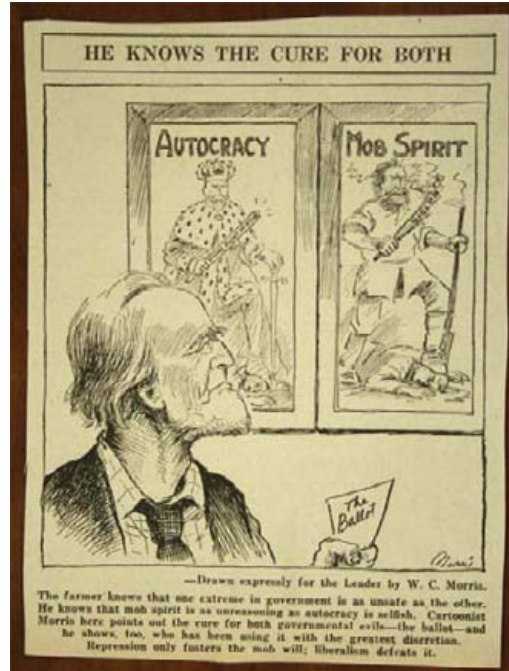


Figure 65. Morris, “He Knows the Cure for Both,” cartoon for *The Nonpartisan Leader*, c.1920. Collection of the Institute for Regional Studies, North Dakota State University.

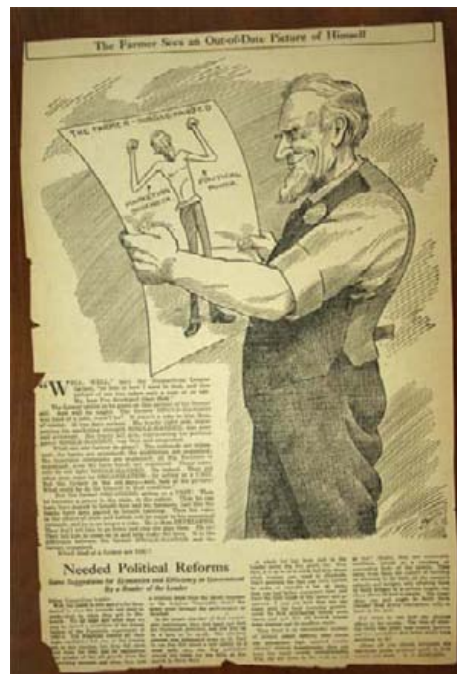


Figure 66. John M. Baer, “The Farmer Sees an Out-of-Date Picture of Himself,” cartoon from *The Nonpartisan Leader*, 1916. Collection of the Institute for Regional Studies, North Dakota State University.



Figure 67. John M. Baer, "The True Picture," cartoon for *The Nonpartisan Leader*, 1919. Collection of the Institute for Regional Studies, North Dakota State University.



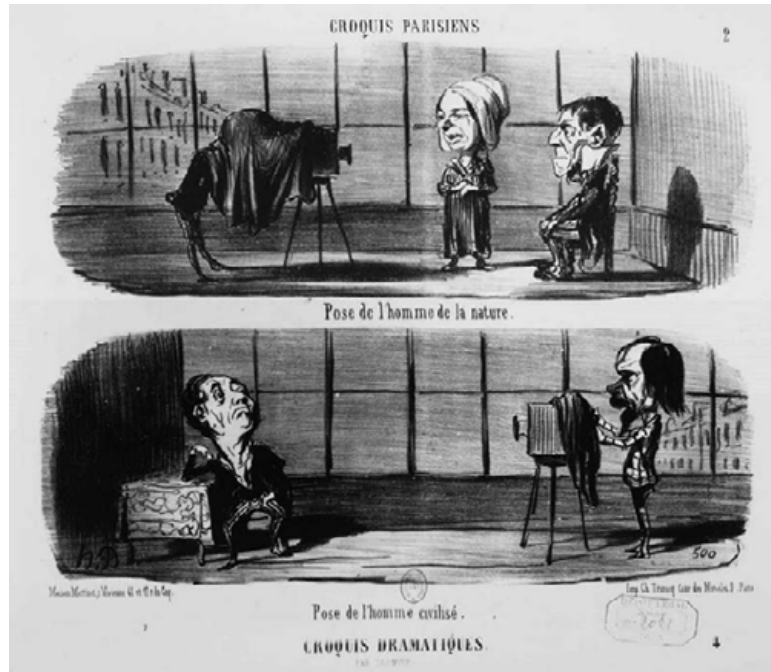


Figure 70. Honoré Daumier, “Pose of the natural man and Pose of the civilized man,” (Pose de l’homme de la nature and Pose de l’homme civilisé,) published in *Croquis Parisiens* in 1853.

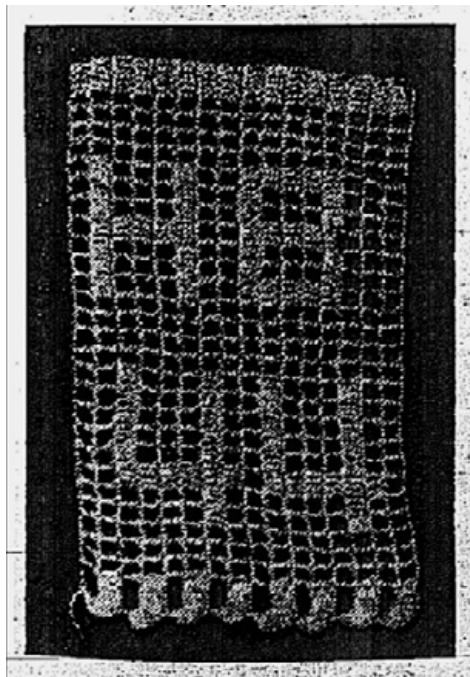


Figure 71. Anonymous, filet crochet lace supporting House Bill 44, published in *The Nonpartisan Leader*, May 10, 1917, page 11.

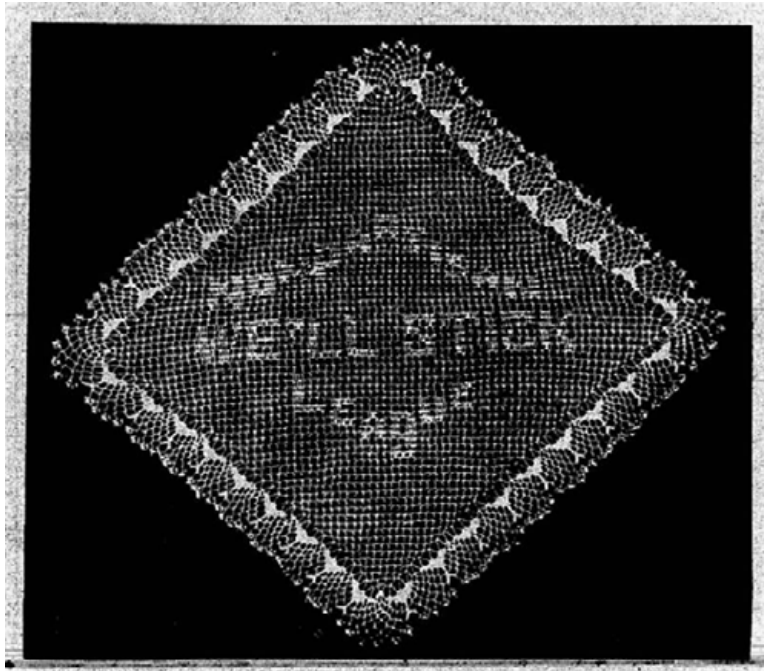


Figure 72. E. A. Meyer, filet crochet doily with fan-work edging, published in *The Nonpartisan Leader*, October 4, 1917, page 13.

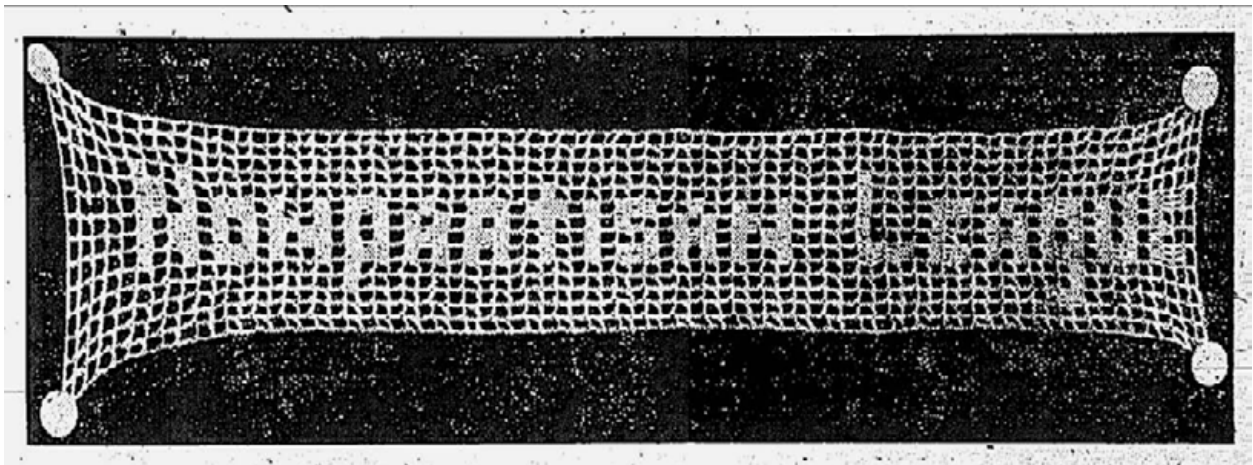


Figure 73. Agnes McDonald, filet crochet table runner, published in *The Nonpartisan Leader*, August 2, 1917, page 12.



Figure 74. Thomas H Foley, cover of *The Red Flame*, April, 1920.



Figure 75. C.C. Colehour of Battle Lake, Minnesota, cartoon published in *The Red Flame*, January, 1920,  
page 100.





Figure 76. Neysa McMein, portrait of Betty Crocker published on the back cover of *The Saturday Evening Post*, October 31, 1936.



Figure 77. American Photo Service image of Neysa McMein, released March 26<sup>th</sup>, 1921. From the collection of KMC.



Figure 78. Neysa McMein, cover of *The Saturday Evening Post*, September 17, 1921.



Figure 79. Neysa McMein, cover of the *Woman's Home Companion*, April 1920.

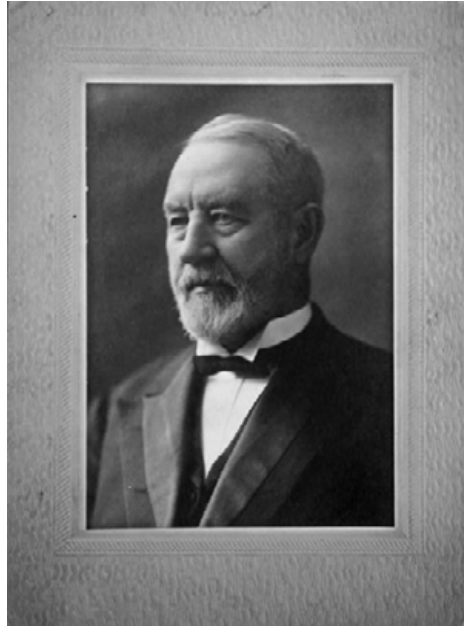




**Figure 80. Artist unknown, portrait of Nancy Cantwell Wallace, commissioned c.1909-1916. Collection of the Wallace House Foundation.**



**Figure 81. Artist unknown, portrait of Henry Wallace, commissioned c.1909-1916. Collection of the Wallace House Foundation.**



**Figure 82. Photograph of Henry Wallace, taken c.1909, collection of the State Historical Society of Iowa.**



**Figure 83. Photograph of Henry Wallace, advertising the book *Letters to the Farm Boy*, published in *Wallaces' Farmer*, February 21, 1919, page 521.**

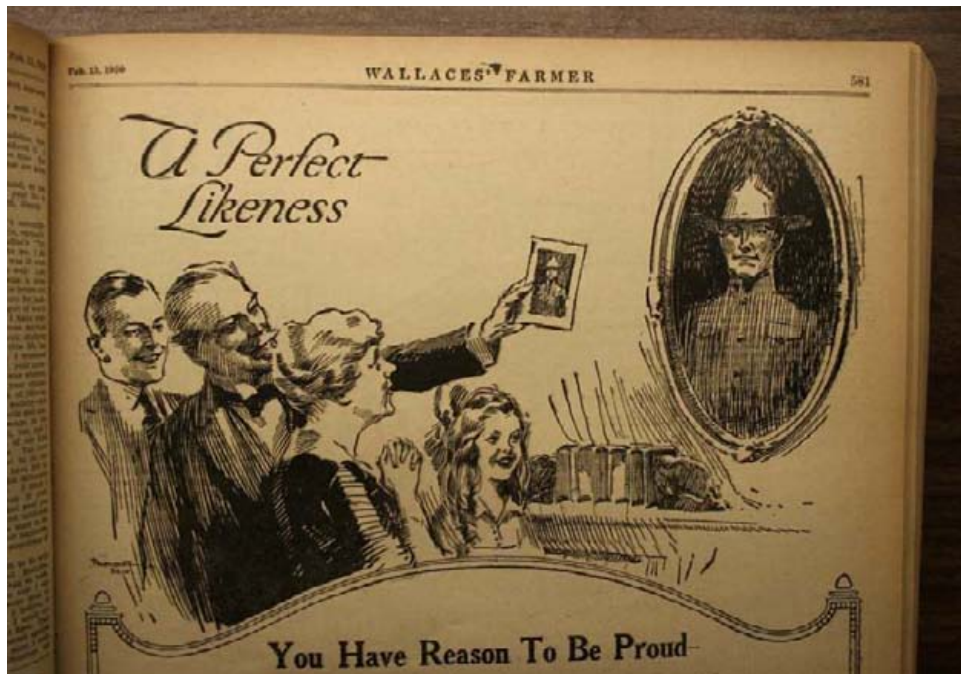


Figure 84. Palenske S & W, Chicago Portrait Company advertisement published in *Wallaces' Farmer*, February 13, 1920, page 581.

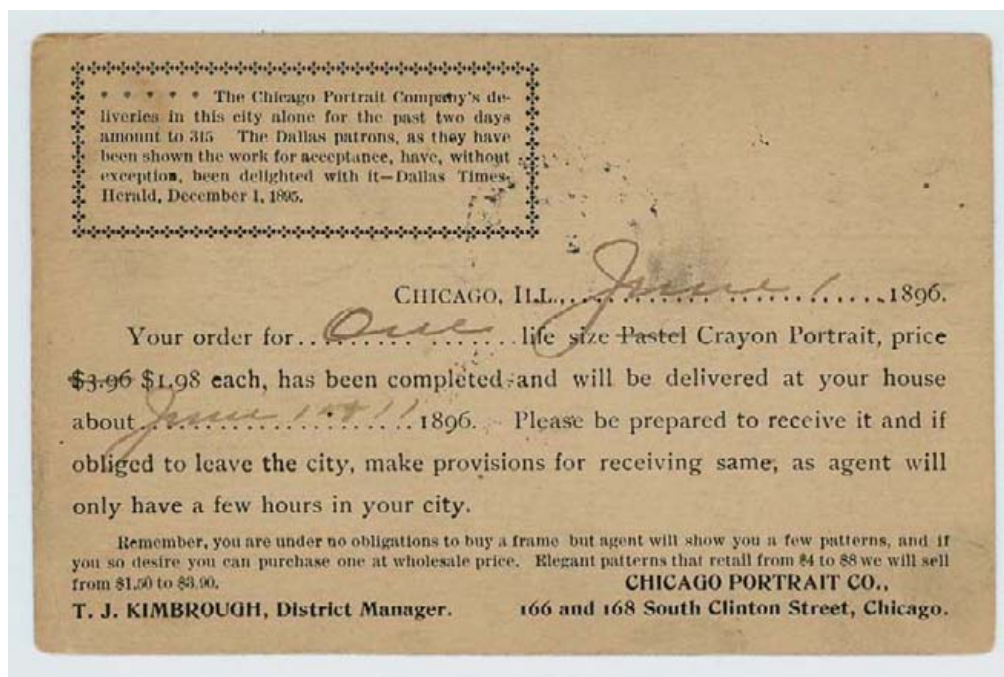


Figure 85. Postcard from the Chicago Portrait Company, sent June 2, 1896. Collection of Travis Nygard.



Figure 86. Grant Wood, portrait of Henry Agard Wallace on the cover of *Time Magazine*, September 23, 1940.



Figure 87. ACME Newspictures photograph of Henry Agard Wallace, No. W567700., stamped November 6, 1940, Library of Congress , LC-USZ62-134530.



Figure 88. Advertisement for the Plano farm equipment company, c.1900.

## 4.0 CHAPTER FOUR: INSTITUTIONALIZING IMAGERY OF CORN

### 4.1 INTRODUCTION

Grant Wood's commission for the cover of *Time Magazine* in 1940—the portrait of Henry Agard Wallace—is a good starting point for thinking about why one variety of corn came to dominate contemporary agribusiness (Figure 86). In this image Wallace, one of the most prominent corn breeders and politicians of the mid-twentieth century, fills the right foreground while looking at the viewer. As mentioned in chapter two, Wallace's likeness is directly copied from an Acme news photograph (Figure 87). In it he is dressed professionally in a suit and tie, as is appropriate for the Secretary of Agriculture, but in a manner that disconnects him from the activity in the background. There, an overall-clad man with a slightly bent back is laboring in a field by moving shocks of wheat—presumably to be threshed out of view. The day is pleasant; a rectilinear group of white clouds extends toward the viewer in an otherwise clear sky, echoing a road that follows the field's edge. The image venerates Wallace, who looms over American agricultural practice. But why would Grant Wood care about this man or be asked to design his image? To answer that question requires looking at their personal relationship, as well as the agendas that tied corn breeding to artistic practice. I frame the cover amidst Wood's other corn-related work, and I also use Wallace's interactions with visual culture. In this context, it is clear that visual material played a key role in shaping, not only how people farmed, but the appearance of crops

themselves. Through aesthetic negotiations some varieties of grain were upheld as worthy of planting, while others were denigrated. Both of the major grain crops—wheat and corn—underwent intense visual scrutiny, and in this chapter I will focus on corn.

This is the intertwined story of two systems of values. The first is the visual story of how creative breeding and myth-building changed the corn plant. The second is the practical story of scientific expertise and business practices that also intervened. By treating these together, the narrative emphasizes that farming involves both “natural” processes to create food as well as a cultural dialogue. Corn plants are living organisms, which must be understood partly in terms of their biology, but they are also socially constructed—to use Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann’s terms—through careful planting, tending, harvesting, and seed-saving. Through these processes, over the course of millennia the plant’s appearance has been manipulated and artists have been inspired to critically reflect on its cultivation.<sup>122</sup>

Taking this broad view, we can see that corn is, indeed, one of the plants most fully invented and controlled by humankind. There is no wild culinary corn, free of the agendas of hungry people. The undomesticated ancestor of corn—a grass called teosinte—has only a few kernels on proto-cobs. These kernels are encased in a thick layer of silica that does not soften by cooking. Attempting to chew these rock-like seeds would be like eating glass—an assault on teeth and gums. How and why teosinte was domesticated and transformed to become *corn* is a historical enigma. However, it was almost certainly valued more for the stalk or leaves than the seed.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966).

<sup>123</sup> My understanding of teosinte is indebted to a workshop that I participated in led by the paleobotanist Robert Thompson. The history of corn breeding in America has been well-studied, but rarely emphasizing visual properties.



In modern history corn has remained at the heart of food-related struggles. By looking at the history of farming we can see how it came to be “true” that one variety—a beautiful yellow one—was the best to plant despite the fact that many other varieties were known to have positive traits. This was a process of endorsement by experts, integration into institutions, and entrenchment within individual family practices. Through these causes this yellow variety, and its visual descendants, ultimately came to dominate American agribusiness.<sup>124</sup>

## 4.2 HENRY AGARD WALLACE’S PORTRAIT

Returning to the *Time Magazine* cover, it is important to note that it was a companion to another mass-produced image—a lithograph created by Wood the same year, 1940. This one was commissioned by the Associated American Artists (AAA) and is titled *Approaching Storm* (Figure 89). The AAA integrated fine art into middle class homes by making it affordable and accessible. The organization reproduced prints by major artists in large quantities and sold them in catalogs. Wood participated for several years, and most of his lithographs were created for this distribution venue. *Approaching Storm* was the only one that he completed in 1940. Both

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Nonetheless, a great deal can be gleaned from the work of Betty Fussell, *The Story of Corn* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992), Henry Agard Wallace and William Lacy Brown, *Corn and Its Early Fathers* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1956), Gregory Scott Bennet, “American Hybrid Corn History: A Century of Yields” (MA Thesis, Iowa State University, 2001), Richard Crabb, *Hybrid Corn Makers: Prophets of Plenty* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1947), Deborah Fitzgerald, *The Business of Breeding: Hybrid Corn in Illinois, 1890-1940* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), Arturo Warman, *Corn and Capitalism: How a Botanical Bastard Grew to Global Dominance*, trans. Nancy L. Westrate (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988, 2003), Paul Weatherwax, *Indian Corn in Old America* (New York: Macmillan, 1954), ———, *The Story of the Maize Plant* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1923).

<sup>124</sup> The idea that some equally-factual ideas are “truer” than others is one of the major points made by Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon, 1969, 1972).



*Approaching Storm* and the magazine cover include a similar set of rectilinear clouds and a road extending toward the viewer. They thus appear to be depictions of the same place. Unlike Wallace's portrait, however, the overall message in *Approaching Storm* is negative. Rather than uplifting us with a message of strong leadership, trouble lurks on the horizon where rain pours from thunderheads and trees are bent by the wind. The weather was also emphasized in a preliminary drawing done with Conté Crayon and chalk that contains a nearly-identical composition (Figure 90). The sketch hints that Wood may have heightened the sense of trouble; the final print contains darker storm clouds and starker shadows. In *Approaching Storm* the same man from the *Time* cover picking up a bundle of wheat is present, but bent slightly further down and with his legs more widely spaced—suggestions of increased effort. Here he is also joined by two peers that are not on the magazine cover. The task that these men face is difficult; they are moving the crop to keep it dry. If they fail to finish then the drenched shocks will be difficult to thresh or could even begin to decay. Although the facial expression of the man nearest to the viewer is vague, a sense of urgent expediency is hinted at by handling two shocks at a time.<sup>125</sup>

With the dichotomy between the perilous storm and the honorific portrait in mind, we might ask why Wood believed that Wallace was worthy of praise. The man was from the third generation in his family to actively shape Midwestern rural life. Collectively, through dissemination of information, education of young people, fulfillment of government posts, and development of new crops, they were responsible for revolutionary changes to farming—especially the growing of corn. Henry Agard Wallace's grandfather, whose portrait was introduced previously, founded a newspaper for Corn Belt farmers. He used his clout to

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<sup>125</sup> The sketch was sold by auction as lot 76 on November 20-22<sup>nd</sup>, 1999 by Jackson's. The sale's record is available online at: [http://www.jacksonsauction.com/past\\_files/images/Nov2099/grant\\_wood.htm](http://www.jacksonsauction.com/past_files/images/Nov2099/grant_wood.htm)

encourage corn specialists to teach at Iowa State College, and he sponsored contests for the best corn. Although not specifically corn-related, he served on Theodore Roosevelt's Country Life Commission (CLC). This group pinpointed structural problems preventing rural people from thriving, such as access to good education and postal services. This same man had been asked to serve as the United States Secretary of Agriculture but refused because he could not also serve on the CLC. Nonetheless, this job remained important in the family, and his son, Henry Cantwell Wallace, held the post under Warren Harding and Calvin Coolidge. In this capacity, Henry Cantwell attempted to fulfill the mission of the USDA to provide high quality seed and information to the populace. The family was also heavily involved with university life. Henry Cantwell Wallace became a professor of agriculture at Iowa State College, where he focused on dairying. Henry Agard Wallace followed in the footsteps of his father—also participating in research, journalism, and government. At the time that Wood painted this portrait for *Time Magazine* Wallace had advanced to holding the same office as his father—Secretary of Agriculture—and had changed the course of corn farming by introducing hybrids. Indeed, he viewed hybridization as a near-mystical phenomena, describing it as “nature’s mysterious supercharger.” He founded a company—Pioneer Hi-Bred, originally known as the Hi-Bred Corn Company—that prospered. This was a family with power.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> A significant body of scholarship and popular literature exists on the historical significance of the Wallace family. See especially the work of John C. Culver and John Hyde, *American Dreamer: The Life and Times of Henry A. Wallace* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2000), Graham White and John Maze, *Henry A. Wallace: His Search for a New World Order* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), Richard S. Kirkendall, *Uncle Henry: A Documentary Profile of the First Henry Wallace* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1993), Richard Lowitt and Judith Fabry, eds., *Henry A. Wallace's Irrigation Frontier: On the Trail of the Corn Belt Farmer, 1909* (Norman: University of Oklahoma, 1991), Donald L. Winters, “Ambiguity and Agricultural Policy: Henry Cantwell Wallace as Secretary of Agriculture,” *Agricultural History* 64, no. 2 (1990): 191-98, Richard S. Kirkendall, “The Second Secretary Wallace,” *Agricultural History* 64, no. 2 (1990): 199-206, Torbjorn Sirevag, *The Eclipse of the New Deal: And the Fall of Vice President Wallace, 1944* (1985), Theodore A. Wilson, “Henry Agard Wallace and the Progressive Faith,” in *Three Progressives from Iowa*, ed. John N. Schacht (Iowa City: Center For the Study of the

Henry Agard Wallace was also the type of person that Grant Wood admired—an intellectual and patron of the arts—so the two formed a friendship. Anecdotes show that they enjoyed each others’ company, but it is unclear how much contact they had because most of Wood’s papers do not survive and Wallace’s archived correspondence, although voluminous, focuses on professional but not personal life. Perhaps the most humorous anecdote involving the two is a tongue-in-cheek suggestion that Wood made to Wallace. He explained that to increase the clover harvest, Americans should be encouraged to plant only four-leafed varieties. Wallace claimed that he would put the USDA right on top of the matter.<sup>127</sup>

In addition to a friendship with Wood, Wallace used his position to draw attention to rural artistic life. In 1937, for example, he celebrated the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the USDA by organizing an exhibition of the traditional folk art of American farmers. This display focused on longstanding heritage by emphasizing handicrafts, such as quilts and woodworking. This should not lead us to assume that Wallace disliked abstract modern art. In fact he was a strong supporter. He used the Russian modernist Nicholas Roerich, for example, for agricultural research purposes—sending him to Mongolia to draw the ancestral grasses of wheat. (The expedition failed to produce meaningful results.) Wallace also had ties to documentary art. The Farm Security Administration photography project of the 1930s that captured iconic images of

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Recent History of the United States, 1980), 36-78, Donald L. Winters, *Henry Cantwell Wallace as Secretary of Agriculture, 1921-1924* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1970), Edward L Schapsmeier and Frederick H. Schapsmeier, *Henry A. Wallace of Iowa: The Agrarian Years, 1910-1940* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1968), Lord, *The Wallaces of Iowa*. On the first Wallace’s work for the government, see the report he contributed to. United States Country Life Commission, *Report of the Country Life Commission*, ed. L. H. Bailey (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1909). Quotation is from Henry Agard Wallace, “Hybridization: Nature’s Mysterious Supercharger,” *Reader’s Digest*, September 1955, 111-14.

<sup>127</sup> On growing four leaf clover, see Edwin B. Green, *A Grant Wood Sampler*, January Issue of the *Palimpsest* (Iowa City: State Historical Society of Iowa, 1972), 21, “Period Piece,” *Time Magazine*, January 8, 1940, available online at <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,763180,00.html>.

depression-era America operated under the purview of the USDA during Wallace's tenure. With this intense interest in visual materials, it is fitting that Wallace also thought about his primary area of research—corn breeding—in visual terms, and that Wood was aware of this fact.<sup>128</sup>

### 4.3 GRANT WOOD'S UNDERSTANDING OF CORN

Grant Wood's interest in corn was not only a celebration of historical practices. In addition to a strong nostalgia for the nineteenth-century small-farm lifestyle of his youth, Wood functioned within the scientifically and technologically progressive intellectual culture of Iowa. By looking at examples of Wood's work we can see that his understanding of corn was highly specific, and that he was interested in new ideas of breeding. Wood created two images of corn that can be used to show this sensitivity. Both are lithographs that were sold through the Associated American Artists.

The first, *Seed Time and Harvest* from 1937, shows a farmer walking across the foreground carrying a bushel of corn that he has taken from a wagonload on the right (Figure 91). Behind this man is a shed with a propped door large enough to store the wagon inside. The man is heading toward a ladder leaning against the shed. The farmer's face is rendered vaguely, suggesting that this is intended to be a generalized statement about farming processes rather than a personalized comment on an individual. Ears on the left side of the image dangle from the

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<sup>128</sup> Green, *A Grant Wood Sampler*, 21. United States Department of Agriculture, *An Exhibition of the Rural Arts: Held in Connection with the 75th Anniversary of the Founding of the Department of Agriculture, 1862-1937* (Washington DC: Exhibition catalog for the United States Department of Agriculture, 1937). On Wallace's friendship with Roerich, including the expedition to Mongolia, see the work of Culver and Hyde, *American Dreamer*, 130-46, 343, 482-83, Lord, *The Wallaces of Iowa*, 453.

roofline, one next to the other, on wires strung one above the other to dry. In the background cleared fields alternate with those filled with shocked stalks. Taken in its totality, what we are privileged to see is the assembly of swags of corn—a process carefully done each fall to those ears that would be used as seed the following spring. This seed-saving was a traditional act, not done by those farmers who purchased seed annually from hybrid breeders.

The other print, *Fertility* from 1939, is a celebration of hybrid corn standardization—the opposite of *Seed Time and Harvest* (Figure 94). It is a farmscape that contains a corn field in the foreground. The ears are full size and probably ripe. A variation on the *American Gothic* house, famously painted nine years earlier, is in the background. This rendition contains the distinctive pointed window, but a different style of porch. The floor plan of the new version is also different—rectangular rather than L-shaped. Between the field and the house is a barn with a gothic roof and a silo. The field is a model of the qualities valued by hybrid breeders and the farmers who planted their seed. One of the goals of hybrid corn breeding was standardizing the shape and height of the corn plant. Producing one consistently medium-sized ear per stalk was desired by these people, and this is precisely what Wood shows. Predictable, moderately large ears of corn could be picked by machine and would dry before it could grow mold in the corn crib. Placing these images in time, it is important to note that the endeavor depicted in *Seed Time and Harvest* was fundamentally old-fashioned by the late 1930s in Iowa, while the standardization seen in *Fertility* was a pillar of the Green Revolution that led to the large-scale corn industry of the twenty first century. This is not to say that only hybrids were planted during the 1930s. The transition to a nearly-all-hybrid farm economy took decades to complete, for both practical and cultural reasons. The magnitude of the fact that a new institutional system needed to be put into place—large-scale breeders that served farmers every year rather than small-scale

breeders that farmers purchased a variety from only once—should not be underestimated. While the early 1930s saw hybrids being adopted in Iowa, where the research was most intensive early on, according to USDA statistics it took until 1960 for planting hybrids to be planted in almost 100% of corn fields nation-wide. The excitement over the technique in Iowa during this era is testified to by the fact that there were about 500 hybrid seed companies in the state by 1940. That number dwindled to only 100 by 1957 and 28 by 1997.<sup>129</sup>

#### 4.4 CORN AS AN EXPRESSIVE MEDIUM

It is clear that in these two prints Wood is depicting corn in highly specific ways, but additional points of reference are necessary to understand why corn of these shapes, colors, and textures was planted. That question requires understanding corn as an expressive medium that can be manipulated in complex ways to serve the agendas of specific individuals and institutions. It requires recognizing that the corn each farmer chose to plant was a value-laden decision. And it requires understanding that the physiognomy of a corn plant's ears was closely interrogated by

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<sup>129</sup> I acknowledge that describing a fictional home from one angle in a print or painting is risky. Nonetheless, after looking at the history of farm homes in some depth it is possible to make probable assertions. For information on this topic see Katherine Cole Stevenson and H. Ward Jandl, *Houses by Mail: A Guide to Houses from Sears, Roebuck, and Company* (Washington DC: Preservation Press, 1986), Wallace Ashby, *Farmhouse Plans*, revised ed. (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Farmers' Bulletin No. 1738, 1935). Agricultural newspapers, such as *Wallaces' Farmer*, also frequently printed photographs, plans, and descriptions of farm homes. For the history of the adoption of hybrids, see the section "Background: The Science of Seed" a report by the USDA by Jorge Fernandez-Cornejo, "The Seed Industry in U.S. Agriculture: An Exploration of Data and Information on Crop Seed Markets, Regulation, Industry Structure, and Research and Development," *Agriculture Information Bulletin*, no. AIB786 (2004): available online: <http://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/aib786/>. On the number of hybrid corn companies see the work of A. Forrest Troyer, "Background of U.S. Hybrid Corn II: Breeding, Climate, and Food," *Crop Science* 44 (2004): 371.

farmers. To begin picking apart this story requires a basic understanding of corn anatomy as well as the types of corn that farmers had access to.

The appearance of ears is inextricably tied to reproductive processes. Botanically, corn is a grass in which each plant has both male and female sex organs. The male cells (pollen) are produced in the tassels at the top of the plant and disseminated primarily by the wind. On a blustery day the pollen can travel many miles to fertilize a distant field. But with still air a plant's pollen might fall downward, landing on the silks of its own premature ears that grow halfway up the stalk—self-fertilizing. Each silk is attached to a different kernel and must be fertilized by a different grain of pollen. The kernels on any given ear are thus usually half-siblings; they have the same mother but different fathers. Multi-colored ears are evidence of corn's genetic diversity, while consistently-colored ears indicate that only similar plants were grown near each other. Cotton Mather first observed this fact in 1716 when he planted red and blue corn upwind from a yellow variety. The result was ears downwind that had many red and blue kernels. Because a ditch separated his plants, Mather further observed that corn intercourse must occur across air, thus overturning the prevailing theory that corn plants mated through their roots. If inadequate pollen reaches the silks a plant will only develop those kernels that were fertilized—resulting in a misshapen ear (Figure 93). Under favorable conditions, silks will be well-fertilized and most-likely develop into a common ear shape—cylindrical, conical, or bulbous (Figure 94). The kernels might be plump or shriveled, and their overall shape might be long and narrow, fat and wide, or resemble a keystone. Those kernels might be yellow, white, red, blue, orange, or multi-colored (Figure 95 and Figure 96). If we take recessive traits into account, the visual form that an ear could take is even more wide-ranging. Ears with inherited traits of branching into a Y shape are known (Figure 97), as are ears with husks surrounding each kernel (Figure 98). With this

basic knowledge of the visual properties of corn, it is clear that Grant Wood's lithographs depict only a small selection of those plants that might have been grown.<sup>130</sup>

To understand whether it was Wood's individual logic to depict only a few varieties, or whether this reflected larger cultural norms, requires looking at what varieties of corn were adapted to the climate and growing season of the Midwest and in common cultivation. What did corn in this region look like in the mid-nineteenth century, right before the era Wood depicts? Did it resemble the corn in his prints? If so, is there clear continuity? Regionally well-adapted varieties were prevalent among indigenous people before white settlers occupied the Midwest, and so we might expect the ears in Wood's engravings to be direct descendants of these. Corn's history is, however, not so simple.

Several visual descriptions of the indigenous corn grown in the Midwest during the nineteenth century survive, as do some of the plants themselves. We know that the corn grown here was both visually diverse and carefully maintained. Proto-ethnographic writing, for example, indicates that this was a region where many varieties of corn were treasured. The German Prince Maximilian Alexander Philipp of Wied, for example, travelled through the upper Midwest from 1832 to 1834. This royal was a premiere scientist of his era—a student of Alexander von Humboldt—and his publications were widely read. He recorded the crops grown by many people, including the Mandan living in what became the Dakota territory. He described this corn as “White, Yellow, Red, Spotted Black and sweet maize; very hard yellow maize, white or red striped maize, and very tender yellow maize.” Trading seed between tribes in the Midwest was common, and so many of the corn varieties grown in the region appear to be similar. Indeed,

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<sup>130</sup> On Cotton Mather's corn experiments, see Wallace and Brown, *Corn and Its Early Fathers*. For discussions of odd-shaped inheritable traits of ears, see the work of Weatherwax, *The Story of the Maize Plant*, 99-113.



if we compare photographs of the varieties that were grown historically by a tribe in the southern Midwest, such as the Pawnee from what is today Nebraska and Kansas, with the varieties grown in the northern Midwest, such as the Mandan from what is today North and South Dakota, we can see numerous commonalities among the ears (Figure 99 and Figure 100). Both tribes had varieties with soft and hard kernels; varieties that were starchy and sweet; varieties that were red, blue, white, yellow, and multicolored; and varieties that varied in length and girth. The photographs of Pawnee and Mandan corn reproduced here are from the collection of the breeder and ethnologist George F. Will, whose father Oscar H. Will founded the Pioneer Brand Seed House in North Dakota.<sup>131</sup>

The Will family is useful to bring into this conversation with Wood and Wallace, as they can be used to show a changing visual tradition that differentiated Native corn from that grown by white people. The Will family had a reputation for producing the best seed in the region, and they foregrounded Native American culture in their advertising. As prolific breeders, we can use them to show a changing body of knowledge over many decades. During the late nineteenth century the Wills acquired indigenous seed and facilitated the transition to inbred corn strains similar to those in Wood's print *Seed Time and Harvest*. Their method was to acquire seed from the Mandan people and plant it in fields with other genetic stock, thus transforming it over several generations. Their efforts focused especially on yellow dent field corn. These were

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<sup>131</sup> Prince of Wied Maximilian, *Maximilian, Prince of Wied's Travels in the Interior of North America, 1832-1834*, ed. Reuben Gold Thwaites, trans. Hannibal Evans Lloyd, vol. 22-25, *Early Western Travels, 1748-1846* (Cleveland, OH: A.H. Clark Company, 1906), 275, Maximilian Prince of Wied, *Travels in the Interior of North America* (London: Ackermann and Co., 1843). A discussion of trade is included in Pekka Hämäläinen, "The Rise and Fall of Plains Indian Horse Cultures," *The Journal of American History* 90, no. 3 (2004): Available online from the History Cooperative, <http://www.historycooperative.org>. For reproductions of the ears, see the work of George F. Will and George E. Hyde, *Corn among the Indians of the Upper Missouri* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1917, 1964).

inbred varieties suited to the northern plains with visual traits similar to those grown on the west coast and in the south.<sup>132</sup>

The family is also a group of people who are worth taking seriously as a source of information on indigenous corn in the upper Midwest. They were certainly business-oriented, and their seed was widely-distributed by catalog—a fact that no-doubt biased their worldviews. But this is also a family that became involved in careful, academic, documentation of corn. Besides having direct contact with the Mandan, George Will was educated at Harvard where he pursued a bachelor's degree in archaeology. There Will's classmate was the art historian and anthropologist Herbert Spinden. The latter man was to become well-known in his field, and he may be best-remembered for writing the first scholarly book about ancient Maya art. He was a curator first at the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology at Harvard and later at the American Museum of Natural History in New York. The two men maintained a lifelong friendship after Will moved back to the Dakotas in 1917 to take over the family seed business. This resulted in professional collaboration, including the study of indigenous corn. Their most significant joint work was a coauthored book on the Mandan, published by Harvard's Peabody

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<sup>132</sup> Information on the Will family can be gleaned from: "In North Dakota's Hall of Fame: Oscar H. Will," *Fargo (ND) Forum*, August 23, 1923, "George F. Will, 70, Seedman and Student of History, Dies," *Fargo (ND) Forum*, October 4, 1955, clipping in the Oscar H. Will collection files, Institute for Regional Studies, North Dakota State University, *Biography of Oscar H. Will: Portrait Hung 1923*, (Manuscript in the Oscar H. Will Collection, Institute for Regional Studies, North Dakota State University written when Will was inducted into the Hall of Fame at the North Dakota Agricultural College, c.1923), Clement A Lounsbury, "Oscar H. Will," in *North Dakota, History and People* (Chicago: S.J. Clarke Publishing Company, 1917), 562-63, George F. Will, "Archaeology of the Missouri Valley," *Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History* 22, no. Part 6 (1924): 283-344, ———, *Corn for the Northwest* (St. Paul: Webb Book Publishing, 1930), Will and Hyde, *Corn among the Indians of the Upper Missouri*, George F. Will and Herbert J. Spinden, "The Mandans: A Study of Their Culture, Archaeology and Language," *Papers of the Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University* 3, no. 4 (1906): 79-219, Oscar H. III Will and Erin C. Will, "Seed Corn to Shelterbelts: Will's Pioneer Brand Helped Settle the Northern Plains – and Remains a Popular Ephemera Collectible," *Farm Collector* (c. 2003): available online at: <http://www.farmcollector.com/articles/miscellaneous/seed-corn-to-shelterbelts-2005-04-22.html>.

Museum. Will maintained his interest in archaeology in other ways too. He translated and published a proto-ethnographic account of Lakota people in the upper plains—written by the French painter, writer, and Army general Philippe Régis Denis de Keredern de Trobriand from 1867 to 1870. Will was a founding member of the North Dakota Historical Society. He sold booklets about the history of corn and techniques of corn growing that highlighted the indigenous history of the upper plains. And most importantly for this discussion of visual materials, he employed the artist Clell Gannon to paint ethnographic imagery for the front of his seed catalogs.<sup>133</sup>

One of the most important facts about commercial breeders of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, such as the Will family, is that they were both aware of the diversity of indigenous crops and also denying that diversity for personal gain. This family, for example, presented indigenous corn as an inferior plant when compared to their own offerings. Looking at covers from the Will family's catalogs for 1911 and 1918, for example, shows a single indigenous variety, variously labeled as "Squaw Corn" or "Ancestor" or "The Parent" (Figure 101 and Figure 102) It is a medium-sized multicolored ear with a slight taper, and it is juxtaposed with larger, more symmetrical, yellow and white ears labeled "Descendants" and "Pioneer Bred Dakota Seed." While the imagery on these catalogs is not a complete lie—the Mandan did grow some multicolored ears and the Will family did develop new varieties from them—it is also not especially honest. By excluding the larger, consistently-colored, ears that

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<sup>133</sup> "George F. Will, 70, Seedman and Student of History, Dies," clipping in the Oscar H. Will collection files, Institute for Regional Studies, North Dakota State University, Herbert Joseph Spinden, *A Study of Maya Art, Its Subject Matter and Historical Development*, vol. 6, Memoirs of the Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University (Cambridge: Peabody Museum, 1909, 1913), Will and Spinden, "The Mandans: A Study of Their Culture, Archaeology and Language," 79-219, Will, *Corn for the Northwest*, Raymond W. Wood, "The North Dakota Artwork of General Regis De Trobriand," *North Dakota History* 73, no. 3-4 (2006): 2-30.

they knew the Mandan grew the family implied that all indigenous corn was calico rather than solid yellow or white. And by making their family's ears larger on the page they implied that theirs were consistently larger and better. The catalogs are thus an example of imagery intended to build a myth of corn becoming progressively more desirable through the intervention of settlers.<sup>134</sup>

Some of Grant Wood's paintings also depend on the understanding of a white agriculture superseding a Native tradition. He evoked the connection between historical practices of Native peoples in the Midwest and corn-growing of his own era most clearly in a painting from 1940 titled *January*—part of an unfinished series of scenes from each month (Figure 103). Shocks of corn without ears stand in a snow-covered field, doubling as a village of tipis. A door-like opening is in the shock nearest to the viewer, with a trail of rabbit tracks leading from it across the snow. Although it is unlikely that Wood was intending to be hurtfully racist, from a contemporary vantage point imagery that conflates Native people with animals is troubling. In any case, it hints that he was aware of the association of corn with Native people, as well as the intense interest in differentiating it from the new settlers' tradition.

More descriptive imagery was used by the Will family—familiar with the visual norms of anthropology. Their success depended on paying tribute to the indigenous varieties that they “improved” as a form of branding. This was especially true once George Will took control of the business in 1917. At that time his personal friend, Clell Gannon, designed images of Native people planting, tending, harvesting, cooking, and eating corn. The paintings appeared from 1919 to 1959, reproduced in full color on the covers. Gannon's first cover is typical (Figure 104

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<sup>134</sup> A nearly-full run of seed catalogs was donated by the Will family's to the Institute for Regional Studies at North Dakota State University.

and Figure 105). It shows Mandan people near earth lodges on a natural rise in the land near a river bank, with an overlapping vignette of a woman tending corn—presumably on the most fertile area by the shore. The image is reasonably well-informed by historical practice—probably a pastiche inspired by prints produced by George Catlin and Karl Bodmer. This type of pseudo-historical painting was, however, out of step both with forms of contemporary culture sanctioned by the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) as well as the life-practices of the Mandan. Indeed, since the Dawes Act of 1887, traditional agriculture among Native people was discouraged by the BIA and an entirely different system of land ownership and georgic values—modeled on Jeffersonian family farming—was officially advanced. While some Mandan women continued to farm small plots of corn for decades, as one is shown doing in Gannon’s painting, the background of earth lodges is anachronistic. This form of architecture was within living memory but had largely been abandoned during the 1890s in favor of housing made from logs and milled lumber. By 1908 living in an earth lodge, as one Arikara man near Beaver Creek North Dakota did, was rare and viewed as an act of cultural resistance to the values of settlers.<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> Clell Gannon also illustrated and wrote popular books, such as: Clell Goebel Gannon, *Songs of the Bunch Grass Acres* (Boston: Gorham Press, 1924), Russell Reid and Clell G. Gannon, *Birds and Mammals Observed by Lewis and Clark in North Dakota* (Grand Forks: Holt Printing Company, 1927), Clell Goebel Gannon, *How Christmas Came to North Dakota* (Bismarck: 1929), ———, *Ever and Always I Shall Love the Land* (New York: Vantage Press, 1965). On earth lodges, including their demise and use as cultural resistance, see the work of Mary Jane Schneider, “Three Affiliated Tribes,” in *Handbook of North American Indians*, ed. Raymond J. DeMallie (Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001), 349, Peter Nabokov and Robert Easton, “Earth Lodge,” in *Native American Architecture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 142-43.

## 4.5 CORN BREEDERS AS ARTISTS

Returning to Grant Wood's *Seed Time and Harvest* (Figure 91), we can see that the medium-sized and uniformly-colored type of corn that the man is saving is different from the Native stock. But what did that mean to a turn-of-the-century settler? There is a second half of this story—that great corn was bred by great artists. To understand it we must think about what the visual properties of grain meant to the people of the Corn Belt—a region so-named because corn is the dominant crop. There the appearance of corn was dwelled upon during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, with beautiful ears being equated with high quality. This fascination was so intense that Henry Agard Wallace once compared it to the Dutch tulip mania of the seventeenth century.<sup>136</sup>

The variety that testifies to this fascination most fully is Reid's Yellow Dent, developed by one breeder in particular—James L. Reid—who had inherited seed from his father Robert. This man epitomized the nineteenth-century cult following for beautiful yellow corn, which affirmed the differentiation from Native varieties described above. Reid's ears were presented as an innovation, visually different from the corn grown by both white and Native people during the eighteenth century in the United States. During the 1700s, most varieties grown in the northeast of the US had “flinty” kernels that were broader than deep with little to no dent. These kernels were found on long and slender eight-rowed ears with white cobs, and Native Americans historically cooked them by parching. In contrast, varieties in the southeast had “gourdseed” kernels—so named because they were deeper than broad and looked like the seeds of gourds.

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<sup>136</sup> The comparison with tulips is from Wallace and Brown, *Corn and Its Early Fathers*.

These grew on short and fat ears with sixteen to thirty rows on red cobs, and they were historically cooked by boiling.<sup>137</sup>

Reid's Yellow Dent corn is an amalgamation of the two. It came into being serendipitously, and it was perfected by selective breeding for nearly fifty years. Its story begins in 1846 when a red-colored variety of gourdseed corn called Gordon Hopkins did poorly on Robert Reid's homestead in Illinois. He had planted it late in the season, so it did not mature fully. The family tried to save seed from this crop, but in 1847 the germination rate was low. As such, they interspersed another variety, Little Yellow flint corn, in the same field. The varieties inter-pollinated, and the next season they discovered that the result was an unusual visual form. The Reids were not the only farmers who discovered what happens when gourdseed and flint varieties are allowed to mate. By happenstance, several other breeders in the late eighteenth through the mid-nineteenth centuries—including John Lorain and Joseph Cooper—also planted them near each other, and they probably had similar results. These other farmers, however, failed to capture the public imagination, and as the decades progressed it was the Reid family's that was perfected. Robert Reid recruited his son James to the cause of breeding the new corn, who in turn inspired his daughter, Olive, to continue the family's operation. Each generation became important in their own right. Olive, for example, reportedly loved to paint images of corn, and by 1905 she had completed three years of certification at the University of Illinois, becoming the first woman to achieve a Life Certificate as an Expert Corn Judge.<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> On parching and boiling see Ibid., 21-22. The Reid family's yellow dent was derived from "Gordon Hopkins" white gourdseed and "Little Yellow" flint. The Little Yellow may have contained some genes from the "Guinea" corn developed in West Africa during the eighteenth century.

<sup>138</sup> For the history of Reid see the *James L. Reid Program, Delavan, Ill., September 10, 1955*, (Delavan, IL: Materials in the National Agricultural Library related to the erection of a historical marker at the Reid family farm including letters, news releases, clippings, the program, and reprints of secondary resources, Call Number: 120

Father, son, and granddaughter thus perfected Yellow Dent Corn through careful seed-saving. James Reid kept the best ears between his bed mattresses for protection over the winter. To ensure their corn's genetic purity the family gave seed to neighbors with adjoining fields. The expense of this act caused them to struggle financially. It was wise, however, from a breeding standpoint. After all, pollen drift easily occurs for 200 meters in average weather, and under exceptional circumstances can travel for 120 kilometers or more. Through these efforts the variety became what James Reid described as "an almost pure yellow corn of medium size and medium early in maturing. The ears carry their size fairly well, have a solid deep kernel that grows very compact on the cob, and will shell about 86 per cent of grain after it is thoroughly dry." <sup>139</sup>

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R252, 1955). This includes numerous resources written for the occasion, such as, Ralph Allen, *Corn—the Hand of Friendship*, G.H. Ifner, *Information Re: Robert and James L. Reid*, and R.W. Jugenheimer, *James L. Reid and His Corn*. It also includes reprinted resources, such as Perry G. Holden, "James Reid and His Yellow Dent," in *James L. Reid: The Man and His Corn*, reprinted from *Wallaces' Farmer*, December 24, 1920, *Famous Names in Corn Development*, reprinted from *The Prairie Farmer*, October 18, 1941, A.D. Shamel, "The Art of Seed Selection and Breeding," in *James L. Reid: The Man and His Corn*, reprinted from *Yearbook of the United States Department of Agriculture*, 1907, page 231-232, Federal Writers' Project, "Delavan —1837-1937, a Chronicle of 100 Years," reprint of pages 24-25, 1937, Olive G. Reid, "One Great Accomplishment in Corn Breeding," reprinted from *Breeder's Gazette*, Vol 67, pages 383-84, February 25, 1915, Forrest Crissey, "James Reid, Master of Corn," reprinted from *The Country Gentleman*, Vol 85, No. 38, September 18, 1920, DeWitt C. Wing, "Who Put 'King Corn' on the Throne?," reprinted from *The Breeder's Gazette*, Vol. 83, January 18, 1923, Tom Delohery, "Reid's Corn Made Millions for Other Farmers but He Died Poor," reprinted from *Farm and Fireside*, page 7, September, 1923, A.J. Bill, "Reid Farm Methods," reprinted from *Bloomington Weekly Pantagraph*, October 27, 1905, James L. Reid, "Letter to Editor," reprinted from *The Farmer's Voice*, November 25, 1899. See also William Reid Curran, "Indian Corn," *The Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 11 (1918): 576-85.

<sup>139</sup> On giving seed to neighbors see R.W. Jugenheimer, *James L. Reid and His Corn* (Delavan, IL: Speech in packet of materials titled "James L. Reid Program, Delavan, Ill., September 10, 1955" in the National Agricultural Library related to the erection of a historical marker at the Reid family farm, Call Number: 120 R252, 1955), 3. On corn pollen see Jean Emberlin, *A Report on the Dispersal of Maize Pollen* (Bristol, UK: Soil Association Research Paper Compiled January 1999, available online: <http://www.soilassociation.org/Web/SA/SAWeb.nsf/848d689047cb466780256a6b00298980/80256ad8005545498025672800383801!OpenDocument>, 1999). Quotation is from A.D. Shamel, "The Art of Seed Selection and Breeding," in *James L. Reid: The Man and His Corn* (Delavan, IL: Memorial program related to the erection of a historical marker at the Reid family farm, reprinted from *Yearbook of the United States Department of Agriculture*, 1907, page 231-232, 1907, 1955).



This type of yellow dent corn was celebrated at competitive “corn shows” where entrants could win ribbons and trophies. These were not competitions based on visual innovation, but ones in which the ears were expected to strictly conform to regular shapes. Trays of six or ten matched ears, each with two kernels removed for inspection, were displayed for the judges, who scrutinized their proportions (Figure 106). Prize-winning ears tended to be nine and a half to ten and a half inches long, be highly symmetrical, and have eighteen to twenty rows of kernels that filled out both the tips and butts. The kernels on these ears were keystone shaped and plump, with slight dents in their crowns when dried. Approximately 800 kernels grew on each ear. Prize-winning ears were those deemed to be the most beautiful, and they were believed to be the highest yielding. Farmers thus saved them for the next year’s crop, and they competed with each other to buy prize-winning seed stock. Indeed, in 1900 prize-winning ears sold for as much as one hundred and fifty dollars, while a non-distinguished ear was worth only a few cents. Encouraged by these events, farmers scrutinized their ears of corn, and fixated on specific visual norms. A tradition was born.<sup>140</sup>

Through such competitions, James Reid eventually became the undisputed best breeder in the country. While his corn had been successful for decades and already spread throughout much of the Corn Belt, the family’s crowning achievement was winning the prize for best corn at the World’s Columbian Exposition of 1893. Their stock thus came to be colloquially known as “World’s Fair Corn.” With such an endorsement, demand for the seed skyrocketed, and farmers planted it across the US and as far away as Africa, Asia, and South America. The enthusiasm had long-lasting ramifications. Indeed, as late as 1955 there were more accessions of corn varieties

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<sup>140</sup> For the standards required for winning at a corn show, see handbooks from the era, such as: M. L. Bowman, *Corn Growing, Judging, Breeding, Feeding, Marketing* (Waterloo, IA: Waterloo Publishing Company, 1915), P. J. Olson and Ernest Gordon Booth, *Selecting Show Corn in North Dakota* (Fargo: North Dakota Agricultural College, 1931).

derived from Reid's Yellow Dent in the Regional Agricultural Station Seed Inventory than any other openly-pollinated type, as testified to by Max M. Hoover, a Regional Coordinator of the United States Department of Agriculture.<sup>141</sup>

Farmers like those depicted in Wood's *Seed Time and Harvest* had good reason to be keenly aware of these visual traits and be desperate to understand them, aside from the vanity of winning prizes. This is because the visual culture of turn-of-the-century farming was like nineteenth-century banking—thriving, idiosyncratic, and dangerous. Numerous small breeders and banks were founded, and they produced a plethora of varieties of corn and banknotes. The public thus strove to differentiate good seed and good money from poor producing plants and fraudulent bills. Strategies for doing this, however, were few. Individuals could do little more than to scrutinize the appearance of seed and bills or to focus on the names of good breeders and bankers. Given the high-stakes of the situations—including potential crop failure or financial ruin—it is understandable why members of the public embraced the seeds and bills that they did.

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The choices available were overwhelming, and good advice about quality was rare. In the case of banknotes, as many as 10,000 different types of bills may have been circulating by 1850, issued by the government, state-sanctioned banks, and counterfeiters. This does not count foreign currencies, which were also on the market. Knowing which bills a person should accept for payment was a tricky task, and even after scrutinizing the notes for correct engraving business

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<sup>141</sup> Hoover's statement is in *James L. Reid Program, Delavan, Ill., September 10, 1955*, (Delavan, IL: Materials in the National Agricultural Library related to the erection of a historical marker at the Reid family farm including letters, news releases, clippings, the program, and reprints of secondary resources, Call Number: 120 R252, 1955), 7.

<sup>142</sup> This information on the banking system is derived from the work of Stephen Mihm, *A Nation of Counterfeiters: Capitalists, Con Men, and the Making of the United States* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007). Quantities of bills are discussed on pages 3 and 6.

owners inevitably accepted forgeries, bills from defunct banks, or bills that had been fraudulently elevated by altering their denomination. It is difficult to measure such clandestine activity, but it is estimated that somewhere between 10% and 50% of banknotes in circulation were counterfeit or had been tampered with during the mid-nineteenth century. Varieties of corn were equally prolific. Some farmers grew giant plants, with stalks that reached sixteen feet or which produced fruit so large that a single ear's kernels could fill a quart jar. *Wallace's Farmer* reproduced an ear from one gigantic variety in 1905, Roseland White Corn from Kimball, Kansas (Figure 107). It filled an entire newspaper page. Other farmers strove for numerous small ears or other distinct traits.<sup>143</sup>

As with money, fraudulent labeling of seed stock was common. While the Reid family's was prize-winning, in a culture in which farmers saved seed and sold seed to neighbors, ensuring quality was a nebulous endeavor. Inferior seed could be passed off as descended from Reid's with little risk of being caught. The great challenge for the farmers, thus, was determining which seed was genuinely high quality and would produce a large crop under that farmer's regionally-specific growing conditions. To differentiate the good from the bad the public enthusiastically embraced authoritative—but deeply flawed—systems. For money, lengthy guides were available, called “counterfeit detectors,” which cataloged good banks and the visual appearance of proper bills. They included high-magnification details of engraving, lists of defunct banks, and information about the colors of ink and paper. Unfortunately, the detectors also served as *de facto* manuals for counterfeit printers.

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<sup>143</sup> A photograph of the large corn ear was published as “Actual size of the great ‘Roseland White Corn,’” *Wallaces' Farmer*, December 22, 1905, page 1538.

The equivalent process for corn was the aforementioned phenomenon of competitive “corn shows,” of which Reid was the grand champion. Often hosted at county fairs or as part of “corn carnivals,” winning ears were assumed to be high yielding. In retrospect this was a workable, but not wonderful, strategy. At the very least, if you purchased a prize-winning ear that had been grown locally, as a farmer you were assured that the variety matured during the growing season available. Taken as a whole, these seem to be precisely the type of dilemmas that the man in Wood’s *Seed Time and Harvest* would internalize. He is aware of how to choose beautiful ears to plant the following year, and he prefers to save seed rather than risk new stock. He thus labors to select his best ears, strings them together and suspends them to prevent animals from stealing his future livelihood.

From this context it is clear why a farmer would care about pretty corn, but why would an artist like Grant Wood? Wood’s interest in the corn makes greatest sense when we understand that Reid’s corn was tied to a myth of artistic acumen. One of the key promoters of Reid’s beautiful corn was the first professor of agronomy in the US, Perry Holden of Iowa State University, then still known as the Iowa State College of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts. Holden had been hired by the college in 1902 with the encouragement of “Uncle” Henry Wallace. Immediately upon starting work at that institution Holden began to engage in the mass-education of farmers. An understanding of the excitement generated by Holden’s appearances is hinted at in primary documents. He described the importance of Reid’s Yellow Dent in 1920, for example, using celebratory language:

It was in a class by itself. It was picturesque, almost classic. The ears, the kernels, even the cobs, possessed a form and shape that might have been given them by some great artist. I was struck by its graceful appearance, by its real beauty.

Whenever it came in competition with other corn it was an easy winner. [...] No other corn shows such evidence of culture and good breeding as Reid's Yellow Dent. I marveled at its [...] lines and curves which ran true to artistic principles. Such a description evokes both a popular and erudite understanding of artistic expression.<sup>144</sup>

By tying this corn to the "picturesque," Holden refers to any subject matter that could be rendered as a pleasing picture. In practice, however, the term usually described landscape painting and photography. The concept was first thoroughly developed by William Gilpin and Uvedale Price in eighteenth-century England to celebrate scenic vantage points that the upper class enjoyed while travelling across the countryside. These views could be sketched or painted to form compositions that had elements derived from both the serenely "beautiful" and the terrifyingly "sublime" traditions of painting. By the late nineteenth century the idea had not only spread to America, but had entered public consciousness through coffee table books like *Picturesque America* and *America's Wonderlands*, which were discussed in chapter one. Holden also describes the corn as "classic," thus evoking the sculptural and architectural traditions of European antiquity and the Renaissance. He has left his description vague, but perhaps was attempting either to evoke columns with fluting like rows of kernels or the language used to describe fine painting.<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> Quotation in Perry G. Holden, "James Reid and His Yellow Dent," in *James L. Reid: The Man and His Corn* (Delavan, IL: Memorial program related to the erection of a historical marker at the Reid family farm, reprinted from *Wallaces' Farmer*, December 24, 1920, 1955), 2-3.

<sup>145</sup> William Gilpin, *Observations Relative Chiefly to Picturesque Beauty*, 8 vols. (London: R. Blamire, 1782–1809), Uvedale Price, *An Essay on the Picturesque, as Compared with the Sublime and the Beautiful; and on the Use of Studying Pictures, for the Purpose of Improving Real Landscape* (London: J. Robson, 1794). The picturesque views of America were in Buel, *America's Wonderlands*, Bryant and Bunce, *Picturesque America*. The idea that "Classic" art of the Renaissance was inherently linear was common during the early twentieth century, and was soon to be synthesized by Heinrich Wölfflin, *Principles of Art History: The Problem of the Development of Style in Later Art*, trans. M. D. Hottinger (New York: Dover, 1915, 1932), especially 18-72.

Continuing with his celebration of James Reid's talent, Holden attributes it to literal artistry. He recalls that upon visiting Reid at home there were "exceedingly clever paintings" on the walls:

"Who painted those pictures?" I asked him.

He did not reply immediately. That was a characteristic of Mr. Reid; he was slow and deliberate.

"Oh," he drawled finally, "I used to try my hand at painting when I was younger. I had a fool idea I would make an artist."

An artist! No wonder the marvelous corn he gave the world was a thing of beauty! It was born of the brain and the skill and the patience and the temperament of an artist.

Corn and fine art are obviously different, and conflating the two metaphorically on Holden's part is a strategy to elevate the status of corn.<sup>146</sup>

Evoking high culture was only one of Holden's techniques to promote the crop. In 1903—only his second year on the job—he used trains to encourage planting Reid's Yellow Dent across the state, making up to seventeen stops per day. Through these trains he encouraged both competitive corn shows and yield tests, which inspired innumerable people to think critically about their crops. In about 1904, for example, Holden gave a sample of prize-winning Reid-style show corn to the teenage Henry Agard Wallace. Holden encouraged the young man to determine its productivity scientifically. Wallace did, and the results were astounding. Although pretty, the show corn yielded poorly. A series of experiments by Wallace on other samples of show corn revealed that, in fact, there is no correlation between the attractiveness of an ear and

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<sup>146</sup> Quotation in Holden, "James Reid and His Yellow Dent," 3.

its yield per acre. Holden's enthusiasm for this corn, and encouragement to research it, had thus led to its downfall.<sup>147</sup>

Intensive study during the following decades—especially the early 1920s—confirmed that there was no correlation between ear aesthetics and yield per acre. Such insights are what led to the activity of the farmer in Wood's print *Seed Time and Harvest* from 1937 to be abandoned. But what can we say about Wood's art that was made a decade earlier—at the moment of transition when beautiful yellow dented inbred ears were the norm, but under heavy attack? We can understand this as a time of cultural anxiety, when the tried-and-true methods of choosing corn had been framed as foolish, and another method had not yet been well-established. Is it relevant that during the years when Wood was working on a series of opulent *Corn Rooms*, 1925-1927, Wallace founded his own business to market the crop—the Hi-Bred Corn Company? Its products, later marketed under the name Pioneer, were claimed to be “Developed—not discovered, made to fit—not found by chance.” I would argue that this was indeed relevant and a significant shift, which should not be dismissed lightly.<sup>148</sup>

The anxiety about corn during the 1920s resulting from Henry Agard Wallace's work can be understood if we look more closely at his conclusions. In 1913, still in college, he had a five-acre test plot for corn, which he used for experiments with inbreeding and hybridization. Inbreeding to bring about a specific trait was accomplished by planting an area of land with the same variety of corn, allowing the pollen to drift freely. Once the ears were ripe, only those from

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<sup>147</sup> For accounts of this early research by Wallace, see Crabb, *Hybrid Corn Makers: Prophets of Plenty*, 143-45, Schapsmeier and Schapsmeier, *Henry A. Wallace of Iowa*, 20, Wallace and Brown, *Corn and Its Early Fathers*, 118-19.

<sup>148</sup> On Wallace's founding of Pioneer and the slogan, see Schapsmeier and Schapsmeier, *Henry A. Wallace of Iowa*, 21, 27-28.

plants that displayed the desirable straight were saved and planted the following year. After several generations, the variety would be noticeably altered. In 1919 Wallace expanded his testing to a 40 acre plot near Des Moines, the place where, by comparing beautiful “grand champions” to ugly “nubbins,” he proved that there is no correlation between beauty and yield (Figure 108). That same year he published research showing that breeding for visual traits, such as erection or height, took only a few generations for superficial change (Figure 109 and Figure 110). By 1923 he had produced a high-yielding, but ugly, hybrid—Copper Cross. The experiments with hybridization depended upon the aforementioned inbred varieties. Pollen could be controlled by planting two varieties in the same plot, in clearly defined rows, and “castrating” one of those varieties by cutting off the tassels. All of the pollen in the area would thus be from the uncastrated variety of corn. When this pollen fertilized the castrated plants, the result is a hybrid ear of corn. When the kernels from that ear are grown into new plants, the result will be a variety that exhibits traits from both of the inbred ones. Copper Cross corn was gnarled and reddish, and when it was entered in the following year’s Iowa Corn Yield Test it won a gold medal. Wallace offered fifteen bushels of it for sale through George Kurtzweil’s Iowa Seed Company in 1924, billing it as “an astonishing product—produces astonishing results.” One might expect this exciting prize-winner to sweep the countryside, being embraced by nearly every farmer. That is not, however, what occurred.<sup>149</sup>

For people accustomed to allowing pollination to occur without human intervention, hybridization could be both disturbing and intriguing, and it was embraced only with caution. In about 1921, when the process was still new enough to be controversial, one US Senator exclaimed to Wallace when learning of these breeding methods, “Oh! You mean you are serving

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<sup>149</sup> Ibid.



as a pimp for the corn tassels.” The potential for hybrids to transform society was also exciting, and connections to other forms of genetic research—such as eugenics—were noticed. This fact led Wallace, in 1939, to participate in a panel discussion at the New York World’s Fair on the Nazi attempts to generate a pure human race of superior intellect and strength. Wallace’s opinion was that such a race could not emerge by simply culling out people—the Nazi strategy. Drawing on his expertise with corn breeding, however, Wallace noted that “pure strains” of humans could likely be isolated through seventeen generations of scientifically-monitored sibling incest—a process requiring approximately 500 years. Because such strains tend to be weak in plants and animals, careful cross-mating from different inbred families would be required to reintroduce the aforementioned vigor. He viewed such a plan as unethical and undesirable for obvious reasons, but noted that increasing strength and intelligence in the US through better nutrition was a major goal of the USDA. Whatever the broader lessons people took away from hybrid corn breeding, this was clearly an era of dynamism in the history of agronomy.<sup>150</sup>

While hybrid varieties eventually became prominent across the Corn Belt, Copper Cross was a failure because of its visual properties. The appearance of Reid’s corn had become so entrenched in the mindset of farmers as the hallmark of good seed that few were willing to plant the strange-looking new Copper Cross variety developed by Wallace. Such a response is not entirely surprising, given that multiple generations of farmers had learned that yellow dent show corn was the best, and children were encouraged to compete along with their parents to inspire an interest in farming. This moment is thus the cusp of a profound transition from inbred corn

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<sup>150</sup> The senator is quoted, but not named, by Wallace and Brown, *Corn and Its Early Fathers*, 15. Quotes on human genetics are from Henry Agard Wallace et al., *The Genetic Basis for Democracy: A Panel Discussion on Race and Race Prejudice* (New York: Transcript published by the American Committee For Democracy and Intellectual Freedom, 1939), 5-6.

saved yearly on the farm to large-scale, institutionalized, scientific, breeding. It is also a moment when Grant Wood created the *Corn Rooms*.<sup>151</sup>

#### 4.6 GRANT WOOD'S *CORN ROOMS*

The *Corn Rooms* are three of Grant Wood's least-interpreted creations, but they are also some of his most innovative. They were designed for the dining areas of three Iowa hotels from 1925 to 1927—the Martin of Sioux City, the Montrose of Cedar Rapids, and the Chieftain of Council Bluffs. These were total environments in which mural panels depicting cornfields filled the walls, lit from *Corn Cob Chandeliers*, below a frieze of lyrics from the *Iowa Corn Song* (Figure 111). Understanding these rooms today is a difficult task because none of them survive intact, but by using photographs in conjunction with salvaged décor we can reconstruct the environments with reasonable clarity. As a subject matter corn is appropriate for dining room adornment, but a deeper logic about farming is also present in these rooms.<sup>152</sup>

Given that the *Corn Rooms* were created after Wallace's first hybrid variety—Copper Cross—was rejected and before later hybrids were accepted, we can understand these rooms,

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<sup>151</sup> Schapsmeier and Schapsmeier, *Henry A. Wallace of Iowa*, 21, 27-28.

<sup>152</sup> Although an extended analysis has not been done by others, the Corn Rooms are mentioned in the scholarly literature. Milosch, ed., *Grant Wood's Studio*, 99-101, Corn, *Grant Wood*, 26-27, Garwood, *Artist in Iowa*, 94, 103, Dennis, *Grant Wood*, 31, 237, DeLong, *When Tillage Begins, Other Arts Follow*, 131-32. Murals were also installed by Wood in the lobby and conference "Pioneer" room of the Hotel Chieftain, and in the coffee shop at the Hotel Montrose. Murals from all three Corn Rooms were salvaged. The Martin Hotel's were removed and restored during the 1980s after thirty years under a layer of wallpaper that had been applied during the 1950s; they are now in the Sioux City Art Center. A mural from the Montrose is now in the collection of the Cedar Rapids Museum of Art, along with a chandelier from the same room. A matching chandelier was in the collection of a commercial gallery, Kiechel Fine Art, in 2009. Much of the secondary literature also mentions a *Corn Room* in a hotel located in Waterloo. I believe that this is a historical error because the hotel is never mentioned by name. I have also found no evidence that Eugene Eppley, the man who commissioned the other three *Corn Rooms*, ever owned a hotel in Waterloo.

historically, as relics of a paradigm shift. The productivity of hybrids was a direct challenge to conventional wisdom, but the merits of this new corn had not yet been accepted across the Corn Belt. Unfortunately, we do not know what Wood thought about the transition to hybrids at this moment, but we can be assured that corn was a controversial topic among the patrons of the hotel that viewed his creation.

Although the *Corn Rooms* can stand alone, the hotel patrons would have had a larger, and more literal, way of understanding the rooms through a tradition of using corn as architectural adornment. This was particularly true of Iowa, where from 1887 to 1891 colorful ears similar to those mentioned above were used in Sioux City as part of a festival in which a Corn Palace was erected annually, covered with ears of corn and bundled grains (Figure 112). Imitations appeared throughout the Midwest, either as stand-alone institutions or in conjunction with festivals. One such institution, in Mitchell, South Dakota, remains active in 2009. Artisans tiled real ears of corn into geometric designs and manipulated them into representational imagery. Decorating with plant matter did not end with the corn palaces, and Wood's room may have re-energized the tradition on a national level. Indeed, just a few months after the *Hotel Monthly* trade journal had published a description of Wood's *Corn Room* at the Montrose, the same periodical featured information about décor for the annual meeting of the Northwestern Hotel Men's Association (Figure 113). Here Walter Pocock adorned the banquet room of the Park Hotel with what a journalist described as "10-feet and taller corn stalks with a wreath of golden ears expressive of a bountiful harvest." Given such examples we can understand corn as a subject that was intrinsically interesting to the populace.<sup>153</sup>

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<sup>153</sup> A scholarly book-length treatment of grain palaces remains to be published in 2009, although Pamela Simpson has been working on such a manuscript. For shorter treatments see Travis E. Nygard and Pamela H. Simpson, "Indians at the Corn Palaces: Race and Reception at Two Midwestern Festival Buildings," *Buildings & Landscapes*:

To begin unpacking the content of the *Corn Rooms* it is useful to examine firsthand accounts of them. One of the best is a description of the Montrose installation that was printed in the *Hotel Monthly* trade journal. It spoke of the room colloquially:

The Iowa Corn room is of and for Iowans. Its four walls carry scenes of fields of luxuriant, tasseled corn, some stalks tall enough to satisfy the most devoted native son. Glowing sunsets in perspective lend added charm to the pleasing motif of decoration. Window drapes are of royal purple velvet, bordered with yellow satin on which are embroidered leaves of corn, in a rich green. The carpet design is squares of green and purple, while lighting fixtures are antique gold finish, harmonizing with sunsets, and yellow borders of the window drapes. Above the fields of corn, as a frieze around the entire room, are the words of the most popular stanza of the Iowa Corn song.

Testimony from a friend of Wood's, Hazel Brown, about how guests responded to the rooms can further enrich our understanding. She noted that the murals "pleased the hotel people very much. As you sat at a table eating, you were sure you were in the middle of a cornfield; you almost felt the crunchy cornstalks under your feet. The men who used the room for meetings loved to tip

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*Journal of the Vernacular Architecture Forum* (forthcoming, 2010), Anastasia Tuttle, *The Mitchell Corn Palace 1892-1939: A Year-by-Year History of the Corn Palace Festival at Mitchell, South Dakota* (Manuscript written for the South Dakota Writers' Project, in the Mitchell Public Library., c. 1939), Travis Nygard, "Oscar Howe and the Metaphorical Monarchy on Maize: Indigenism and Power in the Mitchell Corn Palace Panels, 1948-1971" (MA Paper, University of Pittsburgh, 2005), "A Chronological History of the World's Only Corn Palace," (Mitchell, SD: CPD Distribution, 2001), Cynthia Elyce Rubin, "The Midwestern Corn Palaces: A 'Maize' of Detail and Wonder," *The Clarion* (1983): 24-31, Dorothy Schwieder and Patricia Swanson, "The Sioux City Corn Palaces," *Annals of Iowa* 41, no. 8 (1973): 1209-27, Bruce E. Mahan, "The Blue Grass Palace," *The Palimpsest* 44, no. 12 (1963): 563-71, John Ely Briggs, "The Sioux City Corn Palaces," *The Palimpsest* 44, no. 12 (1963): 549-62, Mitchell Chamber of Commerce, *A Year by Year History Of... The World's Only Corn Palace*, 5th ed. (Mitchell, SD: Educator Supply Company, 1957), Pamela H. Simpson, "Cereal Architecture: Late-Nineteenth-Century Grain Palaces and Crop Art," in *Building Environments: Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture, Volume X*, edited by Kenneth A. Breisch and Alison K. Hoagland, 269-82, (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2005), ———, "Turn-of-the-Century Midwestern Corn Festivals: Kiosks and Crop Art as American Icons." *Arris* 14 (2003): 1-15. Walter Pocock's room is described, and a photograph reproduced, in the article by John Willy, "Northwestern Hotel Association's 24th Annual," *The Hotel Monthly*, November 1926, 34-39.

their chairs back against the wall and make big business of picking off an ear of corn.” She recalled that light came from chandeliers featuring “corn-colored bulbs glowing from the tops of upright ears of corn with pendants of graceful corn leaves.” The pendants she refers to are husks peeled back, which double as bobeches.<sup>154</sup>

These environments were commissioned by the Omaha-based hotel magnate Eugene C. Eppley for the enjoyment of his customers. He was a man who culminated a long line of hotel managers. His father was in the profession, and innkeepers can be found in his ancestry back to the colonial era. Eppley was distinguished within his trade, becoming the Vice President of the Pennsylvania State Hotel Association at age 22 and the President of the Hotel Men’s Mutual Benefit Association of the United States and Canada at age 33. His hotels—owned and operated across the nation—were luxury establishments and points of pride in the communities that contained them. His showpiece was in downtown Pittsburgh—the 1,400-room William Penn acquired in 1928—which remains an active institution in 2009. Although Eppley did not yet own the William Penn when he hired Grant Wood in 1925, at the time he began negotiations with Wood his company was already managing a total of 2,275 rooms.<sup>155</sup>

The hotels that Grant Wood adorned were some of Eppley’s favorites. The Martin Hotel in Sioux City was a six-story establishment that boasted 250 rooms. It was an early acquisition of his in 1915, and it was the headquarters of the Eppley Hotels Company for six years before it

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<sup>154</sup> John Willy, “A Consistently Decorated Dining Room,” *The Hotel Monthly*, January 1926, 66. Brown, *Grant Wood and Marvin Cone*, 58. Portions are also quoted in Milosch, ed., *Grant Wood’s Studio*, 100. Brown, *Grant Wood and Marvin Cone*, 58.

<sup>155</sup> Although it does not discuss Grant Wood’s *Corn Rooms*, an excellent history of Eugene Eppley and his business was written by Harl A. Dalstrom, *Eugene C. Eppley: His Life and Legacy* (Lincoln, NE: Johnsen Publishing, 1969), especially 1-30. The William Penn was purchased from the Pittsburgh Hotels Company in 1928, at which time Eppley expanded it by 600 rooms. Dalstrom, *Eugene C. Eppley*, 15.

relocated to Omaha in 1922. During that time Eppley himself lived on-site to manage it. The 193-room Montrose Hotel in Cedar Rapids was purchased from another hotel magnate, Charles B. Hamilton, four months after the acquisition of the Martin. Eppley soon mounted a large-scale renovation of both properties, which resulted in a local newspaper declaring the Montrose to be “the best asset that Cedar Rapids has today.” The 141-room Hotel Chieftain, erected during 1927 in Council Bluffs, was similar in size and amenities, and it attests to Eppley’s good community relations—the city donated the land to him on which to erect it and \$152,882 to finance the startup.<sup>156</sup>

The *Corn Rooms* were highly-successful strategies for Eppley, who along with Wood was exploiting the region’s fascination with the crop and a desire to increase yields. This was a time of economic instability. The national recession following World War I was extended in the Midwest by an agricultural surplus throughout the 1920s. The surplus caused the price of grain to plummet. With each bushel bringing in less-and-less income, farmers responded by trying to grow more-and-more grain. While this response is logical on the family level—they might then maintain a reasonable standard of living—on a societal level it was a disaster. With ever-more grain on the market prices continued a downward spiral. The economic situation for hotels was also bad at this time. Amidst the recession, not only was travel down, but these institutions had relied on the sale of alcohol to supplement their businesses before prohibition was mandated in 1919. As Eppley himself explained the situation in 1922, “We are doing less than a 1914 business at a much more than a 1914 cost and are out of the bar profits to boot.” He coped with these unfortunate circumstances by making his business more efficient and using innovative

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<sup>156</sup> Quoted in Dalstrom, *Eugene C. Eppley*, 7. The original source is a newspaper clipping from the *Cedar Rapids (IA) Republican*, c. January 1, 1919, in the Eugene Eppley Scrapbooks. On the Chieftain see George Shane, “Bluffs Drive to Restore Wood Mural,” *Des Moines (IA) Register*, July 12, 1959, 8-L.

strategies—such as the *Corn Rooms*—to attract new customers.<sup>157</sup>

What these customers saw were environments that positioned specific varieties of corn in different parts of the room as a way to distinguish the real spaces where humans ate sweet corn from the virtual spaces where corn was raised for cattle. Assuming that all of the ears are ripe, we can understand the plump kernels on the chandeliers as a depiction of the juicy corn that people eat as a vegetable side dish. The corn in the murals, however, with dents in the kernels, is the starchy show corn rarely eaten by people in Iowa, but commonly used as animal feed. (Starchy corn, of which yellow dent is one of many varieties, is nonetheless a prominent part of cuisines outside the Midwest—often used to make grits, hominy, tortillas, polenta, and bread.) Wood's ensembles were then labeled with celebratory song lyrics. While the rooms might, on a superficial level, seem to be nothing more than a mirror of the regional landscape, on a deeper level the context of anxious transformation of the corn economy is crucial. It explains why people, including Wood, might want to dwell on the topic of corn at this time.<sup>158</sup>

The murals installed in the three *Corn Rooms* were all similar, and they affirm the tradition of beautiful show corn. No set of these murals survives in their entirety. Rather, what we have are damaged canvases, removed from their original walls, with large missing portions. Given this reality, an analysis of the three mural sets together provides a more complete glimpse of the phenomenon than looking at what survives of any one individual environment. The mural sets from the Martin and Montrose Hotels have been preserved by the Sioux City Art Center and

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<sup>157</sup> Quoted in Dalstrom, *Eugene C. Eppley*, 13.. The credited source is an article in the company's internal newsletter. Eugene C. Eppley, "Why Hotel Rates Cannot Now Be Further Reduced," *Hospitality*, May 1922, 2-4.

<sup>158</sup> My thoughts on how the space is demarcated in real, virtual, and symbolic ways is derived in part from the treatise by David Summers, *Real Spaces: World Art History and the Rise of Western Modernism* (London: Phaidon Press, 2003).

the Cedar Rapids Museum of Art respectively, and due to their more complete state and accessibility I will rely more heavily on them than on the set from the Chieftain. Unfortunately, the *Corn Room* in the Chieftain Hotel was dispersed when the building was renovated in 1970, and although the Council Bluffs Arts Council has a long-term goal of reuniting the fragments the project is only at the beginning stages in 2009. Beginning with an explanation of how these murals were created for the Martin, came to survive, and ultimately were valued in a museum's collection can reveal both the opportunities and frustrations that these objects provide to art historians.<sup>159</sup>

Wood's quick painting technique required a team effort. Friend and fellow painter Edgar Britton collaborated on the room and signed his name next to Wood's, but his contributions are not differentiable from the better-known artist's. Preparatory work was done by the local house painter Carl Eybers Sr. and his crew. This included gluing canvas to the walls with a mixture of paste and molasses, as well as painting the first layer of color. Eybers Sr. had emigrated to the area from the Netherlands only a few years previously, in 1923, along with his seventeen-year-old son, Carl Eybers Jr.. The latter became Wood's personal assistant for the first day and a half of the project. In this role Eybers Jr. observed that Wood "was certainly clever with his

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<sup>159</sup> On their history and restoration, see Scott Sorensen, "The Mural Rediscovered," in *Grant Wood: A Mural Restored*, ed. Marilyn Laufer (Sioux City, SD: Sioux City Art Center, 1985), 5-9, Bruce Allen Biemann, "The Mural under Conservation," in *Grant Wood: A Mural Restored*, ed. Marilyn Laufer (Sioux City, SD: Sioux City Art Center, 1985), 13-16, Marilyn Laufer, "The Mural and Grant Wood, Artist," in *Grant Wood: A Mural Restored*, ed. Marilyn Laufer (Sioux City, SD: Sioux City Art Center, 1985), 19-25. For the state of the murals from the Chieftain in 2009, see the articles by Michael Morain, "Art Lovers Hope to Save Grant Wood Mural," *Des Moines (IA) Register*, July 12, 2009, available online: <http://www.desmoinesregister.com/article/20090712/ENT01/907120336/1047>, Dane Stickney, "Chasing Grant Wood's Ghost," *Omaha (NE) World Herald*, July 11, 2009, available online: <http://www.omaha.com/article/20090711/NEWS01/707119939/-1/FRONTPAGE>.



hands.”<sup>160</sup>

Eybers Jr.’s personal knowledge is one of the most authoritative sources of information on the rooms. It was recorded during three interviews—two of which took place in 1979 and one in 1983. Eybers explained that he had been chosen to assist Wood because, at age 21, he was the youngest member of the crew hired to renovate portions of the hotel. Their working routine was for Eybers Jr. to apply a transparent glaze that Wood had prepared. The artist then rendered the scenes with an unusual subtractive method. He used brushes and cloths to “erase” a design, and as the layers built up they provided the illusion of texture and depth. Thus emerged cornstalks, barns, farm houses, and the contours of the land. Details were filled in at the end of this process with traditional, additive, brushwork. As Eybers Jr. observed, Wood “used his thumb with a rag, most of the time, and a dry brush. You know, he would just give a few swipes on this glaze that I had coated in and then there was a rabbit sitting there, or he’d fire a few streaks up and down, take a dry brush, and he had a cornstalk.” Eybers Jr. was so impressed with Wood that he remarked that he “was fantastic, really. In all the years that I have been painting, I think that was the most interesting experience that I had.” Upon informing his father of Wood’s techniques, Eybers Sr. replied “You’re going to be sick tomorrow. I want to see how he does that.” This man became equally intrigued by Wood, and he assisted the artist for the remainder of the project—the better part of two weeks.<sup>161</sup>

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<sup>160</sup> Quotation is on page one of an interview with Carl Eybers Jr. conducted by Scott Sorensen on March 20, 1979 in Sioux City, Iowa, transcribed by Evelyn Davis, as part of the Siouxland Oral History Program. One copy is in the Grant Wood Corn Room curatorial folder of the Sioux City Art Center. This was the follow-up of an interview conducted by Leah Hartman on January 30, 1979, also as part of the Siouxland Oral History Program.

<sup>161</sup> First Quotation is in an interview with Carl Eybers Jr. conducted by Scott Sorensen on March 20, 1979 in Sioux City, Iowa, transcribed by Evelyn Davis, as part of the Siouxland Oral History Program, page 1. One copy of the interview is in the Grant Wood Corn Room curatorial folder of the Sioux City Art Center. This was the follow-up of an interview conducted by Leah Hartman on January 30, 1979, also as part of the Siouxland Oral History Program.

The interviews with Carl Eybers Jr. inspired investigation of the Martin Hotel, which had devolved into a mostly-empty low-income apartment complex. Using primary documentation from the local newspaper, the Sioux City Art Center Director, Bruce Bienemann, and Sioux City Museum Director, Bill Diamond, were able to determine that a “corn room” in the building, still so-named, was in fact Wood’s *Corn Room*. The significance of the space had been long forgotten—the chandelier removed and the murals covered with paint and wallpaper. Bienemann and Diamond were able to lift a section of paper, revealing Wood’s and Britten’s signatures. Having located the treasure, the process to salvage them began. The building was acquired by Tower Properties, Limited in 1983, which gave the murals to Sioux City. What was able to be rescued are two large panels, measuring six and a half by thirteen and a half feet which came from the south and east walls; two smaller panels, measuring six and a half by four feet and six and a half by five feet which came from the southeast and southwest corners of the room; and four six and a half by two foot sections that bordered windows on the west wall (Figure 114). An additional panel had been destroyed years earlier when the hotel management cut an archway into the north wall—unaware of the hidden art. A few scraps of this destroyed panel were found near the ceiling—with only background pigment remaining—and they were used to repair holes

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The second and third quotes are in Sorensen, “The Mural Rediscovered,” 6-7. They are referenced as being from the interview with Harman. The last quotation is from an interview with Carl Eybers Jr. conducted by Scott Sorensen on February 2, 1983 in Sioux City, Iowa, transcribed by Nan Bennett, as part of the Siouxland Oral History Program. One copy is in copy in the Grant Wood Corn Room curatorial folder of the Sioux City Art Center. Edgar Britton’s early career was as a muralist, during which time he was involved with New Deal initiatives. He served as mural director for the Federal Art Project’s Illinois Art Project, and he painted murals funded by the Works Progress Administration at the Chicago Heights High School and Deerfield Shields High School of Chicago, as well the post office of Waterloo, Iowa. During the mid-1940s he moved to Colorado, where he is remembered primarily for producing erotic drawings, paintings, and sculpture—primarily female nudes rendered in styles similar to those of Matisse, Picasso, and Brancusi. The definitive study of Britton’s career is based on interviews and materials held by family and friends, written by Jane Hilberry, *The Erotic Art of Edgar Britton* (Exhibition catalog from the Coburn Gallery, Colorado College, 2001). On his apprenticeship with Grant Wood, see pages 31-36.

in the remaining eight panels. After stabilization, minor restoration of pigment, repairs of missing canvas, and remounting by the Upper Midwest Conservation Association located at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, the murals were installed in the Sioux City Art Center. The result of this restoration is remarkable—tears being difficult to see.<sup>162</sup>

As the most complete *Corn Room* cycle, the Martin Hotel murals can provide a reasonable inventory of their subject matter. Collectively the details in the murals evoke a small-scale diversified farm with both cash crops and livestock, managed by a handful of people—a sharp contrast to the photographic panoramas of bonanza farms discussed in chapter one. A farm house with adjacent barn and silo is near the horizon in two places; a sign that forbids “Shootin’” is near the picture plane; a few large corn plants spring up in the viewer’s space with the ears still attached; and shocks of corn dot the fields (Figure 115, Figure 116, and Figure 117). By using a combination of yellows, browns, blues, and greens Wood gave the impression that this field was

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<sup>162</sup> Newspaper coverage provides the best access to this story, including: Nick Baldwin, “Wallpaper Hid Grant Wood Mural,” *Register* 1983, photocopy in the Grant Wood Corn Room curatorial folder of the Sioux City Art Center, Dave Dreeszen, “\$80,000 Bid Keeps Mural ‘Home’,” *Sioux City (IA) Journal*, April 14, 1995, A1, A10, ———, “Art Center May Display Wood Mural,” *Sioux City (IA) Journal*, February 12, 1997, photocopy in the Grant Wood Corn Room curatorial folder of the Sioux City Art Center, ———, “New Owner Looking for Home for Mural: Grant Wood Mural Apparently Too Large for New Art Center,” *Sioux City (IA) Journal*, May 6, 1995, A1, A16, ———, “New Owner Looking for Home for Mural: Grant Wood Mural Apparently Too Large for New Art Center,” *Sioux City (IA) Journal*, October 11, 1997, photocopy in the Grant Wood Corn Room curatorial folder of the Sioux City Art Center, ———, “Giant Grant Wood Mural May Have to Leave City,” *Sioux City (IA) Journal*, November 2, 1996, photocopy in the Grant Wood Corn Room curatorial folder of the Sioux City Art Center, Judi Hazlett, “Wood Mural Stays in Sioux City,” *Sioux City (IA) Journal*, September 11, 1997, photocopy in the Grant Wood Corn Room curatorial folder of the Sioux City Art Center, Michele Linck, “Art Center Makes Glowing Debut,” *Sioux City (IA) Journal*, March 7, 1997, A1, A14, Kathy Massey, “Grant Wood Mural Draws Hundreds,” *Sioux City (IA) Journal* 1991, photocopy in the Grant Wood Corn Room curatorial folder of the Sioux City Art Center, ———, “Grant Wood Mural Will Go on Display,” *Sioux City (IA) Journal* c1991, photocopy in the Grant Wood Corn Room curatorial folder of the Sioux City Art Center, Laurie Niles, “Iowan’s Works in the Picture Once Again,” *Omaha (NE) World Herald* c.1991, 1, 6, photocopy in the Grant Wood Corn Room curatorial folder of the Sioux City Art Center, ———, “Wood’s Corn Room Opens Fields of Art Collecting for Attorney,” *Omaha (NE) World Herald* c.1991, photocopy in the Grant Wood Corn Room curatorial folder of the Sioux City Art Center, Rainbow Rowell, “Lawyer Stuck with Grant Wood Mural He Saved for Sioux City,” *Omaha (NE) World Herald*, November 11 1996, 1, 11.

dry and bathed in the golden light of sunset. Indeed, the entire work is rendered with the mellow palette of Autumn. A crisper set of mural panels survives from the Montrose of Cedar Rapids—having avoided the abuse of being painted over (Figure 118). Here it is clear that Wood used some high-contrast greens and blacks against the golden background to make the corn seem vibrant. Details of the Martin murals suggest a similar treatment, obscured through the pigment loss and a varnish that yellowed. At the Chieftain, most likely the last location to have a room completed, Wood added one more innovation—a chair rail of rough-cut wood that doubled as part of a fence (Figure 119).

A possible source of inspiration for this imagery is a drawing printed on the sheet music for the “Iowa Corn Song” from 1921 (Figure 120). Both depict a corn field at harvest time with stalks shocked at regular intervals. To add depth a few plants are placed on the edges of the picture plane, much larger than the others, with leaves or tassels curving across the top and bottom of the composition. The result is an implied frame. Buildings are confined to the horizon line, where they are silhouetted on the score and vaguely rendered by Wood. Sunset is indicated by golden tones in the murals and by lines radiating from the horizon in the drawing. Looking closely at the ears of corn on the score for the *Iowa Corn Song* reveals that keen attention was paid to anatomical detail. Rather than crosshatching a mass of vaguely-defined kernels, each seed was rendered fully. A slight impression can even be seen on the ends of them. As discussed above, this “dent” is a hallmark of the most common varieties of yellow field corn, from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>163</sup>

Light in the *Corn Rooms* emanated from *Corncob Chandeliers* that can be seen in period

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<sup>163</sup> Ray W. Lockard, George Hamilton, and Edward Riley, *Iowa Corn Song* (Jerome H Remnick and Company, sheet music available online in the Archive of Popular American Music at the University of California, Los Angeles, <http://digital.library.ucla.edu/apam/librarian?ITEMID=SUO003046>, 1921).

photographs (Figure 121). The whereabouts of two of these chandeliers are known, and by looking at the shape and composition we can see that they are an integrated part of the visual program (Figure 122**Error! Reference source not found.**). These fixtures show sweet corn—underscoring Wood’s complex understand of the plant—and thus mark the corn-themed dining rooms as places for humans to eat. The kernels on these ears, consumed fresh from the plant without drying, are mostly filled with water and sugar. When allowed to dry for seed, the lack of a firm starchy mass inside causes them to collapse entirely into shriveled nubs on the cobs. The light fixtures are derived from a form of lighting that dates to at least as early as the fifteenth century in Europe—a circular arrangement of candles at the ends of curving, foliated, metal arms. (A good example of such a light fixture is in Jan van Eyck’s oil painting *The Arnolfini Wedding* from 1434.) The “antique gold finish” of these chandeliers, described in the *Hotel Monthly*, was later obscured by paint, but one of the chandeliers has been restored with new gold leaf. The profile of the chandeliers is traditional, but each individual part doubles as corn anatomy. A supporting central bar and arms form the stalks, made from copper or brass sheeting and tubing. Pieces of metal are attached to the stalks to form foliage. Eight life-size ears made from cast iron are located at the ends. These ears double as candles, with light sockets embedded in the tips. Four smaller ears adorn the central stem. All of these twelve ears are perfectly symmetrical, and each kernel is plump. An informed viewer would understand that this is corn for human consumption, of the type that would likely win in a competition for the best vegetables. Indeed, the golden finish evokes the visual form of trophies awarded at farm shows, an example of which—sponsored by the Wallace family—was published in their newspaper on January 27, 1905 (Figure 123).<sup>164</sup>

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<sup>164</sup> The current whereabouts of chandeliers from the Martin’s room are unknown, but two fixtures from the Montrose

The murals and chandeliers were labeled with a frieze of words from the aforementioned “Iowa Corn Song,” written in gothic capital letters. Unfortunately only one of the three friezes survives—obscured by a false ceiling in the former Hotel Chieftain. As a song about corn generally, it served to bridge the real and virtual spaces. Already by the time that Wood was designing these rooms the song had become a cultural phenomenon, and it emerged from the work of many people. The initial version of the song was written by George Hamilton in 1912, set to the music of Edward Riley. The chorus was borrowed from the song *Travelling* by George Botsford, and additional verses were added by Ray W. Lockard—all before the first sheet music was published in 1921. Since that time the song continued to evolve, with improvised lyrics being common. The song begins with the words that Wood quoted:

We’re from I-o-way, I-o-way,

State of all the land,

Joy on every hand,

We’re from I-o-way, I-o-way,

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survive. It is unclear whether the Chieftain’s room also contained these unusual light fixtures. The forging of these light fixtures, which were designed by Grant Wood, was probably completed with the assistance of George Keeler. One of the Montrose chandeliers is now in the Cedar Rapids Museum of Art (CRMOA), and it was published in the catalog by Milosch, ed., *Grant Wood’s Studio*, 100-01. The other Montrose chandelier was in the collection of a commercial gallery in 2009, Kiechel Fine Art (KFA) of Lincoln, Nebraska. The KFA example was listed on the gallery’s website during the summer of 2009 at the following URL:

<http://www.kiechelart.com/title.php?titlenum=8560&artistId=7354> Given the description from the *Hotel Monthly*, it is clear that the chandeliers were originally displayed with a metallic surface, such as gold leaf. However, at some point the chandeliers were covered in green, brown, and yellow paint. This paint remains on the chandelier in the CRMOA in 2009, and it was removed and replaced with gold leaf on the chandelier in KFA. The CRMOA example was conserved in 2005 by the Upper Midwest Conservation Association at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, informed by the results of analysis by Materials Evaluation and Engineering, Inc. of Plymouth, Minnesota undertaken in 2004. The conservation report is in the object file at the CRMOA, folder labeled Corn Room Chandelier 81.17.3. The KFA example was treated by Midwest Conservation Services in 2003. The conservation report was in the possession of KFA in 2009. For the long history of chandeliers see the work of Kerri McCaffety, *The Chandelier through the Centuries: A History of Great European Styles* (New Orleans, LA: Savoy House in association with Vissi d’Arte Books, 2006).

That's where the tall corn grows.

The next stanza continues the corn theme, with lyrics that were not on the walls that Wood designed:

Our land is full of ripe-ning corn ...

We've watched it grow both night and morn.

Prompted with such words one can imagine patrons of the hotel humming the tune while admiring their surroundings.<sup>165</sup>

With this visual inventory of the *Corn Rooms* in mind, it is tempting to think of the environments as having little to do with the introduction of hybrid corn. After all, Wood does not depict fields of castrated plants or ears of ugly Copper Cross. As Wood's audience gazed at the yellow dent show corn that he so carefully painted around the edges of his murals we might envision viewers feeling comfortable with the crops that they have planted for over a generation, their minds never once wandering to the newer science of hybridization that the Wallace family was enthralled with.

We should not, however, divorce Wood's imagery from its historical context so quickly. Even if fundamentally looking to the past, such visual material is part of the cultural logic of its era—to use Frederic Jameson's terms—and for many viewers at this point in time the images of yellow dent corn would have implied urgent questions about the future of farming. Indeed, during times of change, with paradigm shifts on the horizon, people often become ever-more defensive of their outmoded beliefs and practices—a point well-made by Thomas Kuhn. On one

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<sup>165</sup> The portion of the lyrics that we know were reproduced, as they appear in a photograph of the Montrose Hotel in Cedar Rapids, are quoted in Milosch, ed., *Grant Wood's Studio*, 100. Additional lyrics can be found in Lockard, Hamilton, and Riley, *Iowa Corn Song*. For the legacy of this song, see Tom Longden, "Famous Iowans: George Hamilton," *The Des Moines (IA) Register*, December 4, 2005, available online: <http://www.desmoinesregister.com/article/99999999/FAMOUSIOWANS/512040331>.

level Wood's imagery could be thought of as illuminating the impulses of those farmers who became entrenched in the outmoded logic of planting beautiful ears. Expanding the analysis to include a wider historical framework, including the legacy of yellow dent corn and the story of how hybrids came to be accepted by farmers, we can understand the imagery here as more complicated. Whether Wood intended it or not, his images would continue to resonate with the aesthetics of corn far into the future. Indeed, as hybrid breeders recognized that convincing farmers to plant their new varieties of corn was as much a visual problem as a scientific one, they began to modify the appearance of their wares, conforming them to the aesthetic norms of the past.<sup>166</sup>

#### **4.7 IMITATION IN HYBRID CORN AESTHETICS**

Faced with the institutional structure supporting beautiful corn and a critical mass of farmers committed to perpetuating it posed a dilemma for hybrid corn breeders. Breeders knew that hybrids had the potential to increase production and profit for some farmers, but they lacked both the visual and practical infrastructure to put them into place. The problem of a visual infrastructure was solved by co-opting the aesthetics of inbreds. Specifically, with the rejection of ugly Copper Cross hybrid corn fresh in their memory, Wallace and other hybrid corn breeders responded by incorporating genes from Reid's and Reid-like ears into their offerings to manipulate the appearance of crops, and this form survives to the present day. Indeed, if we compare an ear of hybrid yellow corn that was grown during the early twenty first century with a

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<sup>166</sup> Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991).



prize-winning ear of show corn from the early twentieth they appear remarkably similar (Figure 124 and Figure 125)

Imitation of the ear shape, however, was only the first step in making hybrids truly attractive. Perhaps even more important, hybrids had a feature that Wood fixated on in his print *Fertility*—a more predictable plant shape. A single, uniform, ear that grew at a predictable height was efficient to mechanically pick and process and easy to dry. While many of Reid’s ears were beautiful, the inbred plants were less regular than hybrids. Some had more than one ear per stalk, some had smaller or larger ears, and some grew at higher or lower heights than others. Indeed, it is plant uniformity that was the hallmark of hybridization and the key fact emphasized in Wood’s print. The appeal of hybrids for wealthy farmers that could afford to invest in newly-developed techniques of mechanical harvesting, fertilization, and irrigation therefore makes sense. Hybrids are most appropriate for those farmers with fertile land, ample water, and a scientific education—the profile of many farmers who had attended Iowa State College. Farmers who cultivated marginal land, who were illiterate, or who facing drought would only waste scarce resources by investing in hybrids, as each of these other factors is a bottle neck preventing plants from thriving.<sup>167</sup>

Returning to the use of machinery, it is important to note that any given device has limitations unique to its design. It would be difficult to design an apparatus—even with adjustable parts—that is capable of processing all of the shapes and sizes of corn plants. Consider the types of pickers that might be needed to snap off the ears from plants that bear their fruit close to the stalk. Then consider those that might be needed for nineteenth-century “Chinese tree corn”—a variety of unknown origin that was grown in the US. This corn, now extinct, had

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<sup>167</sup> On the usefulness of uniformity for machine harvesting see Jugenheimer, *James L. Reid and His Corn*, 4.

shanks so long that they looked like branches, with the ears extended far from the stalk. A different set of problems might arise from “Guinea corn,” also grown in the US at this time. This corn probably originated in the Caribbean, was transported to Africa, and was then brought back across the Atlantic to the US. Rather than bearing a single large ear per plant, it had as many as ten small ones at many heights. Would a mechanism designed for husking and shelling larger ears work just as well on these small ones? It is unlikely.<sup>168</sup>

This desire for mechanized harvesting equipment was growing at the turn of the century, with the advent of affordable pickers and binders, and it was crescendoing during the 1920s and 1930s with advances in combine harvesting. Understanding this requires acknowledging that farm machinery was developed in stages, beginning in the early nineteenth century. Experiments with mechanical corn pickers began in 1820, but it took until 1850 for Edmund W. Quincy of Peoria, Illinois to patent a successful model. In Quincy’s device, stalks passed between rollers studded with wooden pegs, resulting in the ears being torn off and dropped onto a conveyor belt. Also in 1820, a device for shelling corn was developed in England, which required cranking by hand for power. A motorized shelling machine was soon patented in 1843 by F.N. Smith of Kinderhook, New York. A device for mechanical husking was patented in 1837. The first corn “binder”—a device to cut stalks and tie them together into bunches—was patented in 1892 by A.S. Peck of Geneva, Illinois. A combine harvester—the “Eclipse Maize Reaper Thresher”—was developed in Australia in 1921 by George Iland of Toowoomba, Queensland. Nine years later, in 1930, a corn combine became available in North America—The Baldwin Gleaner. With such practical, mechanical, reasons for adopting hybridization, why would aesthetics be a compelling enough factor to stop their immediate adoption? To answer that question we should

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<sup>168</sup> On Chinese Tree Corn and Guinea Corn, see Wallace and Brown, *Corn and Its Early Fathers*, 122-24.

return our attention to the visual material.<sup>169</sup>

One's initial reaction to hybrids imitating inbreds might be that this there is something deceptive about their appearance. After all, they are out of step with the values that they purport to embody. Rather than being developed solely for ease of harvesting, good nutritional properties, high yield per acre, or significant resistance to pests and drought the corn was being bred, in part, to bolster debunked beliefs about the merits of beautiful corn. Art historians note that when an object's visual properties do not match the spirit of the age in which it was created it will likely be viewed as an unremarkable historical replica or a deceptive forgery. A different system of values seems to have been in place for farmers. In this instance the visual form of corn seems to have become ever-more important, even though it was anachronistic. Such a response makes sense if we think about the role of institutions in society. As the founder of institutional economics, Thorstein Veblen, explained, institutions are inherently conservative. Although Veblen is best-remembered by art historians for his concept of "conspicuous consumption" from the book *The Theory of the Leisure Class* published in 1899, his significance is much greater. Indeed, Veblen pioneered a sociological approach to analyzing the economy, which focused on institutions, traditions, and habits rather than abstract principles and mathematical models. He noted that institutions change slowly, and that they serve to stabilize society. As such, they become the sources of traditions, and their long-term success depends on people accepting those traditions as valid.<sup>170</sup>

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<sup>169</sup> For a history of technologies developed to harvest and process corn on the farm, see the work of Graeme R. Quick and Wesley F. Buchele, *The Grain Harvesters* (St. Joseph, MI: American Society of Agricultural Engineers, 1978), 207-32.

<sup>170</sup> Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study in the Evolution of Institutions* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1899). For a good overview of Veblen's thinking and the scholarly literature on

While reading for pleasure as an undergraduate, Henry Agard Wallace happened upon Veblen's ideas, which informed his thinking for a lifetime. In addition to the aforementioned book, Wallace read *The Theory of Business Enterprise* from 1904, *Imperial Germany and the Industrial Revolution* from 1915, and *The Nature of Peace* from 1917. The two men became acquaintances when they met at a Midland Economists' meeting, and they enjoyed each others' company. Wallace later encouraged his father to invite Veblen to the National Agricultural Conference of 1922, but the plan fell through. Nonetheless, Wallace came to understand society as controlled by its institutions. The logical result of this worldview was to create hybrid corn that conformed visually to the expectations of farmers who valued the institution of corn shows, and to also enhance the new product with positive traits. Although yellow color with attractive denting had no practical purpose, making new corn appear superficially the same as the old proved to be a smart move. Reid's corn stayed popular among a faction of farmers uninterested in planting hybrids. Indeed, as late as 1930 in the Corn Belt, 75% of the corn seeded was inbred and descended from Reid family stock. But by co-opting the visual form of Reid's seed, in conjunction with a propaganda campaign, hybrids have come to dominate Midwestern agribusiness.<sup>171</sup>

Understanding propaganda to support hybridization requires thinking about the specific

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him, see the book by Ken McCormick, *Veblen in Plain English: A Complete Introduction to Thorstein Veblen's Economics* (Youngstown, NY: Cambria Press, 2006).

<sup>171</sup> On Henry Agard Wallace's interest in Veblen, see Lord, *The Wallaces of Iowa*, 189, Henry Agard Wallace, *Democracy Reborn*, ed. Russell Lord (New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1944), 98, 132, Schapsmeier and Schapsmeier, *Henry A. Wallace of Iowa*, 32-34, 40, 63, 125. The books Wallace read are: Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study in the Evolution of Institutions*, Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of Business Enterprise* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1904), ———, *Imperial Germany and the Industrial Revolution* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1915), ———, *An Inquiry into the Nature of Peace and the Terms of Its Perpetuation* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1917).

technique Wallace employed. While I described the simplest form of hybridization above, what Wallace ultimately came to market were more complicated varieties developed by “double crossing.” The rationale for double cross hybridization is to incorporate positive traits from four inbred lines into a final crop, and also to introduce “hybrid vigor.” Although this vigor was poorly understood at the time, it was noticed by one of the earliest people to hybridize corn—Charles Darwin. He noted that applying the pollen of one inbred strain to the silks of another produced offspring that grew taller than either of the parents. This is in sharp contrast to uncontrolled mating, in which corn tends to produce multicolored ears in a variety of shapes. Hybridization, then, was a way to achieve tight control of the crop. This was then explained to the public with family-tree diagrams published in the USDA’s *Yearbooks of Agriculture*, publications from university extension offices, and the agricultural newspapers (Figure 126). Although the ultimate goal was usually consistent and medium-sized ears of corn, these diagrams emphasized corn growing ever-larger with each generation. Four smallish and irregular ears mated, producing medium-sided descendants. These in turn reproduced, resulting in a large, symmetrical, ear. The imagery of hybridization thus exploited an intuitive belief that bigger corn is better corn—established since the late nineteenth century through trick photography and documentation of record-breaking corn on post cards (Figure 127 and Figure 128). Making medium-sized hybrids was accomplished by using smallish varieties as grandparents—not the huge ears mentioned above. While the family tree diagrams that were so widely-disseminated are scientifically accurate, in retrospect it is a conspicuous omission that they failed to visually emphasize that the goal was to produce medium-sized ears.<sup>172</sup>

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<sup>172</sup> Nearly every book or article about hybrid corn breeding contains these family tree diagrams. For a business example see Pioneer Hi-Bred Corn Co., *Up-to-Date Glance at Modern Corn Breeding Methods* (Des Moines: Pioneer Seed Corn, 1940s). A standard textbook that was used during to teach college students about corn,

In terms of infrastructure, hybridization went hand-in-hand with a vision for American farming that was resource-intensive. Given that lack of nutrients or water could prevent a farmer from benefiting from these new varieties, and that many farms were, indeed, both nutrient and water-deprived, required drastic measures. Bolstering both fertilization and irrigation through bold projects was the agreed-upon solution. This is perhaps nowhere better-expressed visually than on the cover of the Yearbook of Agriculture from 1940, titled *Farmers in a Changing World* (Figure 129). This 1,215 page volume, created under the auspices of Wallace but published after the end of his term, features a photograph wrapping from front to back. It shows two men on a small farm—complete with a traditional barn, silo, and farmhouse. One of the men, clad in overalls, is presumably the owner of the property and the other, clad in a dress shirt, may be a County Extension Service agent—a federal outreach program. Together they scrutinize an aerial photograph of the property—a visual form used for manifold purposes since the first camera was carried on a balloon over Paris in 1858 by Gaspar Felix Tournachon—while pointing to a creek or drainage ditch. Whatever this staged conversation might convey, it is almost certainly about water. Too much or too little of this resource is a detriment to any farmer, and the photograph is a new tool to cope with this reality. Within the wholesome setting of this family’s farm, such an intervention is unsubtle propaganda for embracing new techniques to maximize farm output.<sup>173</sup>

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including hybridization, was by Henry Agard Wallace et al., *Corn and Corn Growing*, 5th ed. (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1949).

<sup>173</sup> Gove Hambridge, ed., *Farmers in a Changing World*, Yearbook of Agriculture (Washington DC: United States Department of Agriculture under the direction of Henry Agard Wallace and the Government Printing Office, 1940). For information on Wallace’s enthusiasm for irrigation, see the work of Lowitt and Fabry, eds., *Henry A. Wallace’s Irrigation Frontier*.

## 4.8 CONCLUSION

Bringing the story full circle by returning to Wallace's portrait for the *Time Magazine* cover, it is clear that Grant Wood has flattered the man (Figure 86). Comparing the painting with the photograph it is based on shows that Wood smoothed his skin and straightening the edge of his hair (Figure 87). Wood also seems to want us to take the image seriously, given that he chose to base it on a photograph with a solemn facial expression and eyes that directly confront the viewer. This sympathetic depiction of Wood's friend, when viewed in light of the history outlined above, makes sense to pair with an approaching storm. Although the exact meaning of Wallace's portrait is ambiguous, the anachronistic elements in the background convey that this is a man who has already established his legacy. Indeed, he both created and alleviated tumultuousness in the agricultural economy. He could be framed as the solution to past trouble—the Secretary of Agriculture in charge of fixing a rural economy that had suffered severe recession since the 1920s. Or he might be framed as the storm itself—a breeder who changed the face of agriculture.

The Wallaces were involved in farming for decades, and their ideas ultimately triumphed. Wood's *Time Magazine* cover even has a legacy that leads us to the future. On September 30, 1946 *Time* ran another cover featuring Wallace (Figure 130). It was based on the earlier design, although Wood, having died four years previously, was not the artist. In this one the back and middlegrounds are different. Wood's rectilinear clouds have been replaced by hazy gray wisps of fog. The farmer from Wood's design has been replaced with a crystal ball. Inside this orb is a new era for food—apples, pears, grapes, and milk before a brilliant blue sky. As we examine what that future brought in actuality, we continue to see a social struggle. The future was good for people invested in hybrid corn. Henry Agard Wallace was not involved with the day to day

operations of the company he founded, Pioneer, after becoming Secretary of Agriculture in 1933, but he remained in close contact with scientists and business leaders there. Hybrids became ever more prevalent, and Pioneer became an agricultural powerhouse—the largest seed company in the world during the late twentieth century.<sup>174</sup>

The future of Mandan agriculture after 1946, however, was bleak. That year the Army Corps of Engineers, as authorized by the US Congress, began to dam the Missouri River—the rationale being to use the water for irrigation and other purposes across the upper Midwest. The banks of this river, which ran through the reservation owned jointly by the Mandan, Arikara, and Hidatsa peoples, were farmlands where the corn-growing depicted by Clell Gannon historically took place. This is also where Native people had continued to farm—using a mixture of new techniques and traditional ones. When completed in 1956, one of the dams that was part of the project—the Garrison—flooded 152,360 acres of tribal land, which included 94% of the area suitable for agriculture. The tribe was compensated by Congress with \$12,605,225—a value amounting to 57% of the appraised damages sustained. In 2009 the tribe’s official history of the dam explains that their “way-of-life was almost totally destroyed,” through this irresponsible resource management. The land remains submerged during the early twenty-first century beneath

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<sup>174</sup> On the success of Pioneer, which in 2009 is a subsidiary of DuPont, see the essay and time line: “Pioneer Hi-Bred International, Inc.,” in *International Directory of Company Histories* (Farmington Hills: St. James Press. Reproduced in Business and Company Resource Center, Gale Group. <http://galenet.galegroup.com/servlet/BCRC>, 2001), Document Number I2501306484, “Pioneer Hi-Bred International, Inc.,” in *Notable Corporate Chronologies* (Farmington Hills: Gale Group. Reproduced in Business and Company Resource Center. <http://galenet.galegroup.com/servlet/BCRC>, 2003), Document Number: I2501151360. For information on Henry Agard Wallace’s involvement with Pioneer over the course of his life, see the work of Culver and Hyde, *American Dreamer*, 82, 90, 110, 47-49, 88, 312, 82, 471, 518-20, 26.



Lake Sakakawea—the third largest artificial reservoir in the US—which continues to be used for irrigation.<sup>175</sup>

The Will family's Pioneer Brand Seed House that had both celebrated Mandan farming with academic research and historical paintings, while simultaneously denigrating the Native tradition by associating it with small multicolored corn ears, continued to exist until the late 1950s. To thrive in the latter era, the family eventually incorporated corn hybrids into their catalog offerings, alongside more traditional inbred yellow dents and colorful heirloom varieties with names like "Bloody Butcher" and "Rainbow." Henry Agard Wallace noted at about this time—1956—that most such varieties had become "forgotten" or were "fast disappearing." Although in many ways responsible for the shift to hybrids, he came to mourn these older types of corn. Noting that "they will have some one little thing which suddenly our hybrid corn will have to have," he took some comfort in the fact that a minority of farmers were keeping the diversity of corn seed alive. Such "special collections of freak corn, kept as curiosities" as well as the varieties grown by "ultra-conservative farmers in out-of-the-way places" such as the "Po Valley in Italy, the highlands of Bolivia or the lowlands of Mexico" will be the "useful germ plasm of the future."<sup>176</sup>

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<sup>175</sup> A modest financial settlement of \$12,605,625 was reached with the federal government in 1949—about \$9,000,000 less than the \$21,981,000 appraised damages that the tribe sustained. On the erection of the Garrison Dam and subsequent flooding of farmlands held by the Three Affiliated Tribes of the Mandan, Arikara, and Hidatsa people, see the work of Michael L. Lawson, *Dammed Indians: The Pick-Sloan Plan and the Missouri River Sioux, 1944-1980* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1982), 27, 59-61, 84, Roy Willard Meyer, "The Garrison Dam," in *The Village Indians of the Upper Missouri: The Mandans, Hidatsas, and Arikaras* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1977), 211-34. For the perspective of the tribes themselves, see the statement by the Hidatsa, Mandan, and Arikara Nation, *Garrison Dam* (New Town, ND: Historical essay published by the Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara Nation available online in 2009 at [http://www.mhanation.com/main/history/history\\_garrison\\_dam.html](http://www.mhanation.com/main/history/history_garrison_dam.html)).

<sup>176</sup> Quotations are from Wallace and Brown, *Corn and Its Early Fathers*, 132.

Although many types of corn do survive in the twenty-first century, few seed houses offer a large assortment of antiquated varieties. Rather, the story of corn breeding has continued to be one of consolidation and standardization. When George F. Will retired, his children did not want to continue running the business. The assets were liquidated by auction in 1959, and the family's trademarked Pioneer Brand proved to be the most valuable. The family sold it to the company founded by the Wallaces, Pioneer Hi-Bred, which had already been using similar words for three decades to market their hybrid corn. Coming to terms more fully with this era—the 1950s—is the goal of chapter four, which examines the work of economists who integrated the story of food from seed to dinner plate.<sup>177</sup>

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<sup>177</sup> On the legacy of the Pioneer Brand, see the essay by Will and Will, "Seed Corn to Shelterbelts: Will's Pioneer Brand Helped Settle the Northern Plains – and Remains a Popular Ephemera Collectible," available online at: <http://www.farmcollector.com/articles/miscellaneous/seed-corn-to-shelterbelts-2005-04-22.html>.

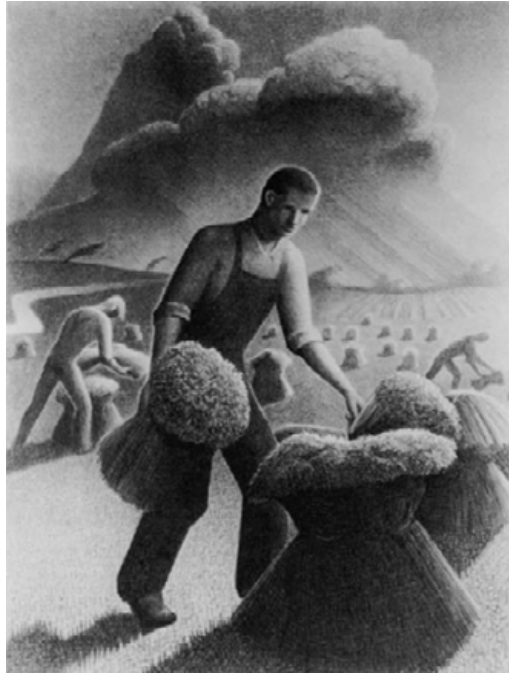


Figure 89. Grant Wood, *Approaching Storm*, lithograph for the Associated American Artists, 1940.

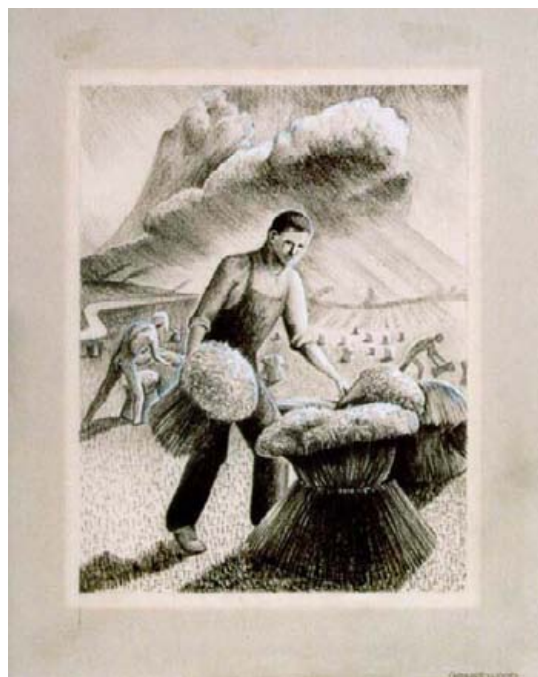


Figure 90. Grant Wood, sketch for *Approaching Storm*, Conté Crayon and white chalk on paper, 1940.



Figure 91. Grant Wood, *Seed Time and Harvest*, lithograph for the Associated American Artists, 1937.

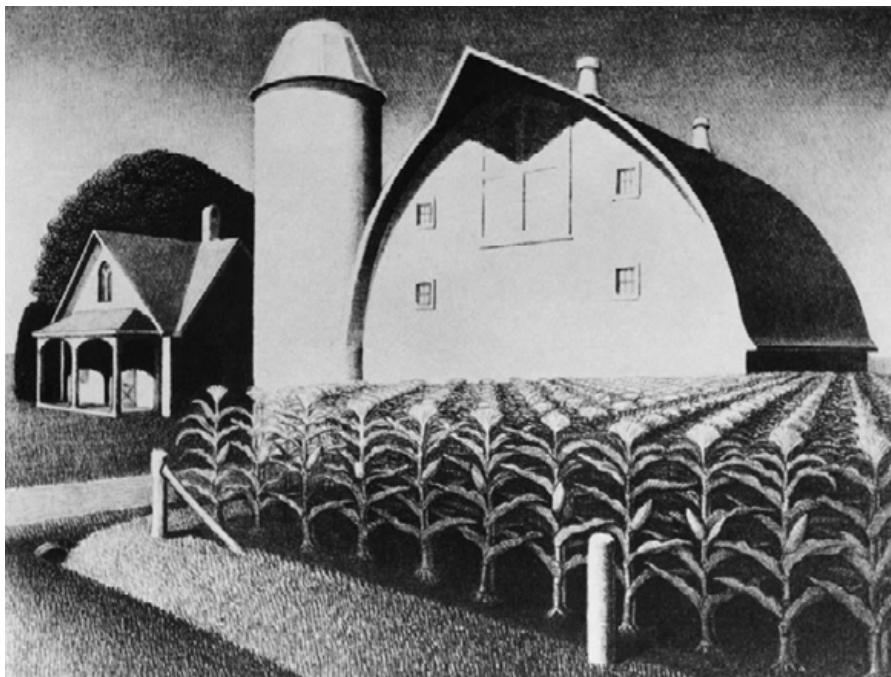


Figure 92. Grant Wood, *Fertility*, lithograph for the Associated American Artists, 1939.

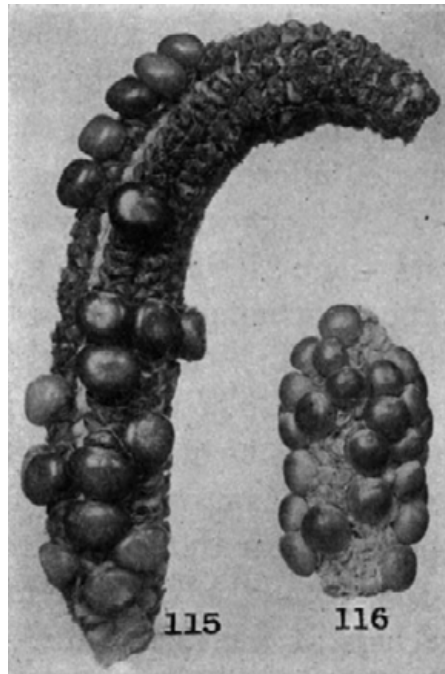


Figure 93. Ear of corn that was not fully pollinated. Illustration from Paul Weatherwax's *The Story of the Maize Plant*, 1923.

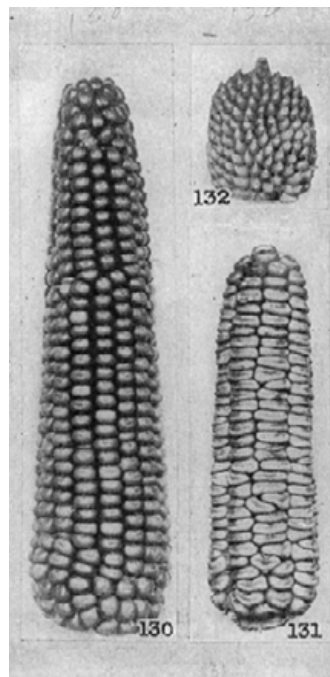


Figure 94. Conical, cylindrical, and bulbous ears of corn. From Paul Weatherwax's *The Story of the Maize Plant*, 1923.

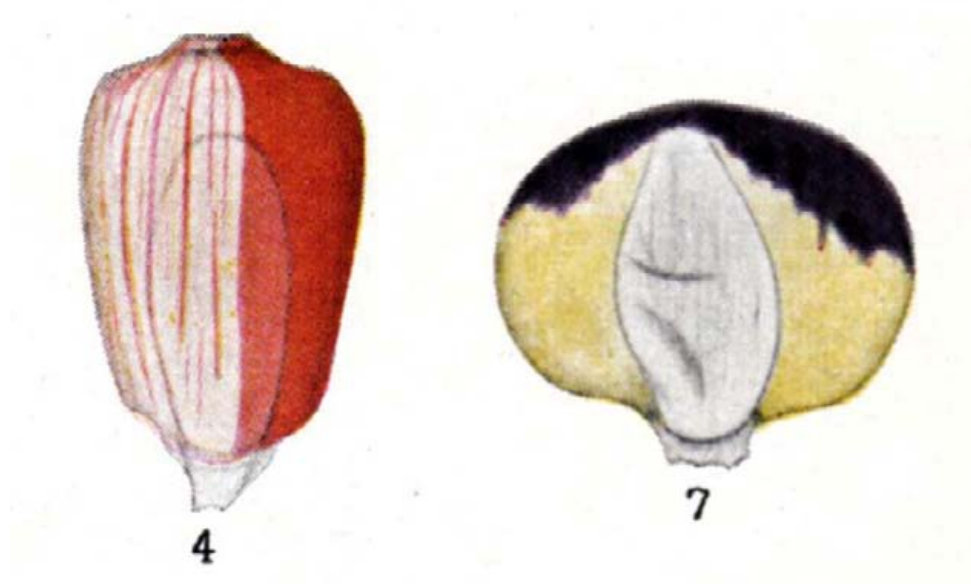


Figure 95. Keystone and round shaped kernels of corn. Adapted from Paul Weatherwax's *The Story of the Maize Plant*, 1923.



Figure 96. Ears of corn in many colors, as grown in 2004 by the farmer Dean Strand for the Corn Palace in Mitchell, South Dakota. Collection of Travis Nygard.

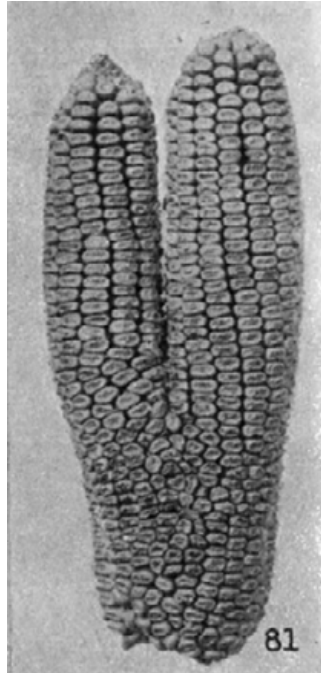


Figure 97. Branched ear of corn, from Paul Weatherwax's *The Story of the Maize Plant* , 1923.



Figure 98. Ear of pod corn with a husk around each kernel, from Paul Weatherwax's *The Story of the Maize Plant*, 1923.

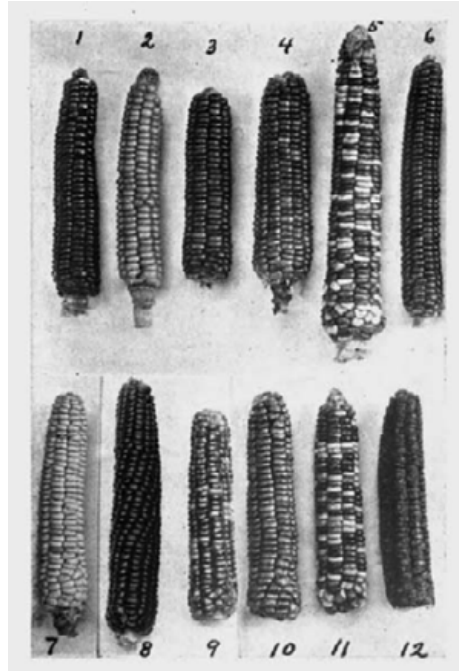


Figure 99. Corn historically grown by the Mandan people, from George F. Will and George E. Hyde's *Corn Among the Indians of the Upper Missouri*, 1917.

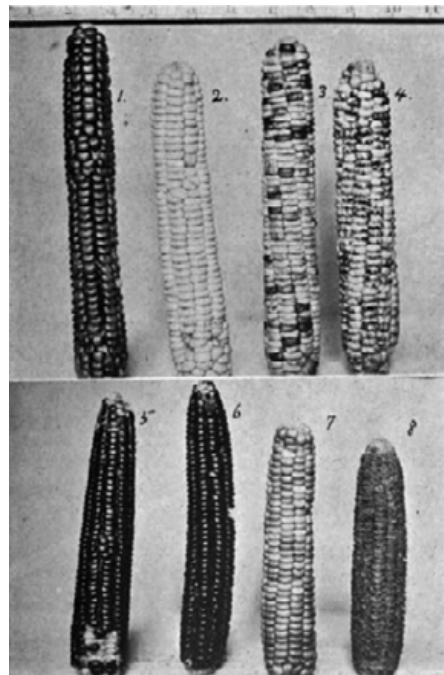


Figure 100. Varieties of corn grown historically by the Pawnee people, from George F. Will and George E. Hyde's *Corn Among the Indians of the Upper Missouri*, 1917.





Figure 101. Oscar H. Will and Company seed catalog cover, 1911. Collection of the Institute for Regional Studies at North Dakota State University.

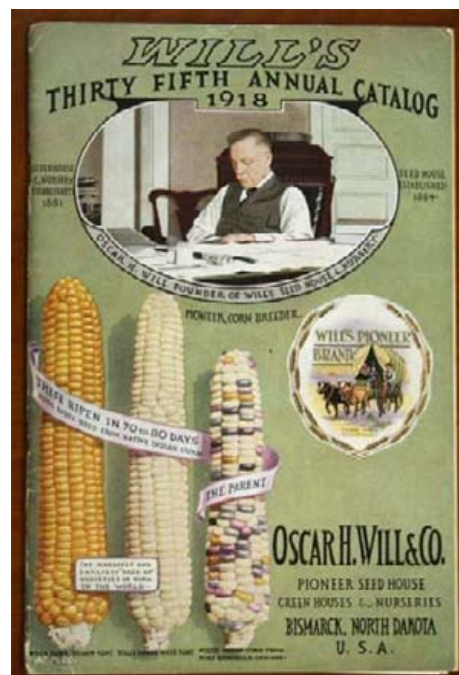


Figure 102. Oscar H. Will and Company seed catalog cover, 1918. Collection of the Institute for Regional Studies at North Dakota State University.



Figure 103. Grant Wood, *January*, 1940. Private collection.



Figure 104. Oscar H. Will and Company seed catalog cover, 1919. Collection of the Institute for Regional Studies at North Dakota State University.

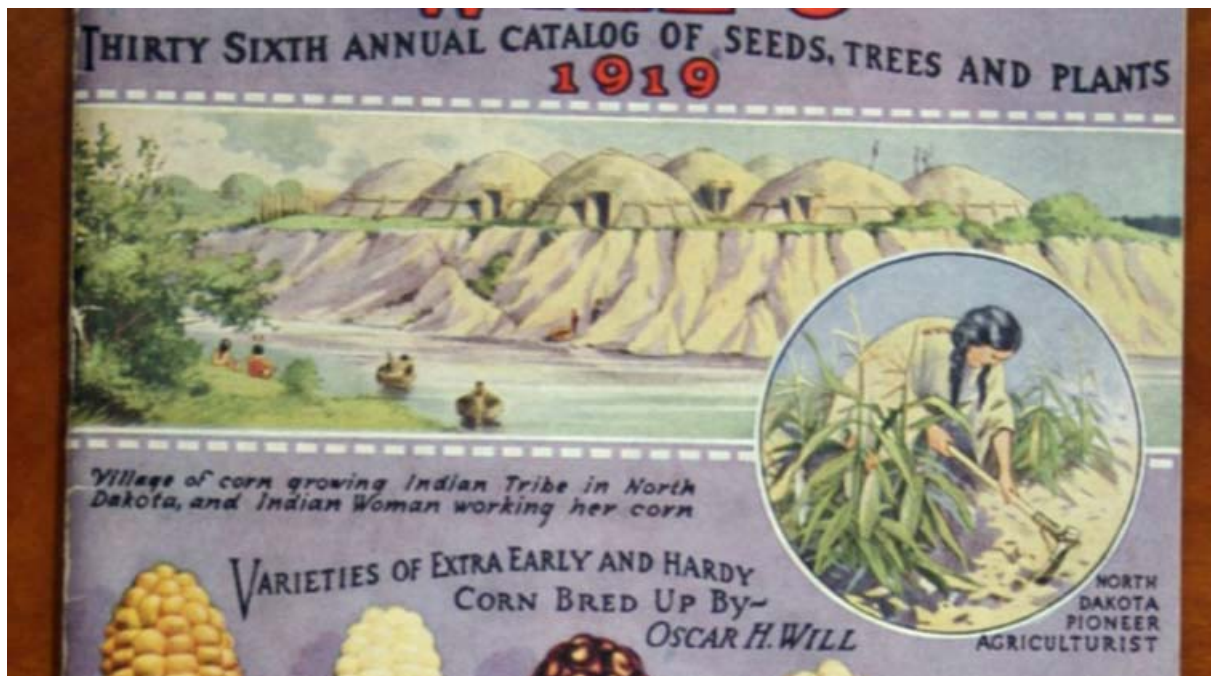


Figure 105. Detail of Oscar H. Will and Company seed catalog cover, 1919. Collection of the Institute for Regional Studies at North Dakota State University.

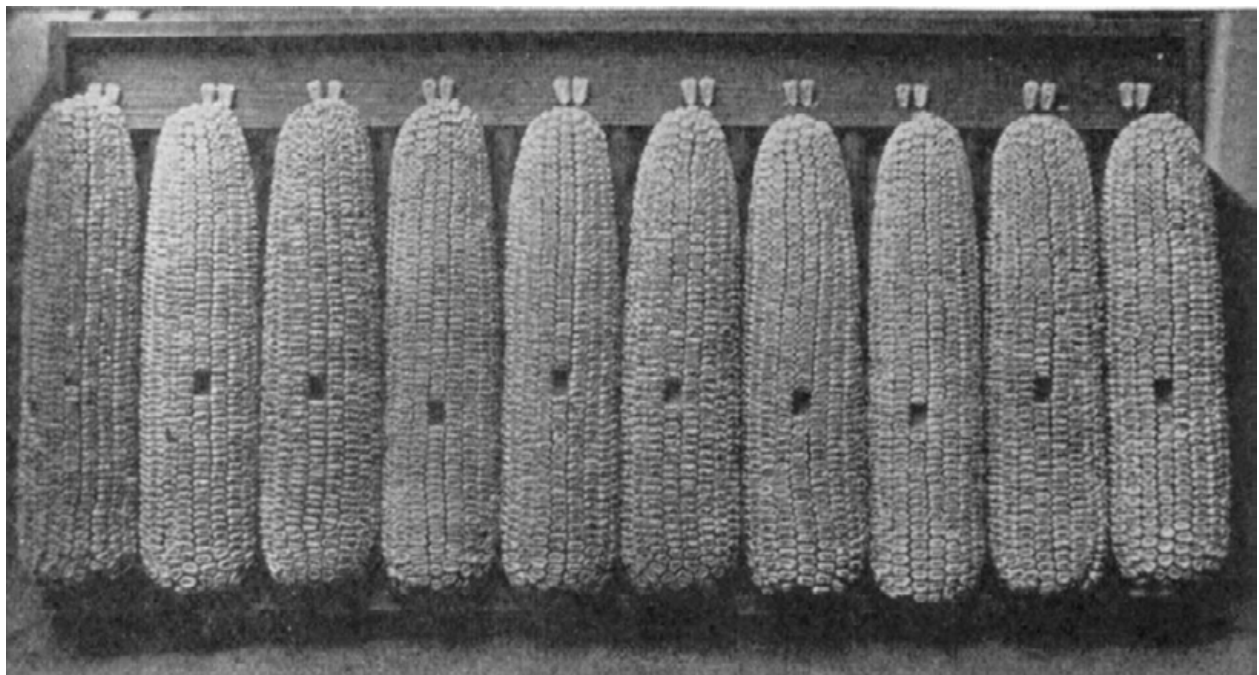


Figure 106. Prize-winning show corn grown by C.E. Troyer of La Fontaine, Indiana, exhibited at the International Grain and Hay Show held in Chicago, 1920, from Paul Weatherwax's *The Story of the Maize Plant*, 1923.



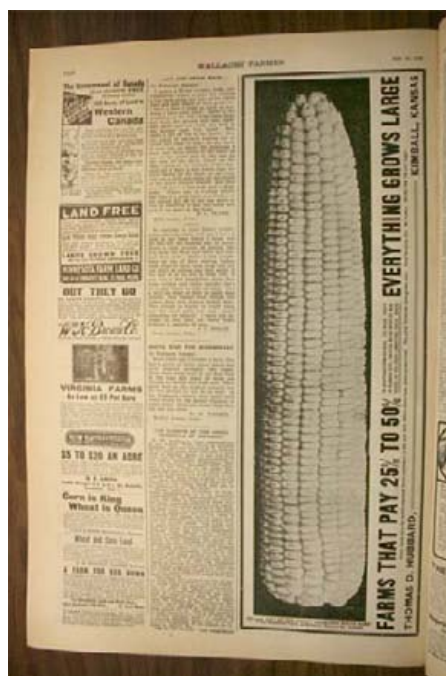


Figure 107. “Actual size of the great ‘Roseland White Corn,’” a variety grown in Kimball, Kansas, as published in *Wallaces’ Farmer*, December 22, 1905, page 1538.



Figure 108. “Grand Champions vs. Nubbins,” illustration comparing the productivity of show corn and ugly corn ears, published in *Wallaces’ Farmer*, December 19, 1919, page 2509.

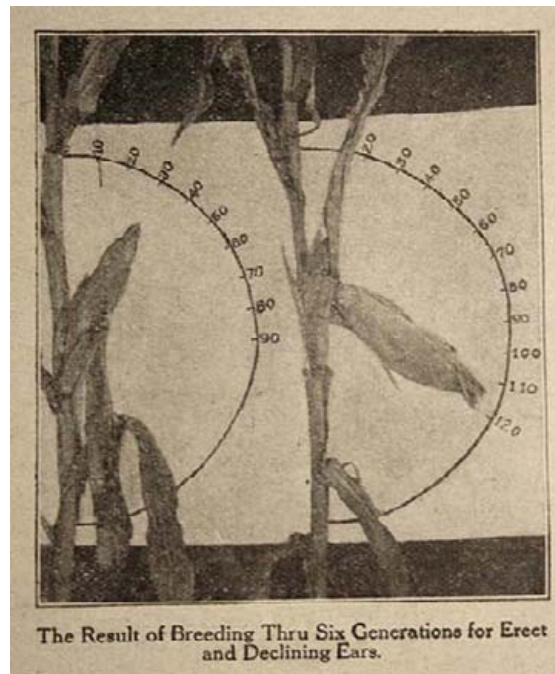


Figure 109. “The Result of Breeding Thru Six Generations for Erect and Declining Ears,” as published in *Wallaces’ Farmer*, June 6, 1919, page 1175.



Figure 110. “High and Low Ears After Ten Years of Selective Breeding From the Same Original Variety,” as published in *Wallaces’ Farmer*, June 6, 1919, page 1175.

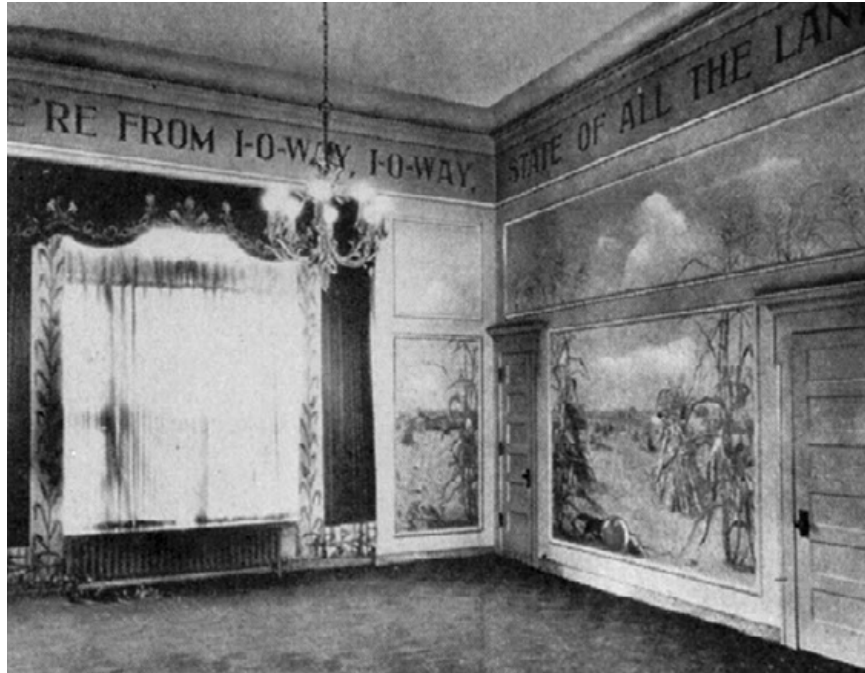


Figure 111. Grant Wood, Interior of the *Iowa Corn Room*, Hotel Montrose, dining room, Cedar Rapids, Iowa. 1925-26. Cedar Rapids Museum of Art Archives.



Figure 112. George Shane, *Sioux City Corn Palace – 1891*, oil on canvas, undated.





Figure 113. Décor for the annual meeting of the Northwestern Hotel Men's Association, as published in the *Hotel Monthly* trade journal on November 1926, page 38.



Figure 114. Grant Wood and Edgar Britton, *Corn Room* murals from the Martin Hotel, Sioux City, Iowa, 1925-1926. Collection of the Sioux City Art Center. Photographs by Travis Nygard.



**Figure 115.** Grant Wood and Edgar Britton, *Corn Room* mural from the Martin Hotel, Sioux City, Iowa, 1925-1926. Collection of the Sioux City Art Center. Photograph by Travis Nygard.



**Figure 116.** Grant Wood and Edgar Britton, *Corn Room* mural from the Martin Hotel, Sioux City, Iowa, 1925-1926. Collection of the Sioux City Art Center. Photograph by Travis Nygard.





**Figure 117.** Grant Wood and Edgar Britton, *Corn Room* mural from the Martin Hotel, Sioux City, Iowa, 1925-1926. Collection of the Sioux City Art Center. Photograph by Travis Nygard.



**Figure 118.** Grant Wood and Edgar Britton (1901-82), Hotel Montrose, *Iowa Corn Room Mural*, Unit 1, 1926-1927. Oil on canvas, 50 1/8 x 38 3/4 in. Gift of John B. Turner II. 81.17.1. Collection of the Cedar Rapids Museum of Art.

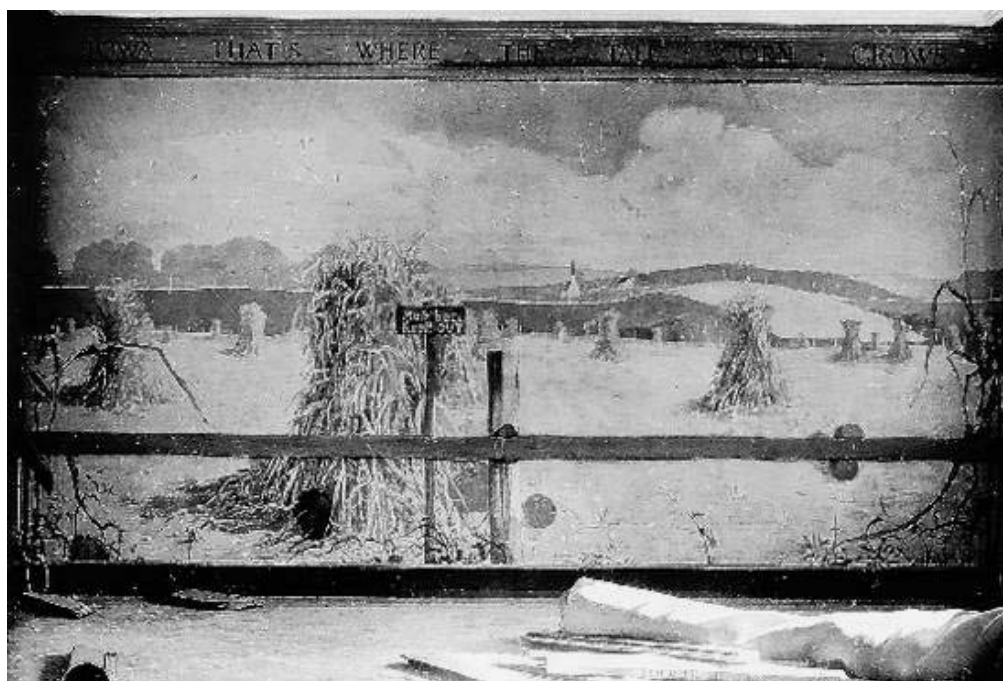


Figure 119. Grant Wood, *Corn Room*, Chieftain Hotel, Council Bluffs, Iowa, 1927.

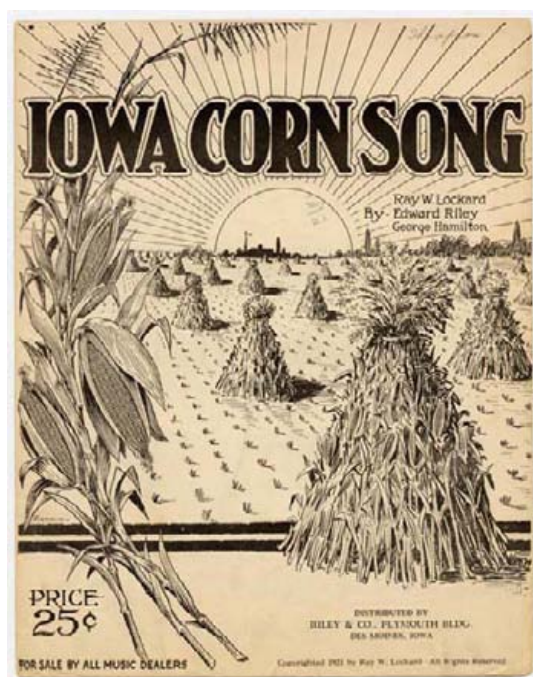


Figure 120. Ristrim, cover art for the score by George Hamilton, Ray W. Lockard, and Edward Riley of the *Iowa Corn Song*, published by the Jerome H Remnick and Company, 1921.

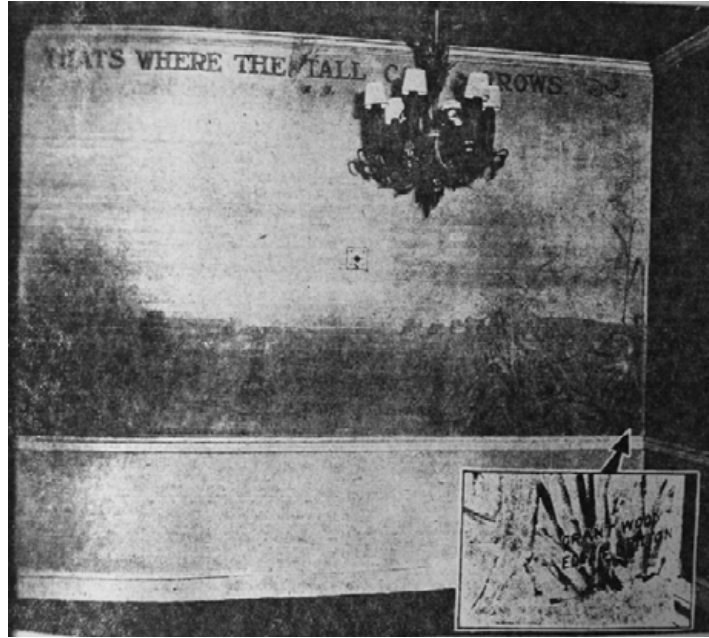


Figure 121. Grant Wood, *Corn Room* in the Martin Hotel, Sioux City, Iowa. 1925-1926. Photograph in the collection of the Sioux City Art Center.



Figure 122. Designed by Grant Wood, forging attributed to George Keeler (1908-44), *Corn Cob Chandelier* for *Iowa Corn Room*, 1925-26. Hotel Montrose, Cedar Rapids, Iowa. Formed brass sheet, cast and machined iron, and copper wiring. 94 x 32 x 34 in. Gift of John B. Turner II. 81.17.3. Photo: Charles Walbridge. Collection of the Cedar Rapids Museum of Art.



Figure 123. Corn-shaped trophy published in *Wallaces' Farmer*, January 27, 1905, page 100.



Figure 124. Ear of hybrid Yellow Dent field corn, grown by Dean Strand in 2004 for the Corn Palace in Mitchell, South Dakota. Collection of Travis Nygard.





Figure 125. Example of an ear of Reid’s Yellow Dent style of corn, which became the “First Premium” winner at the Iowa State Fair, 1907. Image courtesy of the Iowa Historical Society.

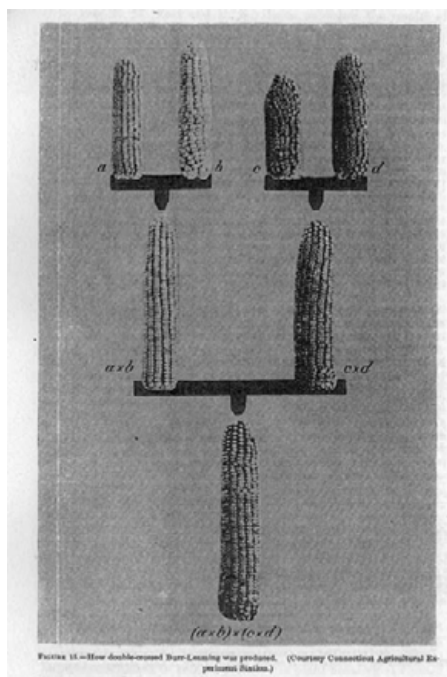


Figure 126. Example of a family tree diagram, explaining the process of double cross hybridization of corn, published by the USDA.



Figure 127. A corn exaggeration postcard from Harvey, ND, c.1910. Collection of Travis Nygard.



Figure 128. "Corn as it Grows in the Great Northwest," postcard of extra-tall corn plants, c.1915. Collection of Travis Nygard.

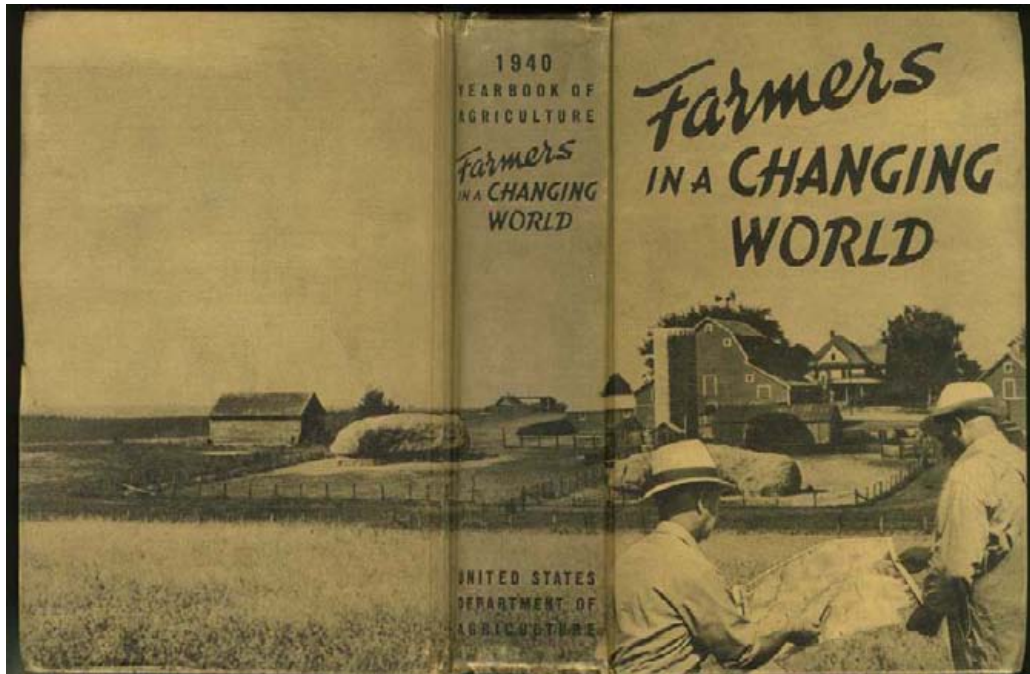


Figure 129. United States Department of Agriculture, *Farmers in a Changing World*, Yearbook of Agriculture, 1940.

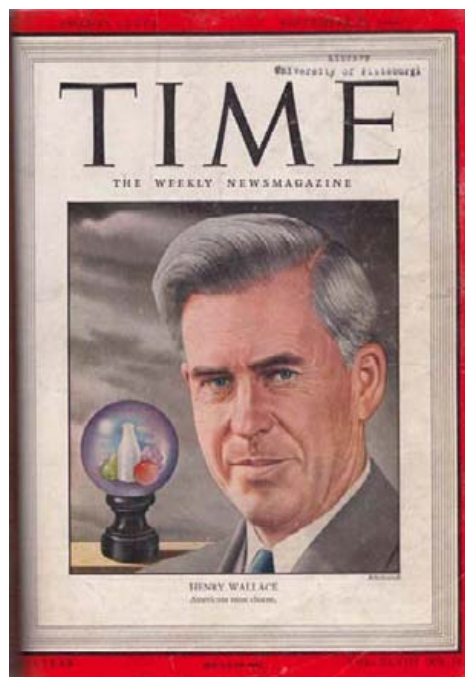


Figure 130. Henry Agard Wallace on the cover of *Time Magazine*, September 30, 1946.

## 5.0 CHAPTER FIVE: THEORIZING THE FARM ECONOMY

### 5.1 INTRODUCTION

It is a testament to the success of Grant Wood's *American Gothic* from 1930 that a cartoon by Billican created for *The Nonpartisan Leader* thirteen years earlier now appears to be a parody of it (Figure 131 and Figure 132). Art that achieves such high status can be complex or paradoxical, and *American Gothic* is both. Indeed few paintings have resulted in more powerful and contradictory responses. Wood denied any critical commentary in the painting—preferring the simple explanation that he had painted a real house in rural Iowa and the people that he envisioned lived there. It has nonetheless been interpreted as biting satire and uncritical documentation; fascist and democratic; dignified and demeaning. In Billican's cartoon a man is shown having his photograph taken, and he seems to be taking the pose of the farmer in Wood's painting. He stands in a photographer's studio, facing the camera frontally, holding a pitchfork, with a farm home behind him on a painted backdrop. Given the visual similarities, a logical question is whether Wood consciously imitated the earlier cartoon. It is possible that Wood was aware of it, but unlikely. There was a branch of the Nonpartisan League in Iowa, but Wood was not a practicing farmer so he was unlikely to have been a member or to have read League publications. This is thus an instance of shared cultural logic, which must be reconstructed in general terms. The wall placard in the cartoon gives us a clue to what those terms are. It declares



that this is the studio of “A. Fake” who can “make you look like what you aint.” The images are thus about deceptiveness. Such a fact is in accordance with Wood’s character. By all accounts of his life Wood was a playful—even mischievous—man, and such personality traits show through in his work. Most importantly for this discussion, the men in *American Gothic* and in Billican’s cartoon were presented as visual double entendres—both farmers and businessmen.<sup>178</sup>

Billican’s cartoon and *American Gothic* are both about rural identities publicly declared through the use of clothing and props. The man in Billican’s drawing is wearing the vest and trousers from a business suit, but he has paired them with the boots, bandana, and straw hat of a farmer. The man in *American Gothic* is a similar hodge-podge, wearing a business shirt, under farmers’ overalls, beneath a business jacket. By combining the wardrobes of these two types of men, the artists cleverly cause the audience to ponder the differences in their identities. This seems to have been a conscious move. Billican draws attention to the construction of identity through the wall placard, and Wood seeded a diversity of interpretations of *American Gothic* in interviews. Wood nudged viewers in one direction in 1933 by stating that “the cottage was to be a farmers’ home.” In 1941, however, he told a different story, that “The persons in the painting, as I imagined them, are small-town folks, rather than farmers. Papa runs the local bank or perhaps the lumberyard. [...] In the evening, he comes home from work, takes off his collar, slips on overalls and an old coat, and goes to the barn to hay the cow.” What we have, then, are intentionally ambiguous statements. In Wood’s case farmers can prefer to think that he is poking fun at businessmen and vice versa.<sup>179</sup>

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<sup>178</sup> Billican, cartoon published in *The Nonpartisan Leader*, November 15, 1917, page 7.

<sup>179</sup> The major readings of *American Gothic* are by Biel, *American Gothic*, 128-42, Hoving, *American Gothic*, Corn, *Grant Wood*. First quote is in Biel, *American Gothic*, 49. Second is in Corn, *Grant Wood*, 42. See also Hoving, *American Gothic*, 97-98. *American Gothic* is sometimes framed as a satirical work of art, but I do not think that

## 5.2 ECONOMICS AS A CRITICAL FRAMEWORK

These images of bankers and bumpkins contributed to a conversation that changed the intellectual understanding of farming, and which culminated in the book by John Davis and Kenneth Hinshaw from 1957 that coined and brought the term “agribusiness” to public consciousness. The title, indeed, contains a pairing of identity and clothing—*Farmer in a Business Suit*. Davis was a Harvard economist who provided the intellectual backbone of the book, while Hinshaw was a journalist who made the concepts accessible to a general audience. A scholarly book was concurrently published by Davis and fellow economist Ray Goldberg—*A Concept of Agribusiness*—with more detail and analysis. *American Gothic* was, by 1957, one of the most well-known paintings in America, and a surge of interest in Grant Wood’s career was also occurring at the time. That year the first retrospective of Wood’s work since his death in 1942 took place, and *American Gothic* was prominently parodied in Meredith Willson’s *The Music Man*. As such, it is possible that the title *Farmer in a Business Suit* is derived from Wood’s painting.

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Wood was a satirical artist. While parody and satire are often thought of as interchangeable concepts, it is useful to tease them apart in this instance. Scholars, following the theorist Linda Hutcheon, often differentiate parody and satire by defining parody as copying a painting, work of literature, or other creative expression in a subversive way, which may have either positive or negative connotations. Satire is a specific form of parody, which is unambiguous and has a goal of belittling its subject. Wood claimed to have only made one satirical painting in his life—*Daughters of Revolution* from 1932. (The Daughters of the American Revolution had censured Wood for employing German stained glass artisans to create his *Veterans Memorial Window* in 1929. Wood therefore got symbolic revenge with a painting that showed them posed in front of the German Emanuel Leutze’s *Washington Crossing the Delaware* from 1851.) I take his word at face value. Other paintings, such as *American Gothic* from 1930, I see as playful parodies but not mean-spirited satires. Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms*. In addition to using parody in his art, Wood is of course one of the most frequently parodied artists. For numerous parodies of *American Gothic* see Corn, *Grant Wood*, 129-42, Biel, *American Gothic*, 120-72.

As Davis, Goldberg, and Hinshaw defined it, agribusiness was both a personal identity and an economic system. Davis and Hinshaw explained, “The farmer in a business suit personifies agribusiness—a new and stimulating concept of economics relating to and including modern agriculture.” But where did their ideas come from? By looking at the decades leading up to their writing we can recover a set of concepts that were at their disposal, and see how they responded to them. On a purely visual level they not only drew on a tradition of clothing as conceptual anchors, but also rejected a popular, moralized, understanding of the farm economy in favor of an impersonal and systemic analysis.<sup>180</sup>

The fact that Billican presents a photographer’s studio is useful for us because it invites us to focus on specific elements that were meaningful enough for Wood, Davis, and Hinshaw to

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<sup>180</sup> Davis and Hinshaw, *Farmer in a Business Suit*, Davis and Goldberg, *A Concept of Agribusiness*. John Davis became an agricultural leader during the 1950s. Most notably in 1953 he became president of the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Commodity Credit Corporation (established in 1933 as a New Deal program to stabilize farm prices), and he was promoted the same year to become the Assistant Secretary of Agriculture in the Eisenhower administration. He directed the program of Agriculture and Business at Harvard from 1954 to 1959. During the 1950s he was also offered to lead the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, but turned it down because he believed that too many Americans had held the post. Ray Goldberg became a long-lasting voice in debates about agribusiness, serving on numerous corporate boards and becoming a distinguished professor at Harvard. For biographical material on Davis’s agricultural career see Alan E. Fusonie, “John H. Davis: His Contributions to Agricultural Education and Productivity,” *Agricultural History* 60, no. 2 (1986): 97-110, ———, “John H. Davis: Architect of the Agribusiness Concept Revisited,” *Agricultural History* 69, no. 2 (1986): 326-48. For biographical information on Goldberg see “Ray A. Goldberg (MBA ‘50),” *Harvard Business School Bulletin* August 2001, available online: <http://www.alumni.hbs.edu/bulletin/2001/august/goldberg.html>, Garry Emmons and Julia Hanna, “The Wise Men: Four Legendary Hbs Professors on the School’s Past and Future,” *Harvard Business School Bulletin*, December 2007, available online: <http://www.alumni.hbs.edu/bulletin/2007/december/thewisemen.html>. Davis made a wholesale career change in 1959, two years after publishing *Farmer in a Business Suit* and *A Concept of Agribusiness*, by devoting the last 29 years of his life to Palestinian causes. In 1959 he was asked by Eisenhower to lead the United Nations Refugee Works Agencies (UNRWA) for Palestinian refugees. He later co-founded and served as president of the charitable American Near East Refugee Aid, Inc., and he published a book about Jewish-Arab relations: John Herbert Davis, *The Evasive Peace: A Study of the Zionist-Arab Problem* (London: Murray, 1968). On Davis’s latter career see Andrew I. Killgore, “Dr. John H. Davis,” *Washington Report*, December 30, 1985, 12, also available online at: <http://www.wrmea.com/backissues/123085/851230012.html>. Davis’s papers are archived at the National Agricultural Library in Bethesda, MD, collection 49. Quotation is in Davis and Hinshaw, *Farmer in a Business Suit*, ix.

have also understood them. Unlike in a snapshot, in the studio we know that the presentation is being thoughtfully manipulated through props, backdrops, posture, and—most importantly—clothing. Many art historians have noted that clothing has symbolic value. Perhaps best known, Erwin Panofsky’s introductory example of *Studies in Iconology* involves twentieth-century men’s hats. He notes that a deep understanding of a culture is required to understand even a simple manipulation of clothing, such as removing the hat to show respect. In the case of Billican and Wood, a viewer with a deep understanding of rural culture looking at *American Gothic* or Billican’s cartoon would likely notice the clash of clothing types described above.<sup>181</sup>

Farmers were supposed to wear bib overalls or other laboring-attire, and businessmen were supposed to wear formal suits. Indeed, these “uniforms” were key ways that farmers were conceptually differentiated from businessmen and politicians. Most people today think of overalls as fundamentally different from suits, but in the long history of men’s wear they are united. Overalls were an invention of the 1840s that quickly became the standard work-attire for both farmers and manual laborers. Styles were available for men, women, and children. Although solid blue and white were the most common during the nineteenth century, black and red were also available, as were stripes. Suits—defined as tailored jackets with trousers—were also designed as work wear. They date to the early Renaissance when the flowing garments of antiquity were abandoned for a second skin of fabric or metal that enabled movement without risking entanglement. Designed for use by the military and for sport, suits were practical garments. They were continually adapted over the following centuries, and by the eighteenth

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<sup>181</sup> Panofsky understood hats as tied to the history of the western military. Removing headgear in polite society dates to at least as early as the middle ages at which time warriors removed their helmets to demonstrate peaceful intentions by making themselves vulnerable. Erwin Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance* (New York: Harper and Row, 1939, 1962), 3-5.

century jackets with lapels and matching trousers were worn by the upper class. Like business suits, overalls are fundamentally a second skin tailored to cover the legs and torso. They maximize the range of movement while protecting the body with heavy fabric. Overalls, however, are less refined garments. They were born of the industrial revolution as cheap, practical, clothing, sold by catalog, and worn with minimal customization. Overalls and suits are thus functionally identical but differentiated by their levels of tailoring and price.<sup>182</sup>

Despite their symbolic divide, in actuality farmers often donned suits and businessmen donned overalls. Townsfolk who kept a cow and a few chickens in their backyards would wear overalls to care for them. Conversely, it is easier to find photographs of farmers from the early twentieth century that are wearing suits than overalls. This is true both of snapshots and studio scenes. Events that were worth recording in a snapshot, such as political rallies and demonstrations by extension agents, were also worth dressing up to attend (Figure 21 and Figure 133). Taking a formal photograph on the farm would also be worth putting on formal ware for. The “Wheet” field discussed in chapter one, for example, shows a farmer and his son with collared shirts, ties, and a bowler hat amidst their grain (Figure 17). Farmers sometimes also wore ragged clothing to do chores—including discarded Sunday suits. Historically suits were even bought by farmers specifically for working. During the nineteenth century—before overalls became common—suits consisting of trousers, shirts, vests, and topcoats were worn for many

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<sup>182</sup> For the long history of suits, see Anne Hollander, *Sex and Suits* (New York: Knopf, 1994). A detailed reference on formal menswear is by O. E. Schoeffler and William Gale, *Esquire's Encyclopedia of 20th Century Men's Fashions* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1973). For the history of overalls, see Susan Strawn, Jane Farrell-Beck, and Ann R. Hemken, “Bib Overalls: Function and Fashion,” *Dress* 32 (2005): 43-55.

forms of labor, including farming. A few farmers—especially poor ones who wore old garments—continued wearing suits while doing chores into the twentieth century.<sup>183</sup>

Nonetheless, looking at other images confirms that a conceptual dichotomy existed between farm and business clothing. In a portrait from 1916 John Miller Baer is shown surrounded by his political cartoon characters—including an overall-clad farmer on the left and a suit-wearing businessman on the right (Figure 134). Similarly, a cartoon from 1916 shows a farmer in overalls placing one arm around a businessman in a suit (Figure 135). Still another from that year shows a farmer in his undergarments trying to fill the suit pants of an overweight politician while his overalls lie on the floor (Figure 136). While a few of these images from the League press are sympathetic towards good businessmen, the majority show animosity. Given that Billican and Baer both worked for the League it is unsurprising that they possess a common visual vocabulary.<sup>184</sup>

Examining the League in conjunction with books about agribusiness is particularly appropriate because we know that Davis's coauthor Ray Goldberg was highly familiar with the organization. In 1947 Goldberg wrote a book about the League, which remains a source of authoritative information on it. It is particularly notable that his analysis was based on extensive interviews with leaders and affiliated politicians. Titled *The Nonpartisan League in North Dakota: A Case Study of Political Action in America*, he intended to update the book every ten years. It received two printings by 1955, and a revised version was scheduled to be released in

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<sup>183</sup> For a class-based history of suits in the nineteenth century, including farmers who wore them in the fields, see Diana Crane, *Fashion and Its Social Agendas: Class, Gender, and Identity in Clothing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 26-67.

<sup>184</sup> Cartoons by Baer published in *The Nonpartisan Leader* on August 31, 1916, page 18; September 7, 1916, page 13; and June 15, 1916, page 13.

1958. The revision, however, was never published—probably because the League had disbanded. Goldberg’s understanding of the history, practices, and leaders of the League should be kept in mind when trying to understand his and Davis’s concurrent work on agribusiness. Indeed, he almost certainly knew of the types of images that Billican and Baer produced.<sup>185</sup>

Billican presented himself to the public as a billy goat and was only slightly less prominent as a cartoonist than Baer was. Billican’s legal name was Wilfred Canan, and he began to draw as a second career after an accident at his machinist job left him without the use of his legs. He enrolled in the W.L. Evans School of Cartooning based in Cleveland, Ohio. This was a correspondence school that offered twenty lessons, taking about six months to complete. The curriculum included both drawing and marketing, and the cost of tuition was twenty five dollars. Evans claimed that, for cartoonists, correspondence instruction was superior to attending art school in person, “Because it’s the individuality that counts. [...] A cartoonist, to be a big success, must be independent of any assistance. *The pupil can best accomplish this*, when he is in a room by himself, working out his own drawing” (emphasis in original). Evans’s tutelage could be valuable, as testified to by the accomplishments of his graduates. Elzie Segar, Chester Gould, Hank Ketcham, and Walt Disney—creators of Popeye, Dick Tracy, Dennis the Menace, and Mickey Mouse—each benefitted from his method.<sup>186</sup>

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<sup>185</sup> The book began as a research project while Goldberg was a student. Goldberg, “The Nonpartisan League in North Dakota: A Case Study of Political Action in America.” By 1956 the League had ceased to exist in any state except North Dakota, and that year it merged with the Democratic party. The League has survived—in name only—as the North Dakota Democratic Non-partisan League Party. Such a merger was surprising at the time, as the organization had closer ties with Socialists and Republicans in its heyday. The authoritative account of this shift was written by a historian who was active in League politics, Lloyd B. Omdahl, “The Switch of the Nonpartisan League to the Democratic Column” (MA Thesis, University of North Dakota, 1961).

<sup>186</sup> Quotation from promotional materials by W.L. Evans, *Advantages in Cartoon and Caricature Work* (Cleveland, OH: Cartoon Portfolio from the W.L. Evans School of Cartooning, 1913), no pagination. On Evans’ legacy, see J. Michael Barrier, *The Animated Man: A Life of Walt Disney* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 33,

Billican himself was a success, and Evans used him to promote the school. One advertisement explained, “Although crippled for life and only able to get about on a tricycle, he has, through the *cleverness* and *force* of his Cartoons, become a *POWER* in his state,” (emphasis in original). Billican shared his expertise with other cartoonists living in small towns by writing two booklets filled with advice. As proof of his expertise Billican claimed to make over ten times as much money by drawing than in his former career. Nonetheless he lived modestly. In 1920 Billican was thirty-two years old and both residing in and working out of a Fargo boardinghouse—the Donaldson owned by Lydia Wendt. Here he would have shared a bathroom and taken meals with fellow boarders who represented a cross-section of working society. They included a bookbinder, a waitress, five salesmen (one travelling), a grocer, two musicians, an auto tire worker, a live-in staff of four, the proprietor, and eleven unemployed wives and children.<sup>187</sup>

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Garyn G. Roberts, *Dick Tracy and American Culture: Morality and Mythology, Text and Context* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1993), 165, Moira Davison Reynolds, *Comic Strip Artists in American Newspapers, 1945-1980* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, 2003), 53, Hank Ketcham, *The Merchant of Dennis the Menace* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1990), 88, 188. Walt Disney did not enroll, but he used materials from the school owned by his friend C. G. Maxwell.

<sup>187</sup> Billican claimed to make sixty to one hundred dollars per week, versus six. The occupants of the Donaldson were recorded by the census. U.S. Census of Population, 1920, Enumeration District 13, Sheet 13B: City of Fargo Ward 1, Cass County, North Dakota. Data digitized by Ancestry.com; original published by the United States of America, Bureau of the Census. *Fourteenth Census of the United States, 1920*. Washington, DC: National Archives and Records Administration, 1920. T625, 2,076 rolls. Roll: T625\_1332; Page: 13B. Billican’s booklets were titled *How to Get By, In and Out of a Small Town as a Cartoonist* and were available by mail for \$3.75, advertised by Billican, “Cartoons Advertising Section,” *Cartoons Magazine*, October 1919, 4. A history of the Hotel Donaldson boarding house, which was erected in 1894 as a meeting hall for the Independent Order of the Odd Fellows, has been written by John Caron, *Donaldson Hotel* (Fargo, ND: Institute for Regional Studies at North Dakota State University, available online: <http://www.fargo-history.com/first-avenue/donaldson-hotel.htm>, 2004). The Donaldson was most technically a “Modern European Hotel,” and it advertised itself as such. Unlike a true boardinghouse, which includes meals with rent, at a European hotel meals were paid for individually. The distinction was legally recognized. West Publishing Company, *Judicial and Statutory Definitions of Words and Phrases* (St. Paul: West Publishing Company, 1904), 3625.



Some of Billican's best drawings—including the one that resembles *American Gothic*—were published in the national edition of the *Nonpartisan Leader*. The majority of them, however, were syndicated across the nation in regional editions of the *Leader* or published in a humor magazine titled *The Goat* that he edited (Figure 137). *The Goat*, when compared with the *Leader*, had low production values. Its appeal was nonetheless understandable. It focused on entertaining images, poetry, and banter that bolstered the League while avoiding the heavier responsibilities of factual reporting. The title is an example of Billican's goat-based humor, which became omnipresent in Nonpartisan League culture. People wore buttons and charms with pictures of goats on them to show loyalty—purchased from Billican for a dollar each—and goats appeared in numerous other contexts (Figure 138). The League was commonly described as a “goat that can't be got.” Live goats were even led before crowds during rallies—a panoramic photograph of League members from 1916 discussed in chapter one captures this practice (Figure 21 and Figure 139). Using a goat to anchor League ideas clearly resonated with Billican's audience, and it shows that he was conversant with farm-related symbolism.<sup>188</sup>

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<sup>188</sup> Billican's cartoons were occasionally printed in the national edition of *The Leader*, but they were much more prevalent in regional editions. His work was thus used to make the latter uniquely valuable to readers. My understanding of regional editions is based on examination of *The Idaho Leader*, *The Colorado Leader*, *The Montana Leader*, *The South Dakota Leader*, *The Minnesota Leader*, and *The North Dakota Leader* held in the Elwyn B. Robinson Department of Special Collections at the University of North Dakota, Grand Forks. I am basing my analysis of *The Goat* on those issues owned by the State Historical Society of North Dakota in Bismarck. “The goat that can't be got” is a variation on the colloquialism “got my goat.” The latter phrase predates the Nonpartisan League, and it may have originated either in America or France within working class or slave cultures. For more information see the work of Mitford M. Matthews, “Of Matters Lexicographical,” *American Speech* 28, no. 2 (1953): 126-27. The delegates have draped a blanket over the goat, with writing that reads something like “[We] have [Governor Louis] Hanna's Goat.” Reproduced from “North Dakota Equity Delegates--All Boosters for the Nonpartisan League and the Leader--and Who's This? Hanna's Goat, So They Say,” *The Nonpartisan Leader*, March 9, 1916, 8-9.

### 5.3 GRANT WOOD'S FARMER IN A BUSINESS SUIT

Given that Wood was also highly conversant with rural imagery it is unsurprising that he understood how to convey meaning with the clothing of farmers. Indeed, he used farm clothing both in his personal life and in his paintings. He was especially interested in bib overalls and wore them almost exclusively to manipulate his public image. He even directed his fellow artist and friend John Steuart Curry to don them when they were photographed together. Wood's choice of overalls was particularly obvious when with other people. In photographs of the teachers at his Stone City Art Colony, for example, he is the only one not wearing trousers (Figure 140).<sup>189</sup>

Given the degree of thoughtfulness Wood gave to clothing choices in his personal life, the clash of clothing in *American Gothic* should similarly be seen as intentional. Clothing is one of the reasons why the painting became controversial, as well as a reason why it has been read in two divergent ways. The people in *American Gothic* are shown absurdly rigid and wearing out-of-date rickrack and a similarly out-of-date collarless shirt. Wood's sister Nan, who posed for the woman in the painting, noted that rickrack was so unfashionable that it was impossible to find new in Cedar Rapids. Wood thus salvaged it from old clothing. The suit jacket and shirt similarly make the man appear drab. The jacket hangs loosely from the shoulders with no attempt made to

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<sup>189</sup> For photographs of the Stone City Art Colony, see the discussion of the organization by Corn, *Grant Wood*, 35, 39-42.

conform to the torso's contour—a “sack” style. A few wrinkles in the fabric are visible but no buttons or other refined detailing.<sup>190</sup>

This is in sharp contrast to the display of suits in American magazines. An advertisement by Cluett, Peabody, and Company from 1913 titled *In the Stands 2*, for example, flaunts high-end tailoring (Figure 141). The duotone two-page layout features five men at a racetrack. They scrutinize the sporting event, a beautiful woman, and each others' wardrobes in highly-contrived poses. Patterns and textures are carefully filled in, rather than dashed off in loose brushstrokes. Solid and houndstooth fabric, tailoring that narrows at the waist, and several styles of lapels are shown on civilians' clothing. Shoulder ornamentation is present on military uniforms. Bodies are carefully suggested beneath the cloth, rather than obscured by vague folds. The postures emphasize contours—achieved by twisting spines and extending elbows. This is an advertisement for rigidly-starched detachable collars—an accessory that was a focus of fashion and marketing during the decades that Wood was coming of age. Each of the men, notably, wears a different style around his neck.<sup>191</sup>

It is particularly important that the shirt in *American Gothic*—salvaged from the Wood family's rags—is designed to be worn with such a collar, but it is rendered with a bare neckline. The top of the shirt is closed only with a removable button—a clasp resembling a cufflink that was prone to “rolling off the dresser into a corner, inevitably pulling the corner in after it.” Such

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<sup>190</sup> On the fact that ric rac was out of date, and a claim that the painting caused a revival of it in Iowa see an account by the artists' sister in Graham, John Zug, and McDonald, *My Brother, Grant Wood*, 74. On detached collars becoming outmoded, see Dorothy Stote, *Men Too Wear Clothes*, Revised ed. (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1950), 28.

<sup>191</sup> Cluett, Peabody, and Company was later renamed Arrow Mensware. *In the Stands 2* was published in *The Saturday Evening Post* on October 11, 1913, pages 36-37. The original painting of *In the Stands 2* is reproduced in Laurence S. Cutler and Judy Goffman Cutler, *J.C. Leyendecker* (New York: Abrams in conjunction with The National Museum of American Illustration, 2008), 82.

collars were a time-saving innovation of the nineteenth century. The garment was invented by Mrs. Montague in the city of Troy, New York, in 1825. Her blacksmith husband insisted on a clean shirt each evening, but only the collars were soiled. She decided to cut them off and attach strings, such that they could be changed independently of the shirt. Thus was born an industry. Cluett, Peabody, and Company set up a factory in Troy and it soon became a leading manufacturer of shirts. At the height of collar frenzy during the 1910s the company offered over 400 styles.<sup>192</sup>

Their “Arrow Collar Man” is widely considered to have been a sex symbol, and as a gay man Wood likely swooned over such imagery. The persona rivaled Rudolph Valentino in popularity, as measured by a deluge of 17,000 letters in a single month during the 1920s. The Arrow Man persona was featured in a Broadway production titled “Helen of Troy, New York” in 1923, and poems were written about him. The phenomenon bled into aspects of life unrelated to collars. Advertisers for diverse products imitated the “Arrow Man,” and he came to refer to any handsome and well-dressed individual.<sup>193</sup>

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<sup>192</sup> Quotation is from Stote, *Men Too Wear Clothes*, 28. A good overview of the Arrow campaign was written by Carole Turbin, “Fashioning the American Man: The Arrow Collar Man, 1907-1931,” *Gender and History* 14, no. 3 (2002): 470-91. See also the corporate history by Arrow Mensware, *Heritage* (Available online at <http://www.arrowshirt.com/heritage.aspx>, accessed August 2008).

<sup>193</sup> Wood’s romantic life is a historical enigma, but scholarship since his sister’s death tends to treat him as a gay man. The most complete discussions of Wood’s sexuality are by John E. Seery, “Grant Wood’s Political Gothic,” *Theory & Event* 2, no. 1 (1998): paragraphs 17-23, James H. Maroney Jr., *Hiding in Plain Sight: Decoding the Homoerotic and Misogynistic Imagery of Grant Wood* (Leicester, VT: Self-published book, available online: [http://www.rovers.net/~jmaroney/Art/Grant\\_Wood/Hiding\\_in\\_Plain\\_Sight\\_full.pdf](http://www.rovers.net/~jmaroney/Art/Grant_Wood/Hiding_in_Plain_Sight_full.pdf), c. 2006). For a broader discussion of Wood’s psyche see Taylor, “Wood’s American Logic,” 86-93, ———, “Grant Wood’s Family Album,” 48-67. Wood had no known male lovers and was married to a motherly opera singer, Sara Sherman Maxon, from 1936 to 1939. The union ended when Wood charged her with “cruel and inhuman treatment” that “threatened his life.” I think that Wood’s words, however, should be taken skeptically. Liberalization of divorce laws began in the Midwest during the nineteenth century, but no-fault divorces did not exist in Iowa until the 1970s. Spouses instead falsely charged each other with cruelty, adultery, abandonment, or other faults to end marriage. For an overview of divorce laws in Iowa, including their history, use the Westlaw database to access I.C.A. § 598.8 (Iowa Code Annotated Currentness; Title XV. Judicial Branch and Judicial Procedures; Subtitle 1 .Domestic

Wood and Billican might or might not have been aware of the specific advertisement *In the Stands 2*, but they were certainly familiar with both the Arrow man and his creator, the illustrator Joseph Christian Leyendecker. He was one of the most prominent and successful artists of the era, and *In the Stands 2* is one of the best examples of his work. Leyendecker's ability to render the human form with technical proficiency was acquired when he, along with his brother Frank, spent 1896 and 1897 in Paris studying at the Académie Julian under William-Adolphe Bouguereau. They were favorites of the master and received monthly recognition for their work. Upon returning to the United States J.C. Leyendecker abandoned fine art to become an illustrator. His accomplishments were many. In addition to the Arrow campaign he contributed cover illustrations regularly to *The Saturday Evening Post* beginning in May 1899 and continued until 1943. He was Norman Rockwell's role model, and they became life-long friends. He was responsible for the now-iconic "new-year's baby" as well as the jolly and overweight Santa Claus in a red suit. Leyendecker developed the Arrow man in 1905, having been hired by the firm's advertising manager, Charles Connolly, to develop a campaign. The most common model was Leyendecker's lifelong companion and business manager, Charles

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Relations; Chapter 598. Dissolution of Marriage and Domestic Relations; 598.8. Hearings—exceptions). Scholars have inferred Wood's desires from comments and his art. He once confided in a friend that "I guess I'm just not interested in women." His sister Nan recalls him explaining that "Women want to look pretty, but I don't like to paint pretty women." (Quotes in Biel, *American Gothic*, 25, 53.) Wood painted many attractive male nudes, but never female. See, for example, the *Spotted Man* from 1924, *Nude Bather* from 1920, the *Four Seasons Lunettes* from 1922-25, classical statuary in the *First Three Degrees of Free Masonry* from 1921, a man resembling Hermes with barely covered loins in *The Adoration of the Home* from 1922, and *Saturday Night Bath* and *Sultry Night* from 1937. *Sultry Night* is Wood's most sensual work, in which a nude farmer savors a trickle of water gliding down his torso. When the Associated American Artists tried to distribute the print a postmaster declared it obscene and therefore not mailable. The art historian Jonathan Weinberg thus included it in his survey of American homoerotic art. Jonathan Weinberg, *Male Desire: The Homoerotic in American Art* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2005), 76-77. See also passing references in: Hoving, *American Gothic*, 122, Robert Hughes, *American Visions: The Epic History of Art in America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), 194, Dennis Domer, "Homeplace in Life and Art," in *Remembering the Family Farm: 150 Years of American Prints*, ed. Stephen H. Goddard (Lawrence: Exhibition catalog from the Spencer Museum of Art at the University of Kansas, 2001), 17.

Beach, who began to work for him in 1901. In the case of *In the Stands 2*, facial features indicate that Beach posed for both the man in a white tie and top hat as well as the one with a striped tie and monocle—although the latter’s nose has been made larger for variety. The Arrow Collar campaign was successful for decades, and it finally ended the year that *American Gothic* was painted—1930.<sup>194</sup>

*In the Stands 2* can be understood as the antithesis of *American Gothic*. In fact, the clothing in Wood’s painting is like the small-town formal wear that Sinclair Lewis criticized a few years previously in *Main Street*. Jackets like the one Wood rendered could be found at places like “Nat Hick’s Tailor Shop, on a side street off Main. A one-story building.” Here customers were enticed with “A fashion-plate showing human pitchforks in garments which looked as hard as steel plate.” They purchased custom-made “Suits which looked worn and glossless while they were still new, flabbily draped on dummies like corpses with painted

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<sup>194</sup> J.C. Leyendecker died on July 25, 1951, and researching his career is difficult because he became a paranoid recluse who insisted that his papers and paintings be systematically destroyed. The papers were indeed discarded posthumously, but the paintings were disbursed through a yard sale. The definitive study of the man is by Cutler and Cutler, *J.C. Leyendecker*. The Cutlers’ book will no-doubt remain the best study, as their research was aided by friends and colleagues of the artist who are now deceased. In particular, a model of his from 1922 to 1925 named Phyllis Frederic gave interviews about his artistic practice, helped to reconstruct his social circle, and showed where he lived and worked. Another major study is by Michael Schau, *J. C. Leyendecker* (New York: Watson-Guption Publications, 1974). Schau relied heavily on a biographical sketch published in the *Saturday Evening Post* and the memoirs of Leyendecker’s friend Norman Rockwell. Given that both of these sources served as promotional tools, nearly all of the “facts” were questionable. Norman Rockwell, *My Adventures as an Illustrator as Told to Thomas Rockwell* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Company, 1960), 159-74, J.C. Leyendecker, “Keeping Posted,” *Saturday Evening Post*, October 15, 1938, 108. A substantial body of analytical work exists on how Leyendecker’s paintings changed American advertising and fashion as well as helped to create white, masculine, and gay identities. See especially Eric Jefferson Segal, “Realizing Whiteness in U.S. Visual Culture: The Popular Illustration of J.C. Leyendecker, Norman Rockwell, and the *Saturday Evening Post*, 1917-1945” (PhD Dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles, 2002), Richard Martin, “What Is Man!: The Imagery of Male Style of J.C. Leyendecker and Giorgio Armani,” *Textile and Text* 13, no. 1 (1990): 3-27, ———, “Fundamental Icon: J.C. Leyendecker’s Male Underwear Imagery,” *Textile and Text* 15, no. 1 (1992): 19-32, ———, “Gay Blades: Homoerotic Content in J.C. Leyendecker’s Gillette Advertising Images,” *Journal of American Culture* 18, no. 2 (1995): 75-82, Turbin, “Fashioning the American Man,” 470-91.

cheeks.” In terms of tailoring the products had “no distinction of cut, no easy grace like the diplomat’s Burberry.”<sup>195</sup>

After World War I the starched detachable collar went into decline. Veterans like Wood, who had served in the Army, preferred the comfort of soft fabric along the neckline which had been present on their uniforms. Cluett, Peabody, and Company survived this change by producing a line of shirts, which remain their flagship product in the early twenty first century. The removable collar was thus seen as stuffy by the mid-1920s and was fully outdated by the time that Grant Wood painted *American Gothic* in 1930.<sup>196</sup>

Returning to the book *Farmer in a Business Suit* we can now see that it and *American Gothic* were effective for similar reasons. By combining symbols with cultural power Wood ultimately created an image that pulls in two directions. When *American Gothic* was published under the erroneous title *Iowa Farmer and His Wife* Wood was harshly criticized by farmfolk, some of whom went so far as to threaten violence. When recalling the reaction of farm wives, for example, Wood noted that “One of them actually threatened over the telephone ‘to come over and smash my head.’” But when Wood claimed that he meant the painting to be a townspeople, he was able to rebuild his support among rural people. Apparently they were quick to reframe it in terms of conflict with big business.<sup>197</sup>

These viewers understood *American Gothic* in terms of farming or business, but not both. This is the crucial distinction between Davis and Hinshaw’s book and the thinking of an earlier generation. While Wood and Billican and their viewers flipped between paradigms, they did not

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<sup>195</sup> Quotes are from Lewis, *Main Street*, 28, 29, 171.

<sup>196</sup> Cluett, Peabody, and Company later changed its name to Arrow Mensware.

<sup>197</sup> Wood quoted in Hoving, *American Gothic*, 65.

merge them. For Billican it was so inconceivable to be both farmer and businessman that his cartoon labels itself as about fraud. Wood, Davis, and Hinshaw each look to the past for their symbolic vocabulary, but while Wood's farmer in a business jacket is quaint and outdated, Davis and Hinshaw's is powerful and fresh—a man of science and technology. As they themselves explained:

The farmer in a business suit has taken the place of the old homesteader. His horsepower is bred in factories and his stock is fed by the white-frosted scientists in the laboratories that produce those fabulous substances known as antibiotics and hormones. His family farm is a costly, efficient, revved-up complex of fields, barns and equipment with gluttonous hunger for capital and managerial know-how. His productivity is a hundred, a thousand times his family's own needs. His harvests flow through myriads of enterprises and arrive in your kitchen cleaned, prepared and processed as if by built-in maid service.

Clearly this farmer would be more at home in the polished world of the Arrow collar man than in the earthiness of a barn.<sup>198</sup>

## 5.4 DIAGRAMMING THE FARM ECONOMY

Although Davis and Goldberg draw on broad cultural trends, such as clothing, they defined agribusiness within their field of agricultural economics and they conveyed their ideas with the visual norms of that discipline. Most importantly this included scientific diagramming. The art

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<sup>198</sup> Davis and Hinshaw, *Farmer in a Business Suit*, x.



historian James Elkins has developed a taxonomy of seven classifications for non-art images, and what Davis and Goldberg have created are schemata—highly structured attempts to convey scientific data. Although Davis and Goldberg provided readers with tables of information on fold-out pages, it was charts and graphs that conveyed essential meaning. One of their best charts mapped out the relationships between sectors of the food economy in 1947 (Figure 142). Using a series of boxes connected with arrows it shows the amount of money generated by various industries that farmers depend upon—such as fertilizer and container manufacturers—which enables the generation of additional money by farmers through the sale of crops. Continuing down the chain and down the page some of the crops are purchased directly by the public, but most of them increase in value again as the raw commodities are transformed into more desirable consumer goods at the bottom of the diagram. There we see that over the course of the food system, 12.88 billion dollars of inputs has been transformed into 72.92 billion dollars of products.<sup>199</sup>

For Davis and Goldberg the concept of agribusiness described this system of interdependent businesses, and their analysis showed how a shift had occurred from 1800 when eighty percent of Americans lived on farms to 1957 when only eighteen percent did. As they explained:

To enable us to think more precisely in this field, the authors suggest a new word to describe the interrelated functions of agriculture and business—the term

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<sup>199</sup> The other types of information possible are allographs (calligraphy, typeset, and layouts), semasiographs (non-standardized writing, which is often pictographic), pseudowriting (use of mnemonic symbols without a grammar), subgraphemics (images that appear to be writing but lack a grammar), hypographemics (identification stamps and other marks without complex meaning), and emblemata (combinations of text and pictures). These categories are described, with numerous examples, by James Elkins, *The Domain of Images* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), 95-235. The 1947 diagram is in Davis and Goldberg, *A Concept of Agribusiness*, 30.

*agribusiness*. By definition, agribusiness means the sum total of all operations involved in the manufacture and distribution of farm supplies; production operations on the farm; and the storage, processing, and distribution of farm commodities and items made from them. Thus, agribusiness essentially encompasses today the functions which the term agriculture denoted 150 years ago. (emphasis in original)

They argued that this change happened gradually, and a word was not previously coined to describe it because no dramatic event galvanized attention. What they meant by this distinction of *agri-culture* and *agri-business* is that during the mid-nineteenth century a singular culture of farming existed in which families and communities were mostly self-sufficient. Slowly this culture was dispersed into a system of interrelated businesses. Rather than farmers saving seed, for example, they began to purchase it from the seed house. Rather than making their own tools they purchased them at hardware stores. Rather than harvesting with the effort of their bodies they hired crews of threshers. Farming thus became a complex industrialized business *system*.<sup>200</sup>

Although Davis and Goldberg do not discuss precedents for their chart of the 1947 food system, the visual culture of the Nonpartisan League can again be used to explain their logic. Using allegories and diagrams, cartoonists for the League conveyed systemic ideas about the economy. For example, conceptual clustering of multiple stages of the food system was conveyed by John Miller Baer. He used a man in a business suit as an allegory for the exploitations of the “Grain Combine”—the elevator, auction house, and miller—which reaps huge profits through collusive deception.

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<sup>200</sup> Davis and Goldberg, *A Concept of Agribusiness*, 1-24, Davis and Hinshaw, *Farmer in a Business Suit*. Quotation is on page two of *A Concept of Agribusiness*.

In one cartoon the Grain Combine is shown as the archetypical fat capitalist businessman—complete with top hat (Figure 143). Unlike the bare neckline in *American Gothic*, here a gleaming jewel rests beneath the Grain Combine’s bow tie. He is in the process of fraudulently re-labeling “D grade” wheat as “A No. 1” quality to increase its value for sale. His act is blatantly self-serving and deceptive, and it is undertaken at the expense of farmers. This two-panel image shows a gleeful transformation. The Combine is pleased with himself, as cigar smoke takes the shape of dollar signs and his facial expression changes from neutrality to a laughing grin. This cartoon refers to the scandals of 1916 described in chapter two, but numerous other problems were also blamed on the Grain Combine. In the 1916 case, Professor Edwin Ladd of the North Dakota Agricultural College estimated that fraudulent regrading of wheat cost the farmers of the state nine million dollars. Other accusations involved overly-powerful dust-collectors that skimmed good grain before it was weighed on fraudulently-calibrated scales at grain elevators.<sup>201</sup>

Cartoon diagrams were also present in Nonpartisan League culture. One example originated in the nineteenth century with the Populists, and it was reused by the League (Figure 144 and Figure 145). Eugene Zimmerman drew the food system as a leaky pipeline to show how the farmer received little of the money consumers paid for food in the grocery store. The public pours its money into a funnel-like opening at the top of the page to procure pork, beef, corn, and butter. The pipe zigzags downward as numerous people along this “Channel of Trade” fill their pockets until the farmer receives a trickle of revenue at the end. The cartoon was first published in the humor magazine *Judge* at the height of the Populist Party’s success in 1886. W.C. Morris,

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<sup>201</sup> For an excellent discussion of the types of problems blamed on the Grain Combine, see Russell, *The Story of the Nonpartisan League*, 63-94.

a nationally-renowned illustrator who sometimes submitted drawings to the *Leader*, directly copied Zimmerman's work in 1917. Morris relabeled the channel "Direct pipeline from the consumer to the farmer," eliminated a few twists in the pipe, and used hard ink lines instead of washes. He has, nonetheless, retained the compositional strategy and essential meaning—farmers receiving little cash flow from a pipe.

The affinity with Davis and Goldberg's work is clear. Both the pipeline cartoons and the diagram of the food system in 1947 convey meaning with a funnel of inputs at the top. Money is transformed in stages as it goes down the page. Both depend on the concept of gravity. Finally the process is bookended with the farmer and consumer. This is not to say that the images are identical. Davis and Goldberg place the farmers at the top of the page and consumers at the bottom—Zimmerman and Morris did the opposite. Davis and Goldberg's diagram is more highly structured to convey factual data in a precise way. It employs multiple arrows to show a more complex set of pathways within the food system rather than a single pipe. It is also targeted at academics rather than the general public. Nonetheless Davis and Goldberg convey the same systemic, flowing, process.<sup>202</sup>

Although Davis and Goldberg were wrestling with a set of systemic problems that had been partially understood by the Populists and the Nonpartisan League, a closer examination of diagrams in America reveals that the strategy of these economists is more subtle and powerful. Because the arrows in the diagram of the food system in 1947 are all one-way and proceed in a clear direction, in mathematical terms what Davis and Goldberg have created is a directed graph in which the nodes are shown as boxes. It is mostly acyclic—meaning that inputs become outputs without travelling through the process multiple times. An exception is the use of bran

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<sup>202</sup> Cartoon published in *The Nonpartisan Leader* on December 21, 1916, page 3.

and oil in animal feed, which moves from industrial processing back up to the top as an agricultural input. The first directed graph looks superficially different from Davis and Goldberg's and was published in 1741 by Leonhard Euler (Figure 146). He developed it for determining if someone could cross each of the seven bridges of Königsberg, Russia (later renamed Kaliningrad) once without crossing any of them twice. On an abstract level bridges in Euler's diagram correspond to arrows in Davis and Goldberg's, and land masses correspond to boxes. Such complex diagramming was a form of communication confined to a few scientific niches until the late nineteenth century.<sup>203</sup>

A turning point occurred in the popular understanding of diagrams in America in 1870 with the publication by the U.S. government of the first "statistical atlas" of census data. The goal was to make both geographic and economic information available to the public. As the best-available reference on the census, nearly every library purchased it, and the series was updated each decade until 1920. The books were a major endeavor, as indicated by the fact that the first edition was folio-sized, had 1,200 illustrations, and was printed in full-color. Before 1870,

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<sup>203</sup> Although art historians rarely engage with directed graphing, George Kubler suggested that the technique could show how works of art fit into webs with ties to numerous other objects. Such an approach has the potential to enrich our understanding of art by moving beyond general styles. As broad and normative categories, relying on styles to understand specific objects is rarely satisfactory. Instead, to place works of art in their specific historical moment and to understand how they were meaningful to their audiences requires showing detailed and gradual changes between types of objects. He noted that archaeologists have long-used such sequences to understand ancient tools and vessels, and that art historians could similarly think of objects as "linked solutions" to problems within a historical sequence. This is the major argument made in, *The Shape of Time* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1962). His discussion of directed graphs is on pages 33 and 34. Leonhard Euler, "Solutio Problematis Ad Geometriam Situs Pertinentis," *Commentarii academiae scientiarum Petropolitanae* 8 (1741): 128, available online in The Euler Archive hosted by Dartmouth College, <http://math.dartmouth.edu/~euler/pages/E053.html>. The history of graphing merits further study to make the topic accessible across disciplinary boundaries. For more information on directed graphs from a mathematical perspective refer to Jonathan L. Gross and Jay Yellen, eds., *Handbook of Graph Theory* (Boca Raton: CRC Press, 2004). See especially the entries by Stephen B. Maurer, "Directed Acyclic Graphs," 142-55, Robin J. Wilson, "History of Graph Theory," 29-49, Jonathan L. Gross and Jay Yellen, "Fundamentals of Graph Theory," 2-19, Lowell W. Beineke, "Families of Graphs and Digraphs," 20-28, and Jay Yellen, "Basic Digraph Models and Properties," 127-41.

census data was published in less-revealing numerical tables—much like the fold-out tables that Davis and Goldberg provide (Figure 147). These tables more thoroughly communicated data than diagrams, but they made it harder to understand. In contrast, the atlases included numerous types of diagrams which remain in use during the early twenty first century. Data density maps, pie charts, bar charts, line graphs, population distribution charts, percent charts, rank charts, wind roses, rectilinear area charts, and circle charts filled their pages.<sup>204</sup>

Because the general public was unfamiliar with the conventions of scientific data-presentation, the atlases also included detailed instructions for interpreting them. The goal of educating the public about graphing was articulated by the publishers themselves, who declared:

Let these facts be expressed not alone in figures, but graphically, by means of maps and diagrams, appealing to a quick sense of form and color ... and their study becomes a delight rather than a task. The density of settlement, the illiteracy of the people, the wealth or poverty of different sections, and many other features of great importance, hitherto but vaguely comprehended, are made to appear at a glance, and are so vividly impressed as not to be easily forgotten. By such aids not only the statistician and political economist, but the masses of the people, who make public sentiment and shape public policy, may acquire that knowledge of

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<sup>204</sup> For more information on the history and significance of these atlases, see Charles Kostelnick, “Melting-Pot Ideology, Modernist Aesthetics, and the Emergence of Graphical Conventions: The Statistical Atlases of the United States, 1874-1925,” in *Defining Visual Rhetorics*, ed. Charles A. Hill and Marguerite Helmers (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2004), 215-42.

the country and its resources which is essential to intelligent and successful government.<sup>205</sup>

It is thus clear that by the time that Davis and Goldberg were diagramming their own versions of “the country and its resources” that a set of widely-understood representational techniques existed that they could employ.

Although Davis and Goldberg’s work is reasonably intuitive to understand, they did not, in fact, choose to use one of the representational techniques in the statistical atlases. This is despite the fact that using techniques in these books might have been better understood by the public. Pie charts, for example, are particularly intuitive, and Davis and Goldberg’s data lends itself to them easily. Using only the groupings of data presented in the flow chart for 1947, for example, it is possible to devise a set of three pie charts that shows the growth in the economy. I have done this for the sake of clarity (Figure 148). Making these charts requires treating separately the major groupings of data that Davis and Goldberg provided: (1) farm production, (2) processing and distribution, and (3) the consumer. The three pies can then be related to each other by making their areas proportional. Such an arrangement would show the amount of money at each stage better than a flow chart because pie pieces are conjoined in a single mass rather than requiring the viewer to mentally assemble boxes surrounded by white space. Dividing the farm economy into three highly distinct stages would have also conformed to the expectations of the public.<sup>206</sup>

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<sup>205</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 226-27. The original source is Fletcher W. Hewes and Henry Gannett, *Scribner’s Statistical Atlas of the United States, Showing by Graphic Methods Their Present Condition and Their Political, Social and Industrial Development* (New York: C. Scribner’s Sons, 1883), vii.

<sup>206</sup> To make the pie charts I included each of the categories present in the flow chart. Farm production together includes feed manufacturing (2.42 billion dollars), seed (0.5), farm machinery and automotive power (3.6), wholesale trade (0.6), transportation (0.96), power (0.5), containers (1), fertilizer (0.42), retail trade (0.8), and all other (2.08), which can be added together to arrive at a total of 12.88 billion dollars for this sector of the economy.

## 5.5 THREE STAGES OF THE FOOD SYSTEM

A tripartite understanding of the food system was derived from the best-selling novelist Frank Norris's work. Most importantly, he began to publish *The Epic of Wheat* trilogy in 1901. Unfortunately he only finished two thirds of it—the last book was being developed when he died of appendicitis in 1902 at the age of 32. The trilogy traces wheat production from farmer to consumer and is filled with human drama. The first book, *The Octopus*, was released in 1901 and focuses on production. It details the labor problems of a large-scale wheat farm in California—the same type of operation described in chapter one of this dissertation. The second book, *The Pit*, focuses on distribution. It was printed posthumously in 1903 and focuses on a scheme to corner the market on wheat at the Chicago Board of Trade auction house. The last book was to be titled *The Wolf* and to focus on the consumption of wheat grown in the US by a famine-stricken country abroad. That country might have been France, Italy, Russia, India, or someplace else entirely. (Newspaper accounts mentioned each of these nations as possibilities at the time of Norris's death.) Although *The Epic of Wheat* is fundamentally a series of novels, the ideas in them became meaningful through connections with visual culture. Because I have previously

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Similarly, the cost of processing and distribution includes oils (0.81), food industries (14.54), drinking and eating places (0.79), alcoholic beverages (0.35), textiles (2.09), tobacco products (0.78), wood and paper (0.19), leather (0.49), soap and paint (0.72), oil meals (0.21), and bran and middlings (2.19) which totals to 23.16 billion dollars. Finally, the costs to the consumer consists of soap and paint (0.95), leather (2.07), food industries (21.02), non-processed foods (9.73), drinking and eating places (13.11), alcoholic beverages (1.21), textiles (11.36), tobacco products (1.48), wood and paper (1.99), wholesale and retail trade (8.5), and all other (1.5) that total of 72.92 billion dollars. To make the charts proportional to each other requires only basic geometry and algebra. The total dollar values of each chart is equal to its area, and the formula for a disk's area ( $\pi r^2$ ) can be used to solve for the radii. As long as the radii of each chart remain in a proportionate ratio to each other the growth will be accurately conveyed. These proportions must respectively be 1 : 1.34 : 2.38 for farm production, processing and distribution, and the consumer.



discussed images of large-scale farming, and the novel about the consumer stage was unwritten, I will focus most of my attention now on images of wheat distribution.<sup>207</sup>

Norris is best-known as a writer, but he originally intended to be a painter. He pursued artistic training in San Francisco, London, and Paris. At the last location he worked under the tutelage of the conservative master of the French salon William-Adolphe Bouguereau—the same man who trained J.C. Leyendecker. Examples of Norris’s visual art are scant, but an engraving published in 1907 suggests that he was technically proficient (Figure 149). It is a Grecian street scene in which three men converse in the foreground and a Moorish servant fans an individual walking into the distance. It seems to have been created as much to display technical skills of foreshortening as to convey meaning. Although Norris’s engraving is more similar in subject matter to Jean-Léon Gérôme’s work than Bouguereau’s, it is well-within the tradition of academic painting and drawing. Norris, however, became frustrated with his progress at mastering the techniques of large-scale history painting. He failed in 1889 at an attempt to render the Hundred Years’ War, focusing on the Battle of Crécy that occurred in 1346. He reused that canvas for smaller paintings before changing career paths to become a writer. Norris became a creative radical through his contact with Émile Zola, and among literary historians he is remembered as the best American novelist to adopt Zola’s techniques of Naturalism. Norris compared good writing to a high-quality piece of silver or jewelry. In both writing and

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<sup>207</sup> Frank Norris, *The Octopus: A Story of California* (Available for public download from Project Gutenberg as EText-No. 268 at <http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/268>, 1901, 2008), ———, *The Pit* (Available for public download from Project Gutenberg as EText-No. 4382 at <http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/4382> 1902, 2003). A scholarly projection of what *The Wolf* would have been like if written, based on newspaper statements, biographies, and Norris’ archives was written by Bruce Nicholson, “Tracking Down *The Wolf*” (MA Thesis, California State University Dominguez Hills, 1995). Nicholson argues that *The Wolf* was in a more advanced state than is generally acknowledged, with notes and possibly chapters already written at the time of Frank Norris’s death. Unfortunately these fragmentary writings were lost or destroyed—probably because Frank Norris’s heir, his brother Charles Norris, was jealous or negligent.

metalwork shoddy workmanship can be covered up with ornamentation, but a simple piece reveals all imperfection. He thus strove for straightforward story lines and language.<sup>208</sup>

Norris often drew on life experiences to enrich his writing. In the case of *The Octopus* he spent time on a large wheat farm named Santa Anita Rancho located roughly one hundred miles south of San Francisco. There he became enmeshed in farm life by working on the “sacking platform” of a combine harvester. He did chores, and what he did not personally experience was described to him. In the case of *The Wolf*, Norris was planning to take a trip around the world in which he visited ports in several countries. Similarly, his experiences as a painter informed his writing. He manipulated the reader’s experience with visual language that evokes salon, Barbizon, and Impressionist painting. Through this strategy he encouraged readers to imagine the appearance of settings in specific ways.<sup>209</sup>

The visual properties in Norris’s writing convey meaning that is not immediately obvious in the text. Such meaning can be reconstructed, however, by examining which artists were

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<sup>208</sup> A discussion of Norris’s painting and drawing practice, which also reproduces an etching, is by Denison Hailey Clift, “The Artist in Frank Norris,” *Pacific Monthly*, March 1907, 313-15. There is a lack of scholarship on Norris’s paintings—probably because they are few in number and difficult to find. There are only two listed in the Smithsonian American Art Museum’s Inventories of American Painting and Sculpture. They are *Landscape with Stream* and *Nevada Falls*; both are undated oil paintings in private collections. The database is publicly accessible online at [http://americanart.si.edu/art\\_info/inventories-intro.cfm](http://americanart.si.edu/art_info/inventories-intro.cfm). See control numbers 71062292 and 71062294. On Norris’s reputation as a Naturalist writer see the essays published throughout the twentieth century anthologized as “(Benjamin) Frank(Lin) Norris (Jr.) 1870-1902,” in *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*, ed. Dennis Poupard (Detroit, MI: Gale Research Company, 1987), Vol. 24, 414-53. For biographical details of Norris’s life as a painter, see Jane Jennifer Jones Boyd, “Frank Norris: Spatial Form and Narrative Time” (PhD Dissertation, University of Tulsa, 1990), 14, William B. Dillingham, *Frank Norris: Instinct and Art* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1969), 3-24, Joseph R. McElrath Jr and Reese S. Crisler, *Frank Norris: A Life* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 65-105. Norris’s comparison of writing with metalwork is from Frank Norris, “Simplicity in Art,” in *Responsibilities of the Novelist: The Complete Works of Frank Norris* (New York: Doubleday, Page, and Co., 1903), 241-48. Because Norris never exhibited at the Salon he is excluded from the major study of Bouguereau’s American students: James Frederick Peck et al., *In the Studios of Paris: William Bouguereau and His American Students* (New Haven: Exhibition catalog from the Philbrook Museum of Art distributed by Yale University Press, 2006).

<sup>209</sup> On using life experiences see Nicholson, “Tracking Down *the Wolf*”, 1-6, 11-12, 23-24, 28-42. Franklin D. Walker, *Frank Norris: A Biography* (New York: Doubleday, 1932), 249.

appreciated by American farmers and grain traders. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth century many American art collections included paintings by Bouguereau and Jean François Millet, but they were not received by the public as equivalent. In fact, people were polarized about which artists were worthy of admiration. While Millet and the other Barbizon painters appealed to traditional family farmers, Bouguereau and other academics epitomized the taste of grain traders and other newly-moneyed individuals. Such a correlation was fitting, given the subject matter that each artist focused on. Millet is notable for his dedication to the plight of the rural laborer while Bouguereau focused on visual opulence. Among readers of *The Nonpartisan Leader* Millet's art was perceived to recognize the dignity of farm laborers without obscuring their hardships. The editors, for example, explained in 1919 that "Great as were his paintings, he is chiefly remembered not because of his art but because of his sympathies with the life of the common people, particularly the peasant farmers of France, of whom he was one." After emphasizing Millet's personal poverty they claimed that "Millet insisted on painting a true picture of the life of the worker." The editors even reproduced an extract from one of Millet's letters to underscore their point:

Sometimes, in places where the land is sterile, you see figures hoeing and digging. From time to time one raises himself and straightens his back, wiping his forehead with the back of his hand. "Thou shalt eat thy bread in the sweat of thy brow." Is this the gay, jovial work some people would have us believe in? But, nevertheless, to me it is true humanity and great poetry.

This commentary in the *Leader* was intended to contextualize Millet's best-known painting, *The Gleaners* from 1857, which appeared on the cover of the newspaper that day in a slightly modified form (Figure 150 and Figure 151). The image is cropped to the vertical proportions of

the tabloid-sized paper, and hay stacks, which in the original are far in the distance, are pushed to the middleground. Presumably these changes were made to make a better composition in conjunction with newspaper text, but the rationale was not stated.

As is typical of the Barbizon painters from north-central France Millet used oil paints and employed a palette of muted earth tones. *The Gleaners* depicts impoverished women stooped as they gather stalks of wheat left in the field. A rig of harvested grain and haystacks are in the background. Gleaning is a survival strategy for poor people, permitted by land owners, dating to the ancient world. An early account of gleaning is recorded in the Bible when Ruth resorts to it after the death of her husband, and her story has since been interpreted as a moral mandate to allow scavenging. Although grain is no longer gleaned in the United States, the practice continues in the twenty-first century when poor people gather small or damaged vegetables left fallow in fields. Potatoes are particularly targeted, although they must be picked before becoming ruined by fall disking. Gleaning has even become institutionalized by emergency food organizations—food pantries often organize groups of volunteer scavengers. No doubt because of pious connotations and the focus on farming, photogravures and lithographs of *The Gleaners* were framed and hung in turn-of-the-century Midwestern farm homes.<sup>210</sup>

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<sup>210</sup> A thorough analysis of the painting was produced by the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, *Millet's Gleaners* (Minneapolis, MN: Exhibition catalog, 1978). Ruth 2:1-23. For a critical treatment of contemporary gleaning, see Janet Poppendieck, *Sweet Charity?: Emergency Food and the End of Entitlement* (New York: Viking, 1998), 153-54, 73-79. Poppendieck is a sociologist who has worked in several food pantries. She discusses how gleaning both provides needed calories for impoverished people, but also operates in troubling ways. In Arizona it is institutionalized with prison labor, with the produce gathered fed to both inmates and the homeless. In California organized groups of retired volunteers glean to benefit food pantries. Poppendieck documents gleaning as part of a larger trend of relying on emergency food as a bandage on poverty in the United States. Her goal is to describe the flaws in this system while advocating for better public policy—thus hoping that fewer people will be forced to choose between malnourishment and eating discarded food.

Bouguereau, on the other hand, “used his ability for the production of pictures which, perfect in line and composition and charming in color, were painted primarily to sell and possessed that prettiness which attracts the plutocratic merchant and the stock broker”—as the *New York Times* explained in his obituary from 1905. His creative output included innumerable paintings filled with pleasing subject matter. *The Nonpartisan Leader* scorned this type of academic output, noting that Millet could have become rich if he lowered himself to making “landscapes, portraits of men and women of wealth or nude studies.” Indeed, Bouguereau’s canvases feature beautiful people within mythological, pastoral, or religious settings. His images, furthermore, were rendered with a technical proficiency that made them easy to appreciate. These facts have led some art historians to deride his work as unsophisticated, sentimental, and pornographic. Ernst Gombrich, for example, humorously compared Bouguereau’s paintings to childish milk chocolate while claiming that sophisticated people prefer tangy flavors and nuts. Bouguereau also had supporters. The nineteenth-century art historian Clara Harrison Stranahan, for example, noted that Bouguereau “produces in flesh-painting surfaces so smooth that they seem waxed or enameled.” She continued by noting that when painting country folk “His treatment of these is the very opposite of Millet: he introduces elegance into his rendering even of a barefooted peasant.”<sup>211</sup>

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<sup>211</sup> Quotation is from “Bouguereau Dead at 80; Burglary Hastened End,” *New York Times*, August 21, 1905, 7. As this dissertation focuses on food, it is worth noting that Gombrich’s metaphor comes from a larger essay he wrote on psychoanalysis, in which he compared the experience of viewing a Bouguereau painting to the oral stage of psychosexual development. Ernst H. Gombrich, “Psycho-Analysis and the History of Art,” in *Meditations on a Hobby Horse: And Other Essays on the Theory of Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953, 1985), 39. For turn-of-the-century responses to Bouguereau see the anthology *Bouguereau, Masters in Art* (Boston: Bates and Guild Company, 1906). Stranahan’s comments are reproduced on pages 31 and 32 of the *Masters in Art* anthology, but the original publication is C. H. Stranahan, *A History of French Painting from Its Earliest to Its Latest Practice* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1888).

*The Return of Spring* from 1886 is a typical Bouguereau masterpiece that aims to overwhelm the viewer with rich surfaces and sensual subject matter (Figure 152). It depicts a nude allegory of the season posed with arms crossed against her chest in a shiver of modesty. A swirl of cherubs adoring her adds dynamism to the composition. Flowers spring up in the left foreground and the sky is a brilliant blue. This painting can also demonstrate the fact that art appreciation is as much a matter of identity as it is aesthetics.

In 1890 *The Return of Spring* became scandalous in the Midwest when a farmer's son assaulted it with a chair. The back legs pierced the canvas, creating large tears in the background and on the woman's shoulder. The painting was on display in Omaha, and the assailant was 25-year-old Carey Judson Warbinton. This man claimed that the painting belonged in a brothel and that he was protecting the public from indecency. In response to the attack *The Collector* accused Warbinton of being the one who was "prurient" and "obscene." In fact "the picture is a work which could arouse offensive ideas only in a mind of the basest lewdness." It shows Spring "pure as the baby cupids that hover about and welcome her again." Galleries played up the vandalism at remaining exhibition venues by displaying the offending chair with the torn canvas. The public flocked to gawk.<sup>212</sup>

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<sup>212</sup> *The Return of Spring* was touring the Midwest in a show assembled by Boussod, Valdon, and Company. It was on display at the Joslyn Memorial at the time, and the same institution (renamed the Joslyn Art Museum) owns the painting in 2009. Although not framed in terms of rural identity, the attack has been noted by scholars such as Dario Gamboni, *The Destruction of Art: Iconoclasm and Vandalism since the French Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 196, Fronia E. Wissman, *Bouguereau* (San Francisco: Pomegranate Artbooks, 1996), 94, Peter Brooks, *Body Work: Objects of Desire in Modern Narrative* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 147, Eric M. Zafran, "William Bouguereau in America: A Roller-Coaster Reputation," in *In the Studios of Paris: William Bouguereau and His American Students*, ed. James Frederick Peck (New Haven: Exhibition catalog from the Philbrook Museum of Art distributed by Yale University Press, 2006), 26. Quotation is from "Entirely Too Modest," *The Collector: A Current Record of Art, Bibliography, Antiquarianism, Etc.*, January 1, 1891, 1. A better understanding can be achieved by reading newspaper coverage in the *Omaha (NE) World Herald*, *Boise Idaho Statesman*, *Chicago (IL) Daily Inter Ocean*, *New York Times*, and *Kansas City (MO) Star*. See, for example, "Nationality in the Nude," *New York Times*, April 5, 1891, "Work of a Crazy Censor: C.J. Warpinton Constitutes

Most newspaper and magazine coverage failed to analyze how aesthetics are culturally defined. Nonetheless, Warbinton's occupation was reported, hinting that this attack was about personal identity. A reporter for *The Kansas Star*, for example, noted that it was particularly surprising that Warbinton "is not a green country lad." It is true that after being raised in a rural Ohio environment he had sought opportunities in Omaha. There he had been living and working as a bill collector for a carpet salesman. He nonetheless seems to have retained the aesthetic norms and values of his farming family. His father and grandfather were a farmer and farm laborer respectively.<sup>213</sup>

With this art-historical background in mind we can understand Norris's visual language employed in *The Epic of Wheat* trilogy in specific ways. The scholarly term for Norris's strategy—causing someone to "see" a picture based on a written or oral description—is "ekphrasis." He used the technique liberally. The literary scholar Jane Boyd goes so far in her description of *The Pit* as to claim that "visual imagery serves as the primary structuring device" and that "the novel is a dramatic production in which the reader watches actors and actresses perform in representative settings and also views verbal paintings through a character's eyes."

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Himself Conservator of Omaha Morals," *Omaha (NE) World Herald*, December 16, 1890, "Warbington Was Shocked. An Omaha Young Man Feels It His Duty to Spoil an \$18,000 Painting," *Chicago (IL) Daily Inter Ocean*, December 16, 1890, "Religious Crank," *Boise (ID) Statesman*, December 18, 1890, "Morbidity Mr. Warpinton. The Protector of the Virtue of Women Ignored by the Fair Sex," *Kansas City (MO) Star*, March 18, 1891. *The Return of Spring* was attacked a second time in 1976, on this latter assault see Graham William John Beal, "William Adolphe Bouguereau, Return of Spring," in *Fifty Favorites from Joslyn Art Museum* (Omaha, NE: Joslyn Art Museum, 1994), 76-77.

<sup>213</sup> On the Warbinton family and their occupations, refer to the census. In 1870 the Warbinton household consisted of Joseph (age 72), Cintha (75), Thomas A. (37) Elizabeth (31), Lesta D. (10), and Carey J. (three). U.S. Census of Population, 1870, Schedule 1, Page Number 15: Salem Township, Shelby County, Ohio. Data digitized by Ancestry.com from originals published by the United States. *Ninth Census of the United States, 1870*. Washington, DC, National Archives and Records Administration. M593, RG29, 1,761 rolls. Roll: M593\_1267; Page: 614; Image: 424.

She provides numerous examples of ekphrastic passages from Norris's work. He, for example, described a pasture like a Barbizon painting in *The Octopus*:

All the colours of the scene were somber—the brown of the earth, the faded yellow of the dead stubble, the grey of the myriad of undulating backs. Only on the far side of the herd, erect, motionless—a single note of black, a speck, a dot—the shepherd stood, leaning upon an empty water-trough, solitary, grave, impressive.

Later in the novel he emphasizes light falling on a milkmaid like a Bouguereau peasant:

Hilma stood bathed from head to foot in the torrent of sunlight that poured in upon her from the three wide-open windows ... Into her eyes ... the sun set a diamond flash; the same golden light flowed all around her thick, moist hair, lambent, beautiful, a sheen of almost metallic luster, and reflected itself upon her wet lips, moving with the words of her singing. The whiteness of her skin under the caress of this hale, vigorous morning light was dazzling ... Beneath the sweet modulation of her chin, the reflected light from the burnished copper vessel she was carrying set a vibration of pale gold. Overlaying the flush of rose in her cheeks, seen only when she stood against the sunlight ... her large, white arms, wet with milk, redolent and fragrant with milk, glowing and resplendent in the early morning light.

Similar uses of Millet and Bouguereau continue to be seen in Norris's later writings and their adaptations.<sup>214</sup>

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<sup>214</sup> For an erudite overview of ekphrasis see W.J.T. Mitchell, "Ekphrasis and the Other," in *Picture Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 151-81. Studies of how Norris's training as a painter impacted his writing include Boyd, "Frank Norris," D.B. Graham, "Studio Art in *the Octopus*," *American Literature* 44, no. 4 (1973):



The taste of the grain trader Curtis Jadwin and his wife Laura Dearborn in Norris's *The Pit* is the opposite of Warbinton's. Rather than assaulting Bouguereau's work they cherish his output. In the story Jadwin becomes obsessed with money, so Dearborn begins an affair with a former lover—the artist Sheldon Corthell. Jadwin ultimately loses his fortune through speculation on the futures market for wheat, and through the challenges of living in poverty becomes emotionally reunited with his wife. Although the story is fictional, it was based on tragic facts. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries there were many attempts to “corner” commodities markets by purchasing enough futures to control the prices. Although most such attempts failed, the potential to reap huge fortunes and to cause great suffering through cornering any market was real. A corner of the copper futures market in 1907, for example, resulted the following year in two thousand people joining the Manhattan Bowery breadlines.<sup>215</sup>

Bouguereau comes into play because Jadwin and Dearborn had purchased a painting by him for their home which featured “a group of nymphs bathing in a woodland pool.” They admire it greatly, but both their conservative and their free-spirited friends disapprove. With criticism that echoed Warbinton's, Jadwin's broker Gretry noted that “you wouldn't want some of your Sunday-school superintendents to see this now. This is what the boys down on the Board would call a bar-room picture.” Later Dearborn's bohemian lover, Corthell, disparages her taste by stating that “It pleases you because it satisfies you so easily. You can grasp it without any

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657-66, Don Graham, *The Fiction of Frank Norris: The Aesthetic Context* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1978), Dillingham, *Frank Norris*. On his visual vocabulary and for the quotations, see Boyd, “Frank Norris”, 14, 122, 36, 82.

<sup>215</sup> Scott Simmon, “‘the Shame of the Cities:’ the Urban Drama at Biograph,” in *The Films of D.W. Griffith* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 37.

effort.” Corthell defends his own dedication to visually-challenging material while explaining that “Bougereau [sic] ‘fills a place.’ I know it. [...] But I cannot persuade myself to admire his art.”

Norris’s novels were written with great subtlety, and readers came to identify with each character’s strengths and faults. Such literary merits are not particularly useful, however, for understanding what *The Epic of Wheat* trilogy came to stand for socially. By looking at images produced over the subsequent decades we can see how Norris’s work became a cultural cornerstone for thinking. The messages were moralized, and referring to the books evoked struggles occurring within the agricultural economy and the need for progressive change.

## **5.6 VISUAL ETHICS IN *THE EPIC OF WHEAT***

Much of Norris’s writing was published with illustrations, and this includes *The Pit*. In fact the dismissal of Bouguereau by Corthell was drawn by Will Grefe when the novel was serialized in *The Saturday Evening Post* (Figure 153). This was the novel’s debut, and it featured reproductions of fifty-nine watercolors by that artist—at least one on every page. Grefe’s drawing about Bouguereau is conventional and appears to be the result of piecemeal assembly. Indeed, his treatment of Dearborn in it is similar to illustrations by Charles Gibson—the most widely imitated artist in America at the time (Figure 154 and Figure 155). Comparing Dearborn’s head with an example of one by Gibson is particularly telling. She, indeed, shares the facial features and hairstyles of the iconic women. Grefe rides on the momentum of the better-known artist, and seems to have done so successfully. His daughter Mary Grefe Fox, indeed, recalled that “prints of his work were sold for framing, and adorned post cards, fans, calendars,

[and] playing cards.” In addition to Grefe’s work for *The Saturday Evening Post* he drew for *Woman’s World*, *Good Housekeeping*, and *Cosmopolitan*. He also illustrated books. Looking at Grefe’s drawing as a whole, Dearborn stands mannequin-like amidst the art collection and is formally framed in a rectangle.<sup>216</sup>

With a new set of drawings due each week to continue the serialization of *The Pit* some boilerplate work from Grefe is understandable. The drawing about Bouguereau should not, however, be mistaken for his best work in this series. He also created highly original-work that integrated drawing skills with the page layout. One pair for *The Pit* was used to convey the climax of the story (Figure 156). Grefe dramatizes this moment by dividing the scene into two vignettes; the first is Jadwin and the other his broker. Laid out with text between them Jadwin is

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<sup>216</sup> Mary Grefe Fox, *Will Grefe (1875 - 1957)* (Biographical entry published in the AskART database, available online: <http://www.askart.com/>, 2006). Gibson Girls were a visual manifestation of the turn-of-the-century “New Woman” and were popular until World War I. They were presented as young, white, materialistic suffragettes. They were well-to-do, educated, and in the workforce, and they pursued free-spirited pastimes such as smoking, drinking, painting, and playing sports. She took broadly progressive stances, including condemnation of child labor. They were first drawn by Charles Dana Gibson in black ink, but were soon widely imitated. Young women imitated the clothing, hairstyles, and mannerisms presented in these drawings. Some feminists approved of her, such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman, but many others considered these women to be fickle caricatures, only superficially committed to women’s rights. Coffee table folios of Gibson’s drawings were available, and they also appeared as prints and on knick knacks. People posed as them in tableaux vivants and speculated who the models were. Although true Gibson Girls were white and feminine, variations on them were used to appeal to Black, Chinese, and Native American women. As the distinguished illustrator Henry Pitz, once said “he was the most imitated artist of his time.” For scholarly treatments of the Gibson Girl, see Martha Banta, *Imaging American Women: Idea and Ideals in Cultural History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 211-18, Lois W. Banner, “The Gibson Girl,” in *American Beauty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 154-74, 324-27, Martha H. Patterson, *Beyond the Gibson Girl: Reimagining the American New Woman, 1895-1915* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005). The definitive monograph on Gibson is by Fairfax Downey, *Portrait of an Era as Drawn by C.D. Gibson* (New York: C. Scribner’s Sons, 1936). See also Henry C. Pitz, “Charles Dana Gibson, Delineator of an Age,” in *The Gibson Girl and Her America: The Best Drawings of Charles Dana Gibson*, ed. Edmund Vincent Gillon (New York: Dover Publications, 1969), vii-xi, Walt Reed, “Charles Dana Gibson,” in *The Illustrator in America, 1860-2000* (New York: Society of Illustrators, 2001), 74-75, Susan E. Meyer, “Charles Dana Gibson,” in *America’s Great Illustrators* (New York: H. N. Abrams, 1978), 208-31. On Pitz see Matthew Lavelle, “Pitz, Henry Clarence,” in *Literary and Cultural Heritage Map of Pennsylvania*, ed. Steven Herb and Karla M. Schmit (University Park, PA: An initiative of The Paterno Library at The Pennsylvania State University available online: [http://www.pabook.libraries.psu.edu/palitmap/bios/Pitz\\_\\_Henry\\_C.html](http://www.pabook.libraries.psu.edu/palitmap/bios/Pitz__Henry_C.html), c. 2007).

sprinting across the page with insider information while his representative is bidding on futures that will result in their ruin.

Grain traders, such as Jadwin, were rendered by Grefe with the norms of business men as described above, and other artists similarly conformed. For example, when Norris abridged the novel as a short story titled “A Deal in Wheat,” published in *Everybody’s Magazine* in August, 1902, none other than J.C. Leyendecker provided an illustration (Figure 157). This is an early drawing of men in formal clothing that predates the Arrow campaign, and it emphasizes the athletic dynamism of grain trading rather than the slow elegance of spectator sports. Four men in full business suits and bowlers flail their arms to indicate bids in a trade-specific sign language. The action took place in the wheat “pit” of the Chicago Board of Trade—an octagonal recession in the floor where brokers jockeyed shoulder-to-shoulder for space and vied for the attention of the auctioneer.<sup>217</sup>

More specifically, it took place in the fifth incarnation of the wheat pit. The Board of Trade first met in 1848 above the Gage and Haines flour store on South Water Street. At that time it was referred to as The Chamber of Commerce or the Grain Exchange. The institution first commissioned a building seventeen years later, in 1865, which was designed by the architect Edward Burling (Figure 158). The three-story structure was located on the southeast corner of

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<sup>217</sup> For the text see Frank Norris, “A Deal in Wheat,” in *A Deal in Wheat and Other Stories of the New and Old West* (Available for public download from Project Gutenberg as EText-No. 9905 at <http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/9905>, 1903, 2006). The drawing by Leyendecker was reused as the frontispiece to Norris, *A Deal in Wheat and Other Stories of the New and Old West* (New York: Doubleday, Page, and Company, 1903). The standard academic history of the Chicago Board of Trade is by William G. Ferris, *The Grain Traders: The Story of the Chicago Board of Trade* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 1988). See also the official history, written by William D. Falloon, *A Sesquicentennial Look at the Chicago Board of Trade* (Chicago: Board of Trade of the City of Chicago, 1998). For the history of corruption at the Board from the nineteenth century to 1989, when forty five traders were indicted by the FBI after a four year investigation, see the work of David Greising and Laurie Morse, *Brokers, Bagmen, and Moles: Fraud and Corruption in the Chicago Futures Markets* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1991).

North LaSalle and West Washington Streets, and it was destroyed in the great Chicago fire of 1871. A replacement was erected in 1872 by the firm Cochrane and Miller at the same location (Figure 159). William W. Boyington designed a third building in 1881, which stood until 1885. It was notable for being based on a “floating foundation” made of concrete and wood. The Board soon outgrew this space, and yet another building was erected in 1885 at 141 West Jackson Street (Figure 160). This one was designed by the architects Wheelock and Clay, and it was ten stories, built on spread foundations, and boasted a 300 foot tower that was removed in 1895 after ground settling caused it to become unstable.<sup>218</sup>

It is with knowledge of this real place well-established, and a set of visual symbols in mind—paintings by Millet and Bouguereau and drawings by Grefe and Leyendecker—that film adaptations of Norris’s work were made. The first was a silent production from 1909 by D.W. Griffith—the director who has become revered for using experimental camerawork as well as despised for making racist propaganda. Titled *A Corner in Wheat*, the film’s content is an amalgamation of *The Pit* and “A Deal in Wheat.” In the film a greedy opportunist, the Wheat King, attempts to buy all of the crop for sale at the Chicago Board of Trade to fix the price and reap a huge profit. He succeeds and the consequences are devastating. The price of bread skyrockets. Families can no longer feed their children. Men who depend on bread lines for meager sustenance are turned away to starve. Meanwhile, the investor throws a lavish party, relishing his fortune. His luck, however, is not to last. At the climax of the film the Wheat King

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<sup>218</sup> For the sake of clarity I refer to this architectural firm as Holabird and Root in conjunction with the Board of Trade Building. It is worth noting, however, that the firm was named Holabird and Roche when the contract was signed. Their name was changed in 1928, while the building was under construction, to reflect the current partners John A. Holabird and John W. Root Jr. They were the successors of the founding partners William Holabird and Marin Roche.

falls into a grain bin while wheat pours down. As he flails frantically his body is covered, and he is literally smothered by his wealth (Figure 161).<sup>219</sup>

Griffith conveyed meaning in the film by relying on the aforementioned familiarity with Millet and Bouguereau. Indeed, the film is constructed like a series of *tableaux vivants* of Millet's paintings. Camera work for the film was done by G.W. Bitzer, who recalled a special connection with Millet in his memoirs. A copy of *The Angelus* hung in his parents' house, and he studied the lighting of paintings, including *The Gleaners*, in preparation for the film. The film begins with an enactment of *The Sower* from 1850, and later the stooping postures of *The Angelus* and *The Gleaners*—both from 1857—are quoted visually (Figure 162, Figure 163, Figure 164, and Figure 165). As the *Biograph Bulletin* announced:

Every phase of the question is illuminated, beginning with an animated reproduction of Jean Francois Millet's masterpiece, "The Sowers." From the barn they start and with the grain sack hung from their shoulders, the two bent and knotted forms are seen trudging wearily over the plowed ground their arms

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<sup>219</sup> The film has been interpreted several other times. For an overview of scholarship see Tom Gunning, "A Corner in Wheat," in *The Griffith Project*, ed. Paolo Cherchi Usai (London: British Film Institute Publishing, 1999), 130-41. For a description of the film shot-by-shot that supports a tight analysis see Helmut Färber, "A Corner in Wheat by D.W. Griffith, 1909: A Critique," *Griffithiana* 59 (1992, 1997): 7-87. For a description of the creation of the film see Russell Merritt, "Foreword to Helmut Färber's *a Corner in Wheat* by D.W. Griffith, 1909: A Critique," *Griffithiana* 59 (1997): 6. For a post-structural interpretation which includes references to real corners of the commodity markets and discussion of Millet paintings see Jan Olsson, "Trading Places: Griffith, Patten and Agricultural Modernity," *Film History* 17 (2005): 39-65. For an interpretation that emphasizes a rural and urban dichotomy see Simmon, "'the Shame of the Cities': the Urban Drama at Biograph," 29-67. For the historical significance of the film's structure see Tom Gunning, *D.W. Griffith and the Origins of American Narrative Film: The Early Years at Biograph* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 240-54. See also Vlada Petric, *D.W. Griffith's a Corner in Wheat: A Critical Analysis* (Cambridge: University Film Study Center, 1976). *A Corner in Wheat* is tricky to interpret because there are multiple versions of the film in circulation with the shots in different orders and with different title cards. For a discussion of what Griffith most likely intended, see Eileen Bowser, "The Reconstitution of 'a Corner in Wheat,'" *Cinema Journal* 15, no. 2 (1976): 42-52, ———, "Addendum to 'the Reconstitution of 'a Corner in Wheat,'" *Cinema Journal* 19, no. 1 (1979): 101-02.

swinging in perfect chronometry with a slight gush of wheat grain pouring forth at each advance of the arm. In this scene we find the genesis of one of the mammoth industries of the earth. The foundation of life, for it is the foundation of the bread of life. How little do those poor honest souls realize the turmoil the fruit of their labors will incur.

By imitating Barbizon paintings Griffith aligns the film with the aesthetic values and progressive politics of farmers. While he does not imitate specific paintings by Bouguereau, he does show the Wheat King in an opulent interior space in which such a painting might hang (Figure 166). Indeed, the party scene evokes the drawing by Grefe of Jadwin's and Dearborn's home.<sup>220</sup>

Imitating paintings as a cinematographic technique might appear strange to readers of the twenty-first century, but during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries painting and drama had merged in the mind of the public in both Britain and the United States. Paintings were displayed dramatically, and drama imitated painting. During the nineteenth century the traditional three-sided stone proscenium was replaced with four-sided gilding—a picture frame for the stage. Extra-large paintings, such as Theodore Géricault's *The Raft of the Medusa* from 1819 and John Martin's *Belshazzar's Feast* from 1820, toured the countryside like theatrical troupes, and they were set up on small-town opera stages. Panoramic paintings that were hundreds of feet long were mounted on rollers, lit with fire from behind, and scrolled across stages. (Midwestern American scenes were particularly popular subject matter for moving panoramas. One extant example simulated floating down the Mississippi River, and another recounted the Dakota War of 1862.) Fine painters were recruited to design costumes and

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<sup>220</sup> Quotation is from *Biograph Bulletin*, December 13, 1909, reproduced in Gunning, "A Corner in Wheat," 130-31. Recollections are in Billy Bitzer, *His Story: The Autobiography of D.W. Griffith's Master Cameraman* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1973), 83-84.

backgrounds for plays. Actors stood motionless like painted compositions to end scenes or emphasize dramatic moments. Sometimes they even imitated specific works of art. In opera, where strenuous singing makes movement inconvenient, such frozen action endured until the late twentieth century. Within the home people donned costumes and posed motionless in their parlors, and many early photographs were staged in a similar way. In short, such practices would have made *A Corner in Wheat* seem logical.<sup>221</sup>

A second silent movie rendition of *The Pit* was directed by Maurice Tourneur in 1914. Although the film is not easily accessible in the early twenty-first century and may have been lost, primary sources suggest that its story line is in accordance with the novel. An understanding of the film's visual properties can be acquired through stills reproduced in a photoplay edition of *The Pit*. Photoplay editions are hardcover novels that were published concurrently with a film adaptation, containing stills as a marketing strategy. The books were most common from 1912 to 1935, and the two largest publishers were Grosset and Dunlap and A.L. Burt. *The Pit's* stills verify an assessment published in *Moving Picture World* stating that the film was a "big production—a good one. It is elaborately staged, well directed and finely played." The magazine *Motography* explained that the film begins with Chicago's railroads and wharfs before

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<sup>221</sup> On blurring visual art and theater see the essay by Michael R. Booth, "The Taste for Spectacle," in *Victorian Spectacular Theatre 1850-1910* (Boston: Routledge and Keegan Paul, 1981), 1-29. On staged photography see the essays in the exhibition catalog *Acting the Part: Photography as Theatre*, ed. Lori Pauli (London: National Gallery of Canada published by Merrell, 2006,) including the work of Ann Thomas, "Modernity and the Staged Photograph, 1900-1965," 101-31, Lori Pauli, "Setting the Scene," 13-71, Marta Weiss, "Staged Photography in the Victorian Album," 81-99, and Karen Henry, "The Artful Disposition: Theatricality, Cinema, and Social Context in Contemporary Photography," 134-60. For information on panoramas of the Mississippi River, including an extant example in the Saint Louis Art Museum painted by John J. Egan about 1850, see Whitmore, "A Panorama of Unequaled yet Ever-Varying Beauty," 12-61, Perry Townsend Rathbone, *Mississippi Panorama: The Life and Landscape of the Father of Waters and Its Great Tributary, the Missouri*, revised ed. (St. Louis, MO: City Art Museum of St. Louis, 1950). The Dakota War panorama is in the collection of the Minnesota Historical Society. For a discussion of how tableau was used in other early films, see Ben Brewster and Lea Jacobs, "The Tableau," in *Theatre to Cinema: Stage Pictorialism and the Early Feature Film* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 33-78.



transitioning to the floor of the Board of Trade. Scenes of financial struggle take place within this institution, interspersed with scenes of marital problems. By the end Jadwin is penniless, but in the last scene he and Dearborn embrace as a happy couple.<sup>222</sup>

One still from the Photoplay edition is a particularly interesting two-page spread that shows the auction pit of the Board of Trade (Figure 167). The large space is swarming with men in business suits, as they excitedly bid for grain using the same elaborate system of hand gestures drawn by Leyendecker. *Motography* praised the scene in superlatives, noting that it was “the biggest interior scene ever made anywhere.” Similarly the writer for *Moving Picture World* noted that it was an interior “of uncommon and spectacular value even in these days of big productions.” The magazine further praised the quality of acting, noting that nothing was “grossly exaggerated” and that “the men look like they might have come from State Street offices.” Such realism was, in fact, achieved by filming bona-fide traders. As was explained in *Motography*, to fill the space five hundred actors were recruited, including “sixty brokers from Wall street, the New street curb, the Consolidated Exchange and the New York Stock Exchange” and “Forty Western Union and Postal messenger boys.” It is notable that “Several of the brokers had sold wheat in the very pit which was being reproduced for the camera.”<sup>223</sup>

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<sup>222</sup> The film was based on a theatrical adaptation of the novel by Channing Pollock from 1904. Jadwin was played by Wilton Lackaye, Dearborn by Gail Kane, and Corthell by Milton Sills. For basic facts about the film see Harry Waldman, “The Pit,” in *Maurice Tourneur: The Life and Films* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2001), 37-38. The history of photoplay editions is recounted by Rick Miller, “What Is a Photoplay Edition?” And “The Story of Photoplay Editions,” in *Photoplay Editions: A Collector’s Guide* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, 2002), 1-10.

<sup>223</sup> “Big Interior Scene,” *Motography*, December 19, 1914, 842. The film was described at the time as: “The Pit—Brady—(Five Reels).—The sense of the drama are laid in Chicago during a period of speculation in the wheat pit. Cressler, a victim of rash speculation, commits suicide just as Curtis Jadwin, a young broker, wins the hand and heart of Laura Dearborn, a society girl. Their married happiness is menaced by Jadwin’s infatuation for wheat speculation, which leads him to neglect his young wife. Corthell, a former lover, appears to her and almost wins her away from her husband. The latter is temporarily won from his passion for money-making, but succumbs to it again

Taken as a whole, what emerges from a visual analysis of Norris's work is an understanding of the food system that humanizes the production, processing, and consumption of food. By looking at pictures on paper or the movie screen Americans saw struggling farmers, greedy traders, and despairing consumers, and the contrasts were stunning. Such personalized narratives are highly persuasive and have the potential to be used for encouraging social change. Viewers would have identified with some of the individuals represented, but more importantly they would have moralized the stages of the food system. It is thus clear that drawing on Norris's ideas would have been possible for academics of a later era, such as Davis and Goldberg, and that such an approach had merit. To bring the visual conversation about auction houses up to Davis and Goldberg's era, however, requires an examination of how the Board of Trade responded to this moralizing.

The public uproar about unfair trading practices and corners on the market spurred on regulation. Indeed, attacks on the Board led to national attention, and in 1916 Woodrow Wilson asked the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) to undertake a wholesale investigation of the grain markets. The process lasted for nine years, and the result was a nine-volume report, totaling 2,826 pages, which called for changes. Most importantly, it pled for the reform of futures trading at auction houses like the Chicago Board of Trade. It framed trading in these places as characterized by excessive speculation, epitomized by attempts to corner the market. The

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and leaves the path open for Corthell. Jadwin plans a great wheat corner and starts in by winning back a fortune of which his friends deprived him years before. The market recedes and Jadwin quarrels with his partner, accusing him of trying to sell him out. Jadwin, thereupon, plunges into the market, but failing to corner it, hears the name of his firm 'read out' by the secretary. The corner has been prevented; he is ruined. Quitting the tumult of the Board of Trade, he makes his way home, a beaten bam. His wife is on the point of eloping with Corthell, but when she sees her unhappy husband her heart is touched. Dismissing her lover, she turns to Jadwin and promises to help him commence life afresh far from the feverish temptations of speculative business life. The leads are in the hands of Wilton Lackaye, Gail Kane and Milton Sills." Reprinted from "World: The Pit," *Motography*, January 16, 1915, 80. *Moving Picture World* is quoted in Waldman, "The Pit," 38.

reforms, members of the FTC hoped, would stabilize grain prices for the common good.<sup>224</sup>

Secretary of Agriculture William Jardine made the FTC's conclusions public at the time of the report's completion in 1925. In a speech given in Bismarck, North Dakota, to an audience no-doubt dominated by Nonpartisan League sympathizers, he explained:

Farmers in this section of the country are particularly interested in the violent fluctuations of grain prices during more recent months. During the investigation carried on by the Department of Agriculture to determine the causes of these disastrous price changes I made certain suggestions to representatives of the Chicago Board of Trade and called upon them to consider constructive measures to prevent a similar situation in the future. As I see it, the grain exchanges of this country perform a useful function—at least we have perfected no better system of marketing. But when the price of wheat fluctuates 12 or 13 cents in a day it indicates to me that there is something wrong. There is no agency that can bring about more effectively a correction of this situation than the grain exchanges themselves. They must realize that they have to a large extent lost the confidence of the people and can regain this only by thoroughly putting their house in order. If they fail to take appropriate action it is my purpose to exercise to the fullest extent such power as the existing law gives me to require them to do so.

With these threatening demands made public, the Board clearly had problems to contend with.

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<sup>224</sup> United States Federal Trade Commission, *Report of the Federal Trade Commission on the Grain Trade*, 9 vols. (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1920-1925). It is worth noting that the governor and state legislature that commissioned the new capitol in 1930 were not endorsed by the Nonpartisan League, but this should not be taken to mean that the League's agendas were moot. No candidate could be successful in North Dakota at this time without catering to the League.

In response to harsh criticism by the Nonpartisan League and the governmental crackdown on corruption, the Board of Trade issued a propagandistic book by Edward Jerome Dies, *The Wheat Pit*, to defend itself. The book claimed that “‘Phantom wheat’ was a favorite cry of exchange critics during the recent post-war agrarian unrest. But there is really nothing ghostly about the tremendous volume of grain received at Chicago. Four hundred million bushels is the annual total.” This explanation obscures the real problem of phantom wheat, voiced by the League, which occurs when scales are fraudulently calibrated at country elevators. Operators of these scales under-weighed grain, and thus underpaid farmers. The discrepancy became visible when the volumes of wheat reported at elevators and at grain exchanges were compared. Jerome Dies also reframed grain speculation, not as a phenomenon that resulted in commodity corners and subsequent social and economic turmoil, but as “a part of the great system of distribution to which credit and transportation belong.” It was like “a balance wheel, by which the whole machinery of industry is regulated.” The author quoted an anonymous 50-year veteran of the Board, saying that “It is almost as easy to corner the stars in the sky as to corner the wheat market of today. [...] And there never will be another corner for the simple reason that exchange rules and rigid supervision by the federal government make such a condition utterly impossible.” Thus, whatever minor problems were present at the Board in the past were presented as defunct, given that the organization had regulated itself between 1915 and 1925. Such claims were dubious at best, and they unsuccessfully attempted to squelch scrutiny of the institution. Thus

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<sup>225</sup> Quotation is in Falloon, *A Sesquicentennial Look at the Chicago Board of Trade*, 159-60. The original source is by William M. Hardine, “Farmers’ Distribution Problems and Co-Operatives,” *The American Grain Elevator and Grain Trade*, July 15, 1925. The address took place in the Bismarck metropolitan area, the city of Mandan, which is directly adjacent to Bismarck proper.

during the late 1920s the Board began to radically rethink its visual presence and enhance its operations with a new building.<sup>226</sup>

## 5.7 REBUILDING THE GRAIN TRADE

As early as 1909 the Board was exploring the idea of a new building, and they consulted with the firm Holabird and Root (then named after the founders William Holabird and Martin Roche) about the possibility. The head architects of this firm, John A. Holabird and John W. Root Jr., were both schooled at the École des Beaux-Arts, and they could boast of many projects across the nation. Over the next eighteen years the spatial needs of the Board were solidified, and several other architects were considered for the project. Holabird and Root nonetheless won the commission in 1927, and the new building was placed on the same lot as the one from 1885—most of the block bounded by LaSalle, Jackson, Sherman, and Van Buren Streets (Figure 168). The plan was designed to meet both the needs of the Board, as well as to generate profit through the leasing of office space. Thus, floors 1-3 were designated for the lobby and offices of the Board, 4-9 were reserved for the trading floor, and 10-42 were to be rentable offices. The building is capped with three floors, 43-45, designated for storage, an observatory, and maintenance. Demolition of the old building began in 1929, and despite the stock market crash of that year construction continued. By the end of 1930 the building was well-enough finished for a dedication ceremony and for the first tenant—Quaker Oats—to move in.<sup>227</sup>

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<sup>226</sup> Edward Jerome Dies, *The Wheat Pit* (Chicago: The Argyle Press, 1925), 13, 19, 46, 51.

<sup>227</sup> Key scholarship on Holabird and Root has been written by Werner Blaser, *Chicago Architecture: Holabird and Root 1880-1992* (Basel: Birkhäuser Verlag, 1992), Robert Brueggemann, *Holabird and Roche, Holabird and Root: An*

What the employees of Quaker Oats found themselves within is an impressive forty-five story (612 foot) art deco skyscraper—a design chosen for its symbolic as well as functional value. By choosing an art deco, rather than a historicist, style the Board presented itself as on the cultural vanguard. The exterior is defined by a large base, tower, and pyramidal roof, all of which are adorned with streamlined elements. Most prominently, on the tower's façade soaring vertical lines are caused by dark windows with similarly dark stone between them. The building was a bold visual statement on the skyline—the tallest in Chicago upon its completion. It was to be, and remains, a building on the cutting edge of technology—the nerve center for the world-wide grain trade. When the building was new more telegraph lines were installed there than in any other place on earth. Prices achieved by auction thus effectively dictated the global price of grain.<sup>228</sup>

The spatial organization of the Board of Trade building should be understood as derived in part from municipal building ordinances, but also from a desire to propagandize. Beginning in 1893 the city had limited the height of buildings. The first cap was 130 feet, or about eleven stories. Over the next several decades these types of restrictions were tinkered with many times, resulting in buildings of varying dimensions being erected downtown. Under the ordinances that the Board was built under—mostly enacted by 1920—the bases of buildings were restricted to 260 feet—or about twenty two stories. It was acceptable, however, to erect a tower above 260

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*Illustrated Catalog of Works*, 3 vols. (New York: Garland in cooperation with the Chicago Historical Society, 1991), ———, "Holabird and Roche and Holabird and Root: The First Two Generations," *Chicago History*, Fall 1980, 130-65, Russell F. Whitehead, "Holabird and Root: Masters of Design," *Pencil Points*, February 19, 1938, 67-97. A standard reference on this building is the work of Robert Brueggemann, "Chicago Board of Trade," in *Holabird and Roche, Holabird and Root: An Illustrated Catalog of Works* (New York: Garland in cooperation with the Chicago Historical Society, 1991), entries 1200 and 01, pages 23-40.

<sup>228</sup> On the earlier structures occupied by the Board, see Frank A. Randall and John D. Randall, *History of the Development of Building Construction in Chicago*, 2nd ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 56, 119-20.

feet on up to twenty five percent of a lot, not to exceed one sixth of the total volume of a building. The result was a plethora of structures with large bases and slender towers. In the case of the Board, the massive nine-story base measures 173 by 255 feet, which is topped with a 45 story tower placed at the far end of the structure. Wings with extra office space extend forward from the façade, carefully designed so as to be ignored from the best vantage point on LaSalle Street. Here only the ends of the wings are visible, with the tower shooting up behind them. Thus the architects created the illusion of a sprawling, low, base with a tower jutting up from it gracefully.<sup>229</sup>

Proposals with more conservative dominant features had also been seriously considered. Alfred S. Alschuler Incorporated and D.H. Burnham and Company, for example, each submitted ideas. Structurally these appeared much like the plan by Holabird and Root, with large bases and soaring towers—the results of the same city ordinances (Figure 169, Figure 170, and Figure 171). Their ornamentation, however, could not have been more different. D.H. Burnham and Company's was neoclassical, the front being based on a triumphal arch. Burnham's trading floor echoed the Board's building from 1865, with a coffered ceiling, murals in lunettes, and recessed trading areas. Alfred S. Alschuler Incorporated's also drew on the past. It made heavy use of gothic elements, including needle-like stone spires and pointed arches.<sup>230</sup>

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<sup>229</sup> For discussions of how municipal policy shaped the Chicago skyline, see the work of Carol Willis, "Light, Height, and Site: The Skyscraper in Chicago," in *Chicago Architecture and Design, 1923-1993: Reconfiguration of an American Metropolis*, ed. John Zukowsky (Munich: Prestel in association with the Art Institute of Chicago, 1993), 119-39. Willis notes that the specific policies that the Board was forced to conform to were published by the City of Chicago, *Building Ordinances, with Amendments up to and Including January 16, 1928* (Chicago: 1928), 219.

<sup>230</sup> Proposal by D.H. Burnham and Co. dated November 2, 1925, page 8, in the folder "[1-9] Bldg. Comm—New Bldg C. 1925-26" in the box "Chicago Board of Trade Supp. V. 75-68. Box 14" in The Chicago Board of Trade collection in Richard J. Daley Library's Special Collections department, University of Illinois at Chicago. On Alfred S. Alschuler Inc. see the report to Mr. H.A. Rumsey, Chairman of the Building Committee of the Board of Trade, Chicago, Illinois, dated January 15<sup>th</sup> 1926, page 3, in the folder "[1-10] Bldg. Comm—New Bldg C 1925-26" in the

Holabird and Root's buildings were often complemented by decorative programs, and this is certainly true of the Board. Here the art-deco design included stylized wheat for ornamentation on grillwork, elevators, and trim, as well as sculpture and murals (Figure 172). A celebratory sculpture on the façade by Alvin Meyer served to tie the Board to American nationalism, using imagery from European and American history (Figure 173). Specifically, it united the institution with the agricultural traditions of the old and new worlds through depictions of a Babylonian holding wheat and an Indian holding corn. Just slightly above the level of their heads, placed directly above the clock, is an eagle. These stone carvings are partially rendered in the round and partially in high relief. Both figures are shown in pre-modern garb. The Babylonian wears a hood, and his facial hair is long. The Indian wears a feathered headdress, and carvings on the forehead suggest war paint. They mirror each other in composition, flanking a clock—an unobvious reference to the passage of history. Both men hold crops in similar positions arcing over the clock—a reference both to what is sold here as well as to the idea that civilizations are built on agriculture. Each wears a garment with vertical folds that blend into the soaring lines of the building.

A second major sculpture on the exterior also blends with the building—a colossal image of the Roman goddess *Ceres* created by John Storrs (Figure 174). He has re-interpreted this goddess of agriculture as a half deity-half skyscraper. Storrs had been interested in architecture—and especially skyscrapers—since childhood. As an adult he fostered friendships with the best architects of Chicago, including John A. Holabird, John W. Root, Louis Sullivan, Frank Lloyd Wright, and Edward Bennett. As early as 1914 he was making sketches of these buildings, and his art from the 1920s is widely-understood to be inspired by architecture. Alone or in

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box “Chicago Board of Trade Supp. V. 75-68. Box 14” in The Chicago Board of Trade collection in Richard J. Daley Library’s Special Collections department, University of Illinois at Chicago.



cityscapes, he carved, cast, and assembled the soaring vertical forms of skyscrapers and applied geometric patterning to them. Most of his sculptures were not intended to represent specific buildings. However, two years before Storrs was commissioned to create *Ceres* for the Board, in 1927, he made a sculpture titled *Forms in Space* that was directly derived from the profile of a Holabird and Root building (Figure 175). The inspiration was the first art-deco skyscraper in Chicago, erected at 333 North Michigan Avenue. Storrs' tribute to this earlier building by Holabird and Root, in addition to friendships with the partners in the firm, probably helped him to land the *Ceres* commission in 1929.<sup>231</sup>

Storrs's *Ceres* is a 30-foot cast aluminum finial on the top of the Board of Trade building. Although the original proposal for the building by Holabird and Root lacked the statue, the final elevation drawings created for technical and promotional purposes show her prominently (Figure 176). The goddess wears a pleated dress, which becomes rectilinear at the bottom—doubling as the base of a skyscraper. As Storrs described it, “the vertical lines of the building itself are retained in the lines of the statue.” She holds what Storrs described as a small sack of grain in one hand—used to show the quality of a shipment to buyers—and a sheaf of wheat in the other. Viewers have sometimes assumed that the sack is a money bag, which would have also been appropriate for an auction house. The head of *Ceres* lacks facial features—ostensibly because they would be so high above the ground as to be indistinguishable. This blank face should be understood, however, as a cunning promotional strategy. The fact that her face lacks detail was

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<sup>231</sup> Information on Storrs's interest in architecture, and his *Ceres* specifically, can be found in the work of Ann Rosenthal, “John Storrs, Eclectic Modernist,” in *John Storrs and John Flannagan: Sculpture and Works on Paper*, ed. Jennifer Gordon, et al. (Williamstown: Exhibition catalog from the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 1980), 16-20, Noel Frackman, *John Storrs* (New York: Exhibition catalog from the Whitney Museum of American Art, 1986), 57-81. The quotation is on page 77 of Frackman. Holabird and Root was still called Holabird and Roche at this time, but I am using the former for clarity throughout this narrative.

repeated in the press and guide books, prompting the public to squint in vain at the smooth surface. The interest generated also prompted Storrs to sell small replicas of the statue to collectors (Figure 177). It is thus probable that more people admired her blank face than would have noticed a realistically-modeled one.<sup>232</sup>

In addition to mythology and architecture, the form of Storrs's *Ceres* evokes the popular culture of the era. There is a strong resemblance between his sculpture and the appearance of robots that was forming in people's minds. Indeed her body is only slightly less smooth, angular, and metallic than the celebrated humanoid Maria from Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* released two years previously, in 1927 (Figure 178). Unlike the unsettling feelings created by the sharp angles and segmented joints of Maria, however, Storrs's *Ceres* conforms to the enviable norms of high society. As is appropriate for a goddess from antiquity, she is wearing something like the Venetian designer Mariano Fortuny's "Delphos" gowns inspired by ancient Greek sculpture (Figure 179). Given that many Delphos gowns were owned by upper class women in Chicago, Storrs' sculpture would likely have been seen as fashionable. Fortuny's innovative dress was permanently and tightly pleated to evoke a *chiton*, such that it swelled and contracted with the contours of the body. To maintain accordion-like elasticity, Delphos gowns were stored twisted into a coil rather than on a hanger. The chemical process through which the fabric was pleated was a closely-guarded secret. Should the creases become relaxed it was possible to return it to the factory for re-pleating. The design was first produced in 1907, and it remained in production until the designer's death in 1949. The body of the garment was standardized, but sleeves, belts,

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<sup>232</sup> See, for example, Henry Justin Smith and Edward Howard Suydam, *Chicago: A Portrait* (New York: The Century Company, 1931), 65.

and beads varied. Like the garment on Storrs' *Ceres*, the Delphos gown could be worn under a coat, and indeed Fortuny designed velvet garments for that purpose.<sup>233</sup>

On the wall of the trading room was another large depiction of Ceres. This one was by the most renowned muralist working in Chicago—John Warner Norton (Figure 180). Although Norton's mural seems to celebrate the Board, we can be assured that the artist had mixed feelings about the institution because it cost his family their economic stability and him his education. Norton was raised in Lockport, New York, by a well-to-do father—also named John—who was involved in paper milling and other manufacturing endeavors. His mother was a professional musician. The family sent their son to Harvard in 1894, where he enjoyed mathematics and languages, but his education was cut short by unforeseen circumstances. As a family friend explained, "In a spectacular and old-fashioned Board of Trade failure John's father threw in his fortune (in vain) to save a brother. From a rich man, in a day he was reduced to one in moderate circumstances." With his family unable to pay tuition, Norton was sent home. After several years of struggle, during which he helped with the family business, Norton enrolled at the Art Institute of Chicago in 1899. Once John Warner Norton became established as a muralist, he often partnered with Holabird and Root to create art for their buildings. His *Ceres* for the Board of Trade completed in 1930 is an example of this. He created the mural off-site in a studio, after examining the space, creating numerous sketches, and testing colors in the lighting available. At least ten complete sketches of the mural survive, showing that he struggled to settle on a specific model and style. The result, on a formal level, was an art deco composition rendered with an

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<sup>233</sup> Six examples of these dresses survive in the Chicago History Museum. They can illustrate the variation on the design. They are in red, blue, green, and tan, some were hemmed with changing style but they all extend to at least mid-calf. Two have sleeves and four are sleeveless; four are belted and two hang freely. They are reproduced by Timothy A. Long and Valerie Steele, *Chic Chicago: Couture Treasures from the Chicago History Museum* (Chicago: Exhibition catalog from the Chicago History Museum, 2008), 30-31.

orange palette. Ceres appears as a beautiful woman with a bare torso. Her towering body fills nearly the entire thirty one and a half by eight foot canvas. In one hand she holds a fan-like bunch of wheat, while with the other she scatters coin-like kernels of grain onto the soil. A few stalks of wheat, oats, and corn are at her sides. A cityscape appears diminutive behind her.<sup>234</sup>

By placing the goddess between a rural and urban environment, Storrs and Norton together reinforced a myth of origin for modern grain distribution that was grounded in antiquity. This trend of including mythological figures in the decorative program was a direct tie to the earlier incarnations of the Board's building. In the one from 1872, murals on the trading room floor depicted Ceres as well as Mercury, Apollo, and Minerva. Although no longer extant, in an engraving from when the building was new two of these rectilinear mural panels are clearly visible, filling large portions of the wall (Figure 181). Ceres is flying over farmland, with a man holding produce on her right and a woman holding bread on her left. The building also contained sculptural references to mythology. Two stone figures carved in the round adorned the façade. Although they were described as allegories of agriculture and industry rather than goddesses, the figure of agriculture was carved with prominent attributes of Ceres—including a cornucopia and a shock of wheat (Figure 182). Thus, Holabird and Root's Board of Trade building can be

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<sup>234</sup> For a scholarly discussions of John Warner Norton's work, see the work of Jim L. Zimmer, "The Life and Art of John Warner Norton," in *John Warner Norton*, ed. Jim L. Zimmer (Springfield, IL: Exhibition catalog from the Illinois State Museum, 1992), 10-29, Richard N. Murray, "John Warner Norton: Mural Painter," in *John Warner Norton*, ed. Jim L. Zimmer (Springfield, IL: Exhibition catalog from the Illinois State Museum, 1992), 36-51. See also the essays written by his friends Tom Lea, "John W. Norton: The Artist," in *John W. Norton: American Painter 1876-1934* (Chicago: Privately Printed for Friends of the Artist by The Lakeside Press, 1935), 33-45, Thomas E. Tallmadge, "John W. Norton: The Man," in *John W. Norton: American Painter 1876-1934* (Chicago: Privately printed for friends of the artist by The Lakeside Press, 1935), 11-31. For the significance of John Warner Norton as a Chicago muralist, see Sylvia Rhor, "Mural Painting and Public Schools in Chicago, 1905-1941" (PhD Dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, 2004). For the sketches Norton created for Ceres, see also the monograph published at the time of Norton's death by Thomas E. Tallmadge and Tom Lea, *John W. Norton: American Painter 1876-1934* (Chicago: Privately printed for friends of the artist by The Lakeside Press, 1935), plates 12-15. Quotation is on page 17 of Tallmadge.

understood as a blend of the innovative form of a skyscraper covered with streamlined motifs, merged with traditional imagery appropriated from earlier incarnations of the building. While the building can stand alone as an interesting monument, when placed in a larger context its importance as part of the visual culture of agribusiness becomes clearer. To do so I will return to the Nonpartisan League and politics in the upper Midwest.<sup>235</sup>

Although primary documentation is scant for this period, visual evidence suggests that posturing between the Board of Trade and the government of North Dakota continued. It is notable that during the years before the Chicago Board of Trade commissioned its new building in 1927, North Dakotans were engaged in a longstanding struggle for control of the agricultural economy—especially the sale and processing of wheat. Then, concurrent with the completion of the Board of Trade in 1930, the North Dakota State Capitol Building burned. Faced with an immediate need for space, the state Capitol Committee hired the same architects, Holabird and Root, to replace the building. As a state that had a history of scrutinizing institutions in the food system—such as General Mills, country elevators, and grain auction houses—and which previously responded to these institutions with the ambitious State Mill and Elevator building project, it is reasonable to ask whether similar thinking informed the commission of the State Capitol. As I will argue, the visual and archival evidence suggests that the capitol was, in part, a reaction to the Chicago Board of Trade.<sup>236</sup>

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<sup>235</sup> These sculptures are now installed at ground level behind the Board of Trade Building.

<sup>236</sup> My analysis of the Holabird and Root capitol is unique in that it attempts to intertwine it with the social history of grain trading. Other scholarly and popular histories of the building have been written that frame the building in the context of other American capitols, Holabird and Root's body of work, the long story of modern architectural history, geological materials and stonework, urban geography, and labor relations. See especially the work of Henry Russell Hitchcock and William Seale, *Temples of Democracy: The State Capitols of the U.S.A.* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), 284-87, Robert Brueggemann, "North Dakota State Capitol," in *Holabird and Roche, Holabird and Root: An Illustrated Catalog of Works* (New York: Garland in cooperation with the Chicago

On purely visual and spatial levels, the new capitol building—completed in 1934—seems to be a direct response to the Chicago Board of Trade (Figure 183). Both buildings share a large base, a tower rising from one end, and soaring vertical lines on the façade of the tower—the form dictated by Chicago’s municipal law. The base of the capitol is slightly larger than the Board’s, at 389 x 173 feet, but in both cases the base contains large open rooms on the floors directly above the lobby. In the Board this large space consisted of the trading floor for grain, while in the North Dakota capitol the space was the legislative chambers. Also in each building the tower was designed for functional offices topped with an observation deck. Had the firm’s intentions of adorning the Capitol with a large symbolic statue and ornamental carvings been carried out, the resemblance between the two buildings would have been even stronger. Unfortunately, the only adornments added to the Capitol were a few bronze plaques and several sets of elevator doors designed by Edgar Miller. The plaques depict a farmer, miner, Indian, trapper, and wife. They are located on the exterior of the building above windows in the

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Historical Society, 1991), entry 1365, pages 212-219, ———, “Moscow, Berlin, Washington, Bismarck: Some Thoughts About Architecture and Politics in the 1930’s,” in *The North Dakota State Capitol: Architecture and History*, ed. Larry Remele (Bismarck: State Historical Society of North Dakota, 1989), 5-12, L. Martin Perry, “According to Plan: A History of the North Dakota Capitol Grounds,” in *The North Dakota State Capitol: Architecture and History*, ed. Larry Remele (Bismarck: State Historical Society of North Dakota, 1989), 31-54, Richard Striner, “Twentieth-Century Pioneers: Public Building in the New Deal Era,” in *The North Dakota State Capitol: Architecture and History*, ed. Larry Remele (Bismarck: State Historical Society of North Dakota, 1989), 13-30, Robert F. Biek, *A Visitor’s Guide to the North Dakota Capitol Grounds: Buildings, Monuments, and Stones* (Bismarck: State Historical Society of North Dakota, 1995), Joseph Bell De Remer, “A New Capitol for the People of North Dakota,” *Architectural Forum* 62, no. 2 (1935): 112-25, Kenneth W. Simons, *North Dakota’s State Capitol* (Bismarck: Bismarck Tribune Company sponsored by the North Dakota State Historical Society and the North Dakota State Board of Administration, 1934), Eldon Hauck, “North Dakota,” in *American Capitols: An Encyclopedia of the State, National, and Territorial Capital Edifices of the United States* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1991), 170-77. For a primary source on the fire see “Capitol Is Burned at Bismarck, N.D.,” *Washington Post*, December 29, 1930, 1,2.

Memorial Hall, which joins the legislative chambers to the tower. The elevator doors depicted historical scenes, including pioneering and the Indian wars.<sup>237</sup>

It might be surprising that small townsfolk were interested in the urban form of a skyscraper, but primary sources show it to be true. For example, in Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street* from 1920, the town booster, Jim Blasusser, disparaged Europe by noting that "You may not believe it, but there ain't one first-class skyscraper in the whole works." Although there was a general enthusiasm among the American people for skyscrapers nation-wide, residents of Bismarck would have had special reason to pay attention. The capitol that burned had been designed by Leroy Buffington—an architect who claimed to have invented that building form (Figure 184). Although no one person merits credit for such a complicated architectural form as the skyscraper, Buffington is widely remembered for developing building techniques used in them. He called the buildings "cloudscrapers," and in 1882 patented shelf and braced skeleton building techniques to erect them. In addition, Buffington was able to boast landing the commission of the world's largest flour mill—Pillsbury's A (Figure 185). This mill cost over a million dollars to build, and the design principles were borrowed from industrial mills from across the globe. Buffington and Charles Pillsbury studied these milling precedents together, and

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<sup>237</sup> Edgar Miller worked frequently with Holabird and Root as well as other architects, adorning buildings with sculpture and stained glass. For information on his creative output, see the essays by Larry Zgoda, "Edgar Miller's Unique Modernist Style Revealed," *Stained Glass Quarterly* 82 (1987): 312-14, Louise Bruner, "Edgar Miller, a Versatile Artist and Craftsman," *American Artist*, May 1963, 38-43, 65-67, Earl Howell Reed, "Edgar Miller, Designer-Craftsman," *Architecture* 66 (1932): 63-68. Miller's historical scenes for the elevator doors are clever, but their violent stereotypes are in poor taste. As the official booklet explained, "An Indian, with upraised tomahawk, and a hunter with his musket, are presented in warlike attitudes, one on each side of the sliding doors. Closing of the doors brings them into close proximity, each facing the other. These figures illustrate the conquest of the west by the white man and the struggle between whites and Indians which accompanied that development." Simons, *North Dakota's State Capitol*, 25-26. Quotation is from "A New Capitol for the People of North Dakota," *Architectural Forum* 62, no. 2 (1935): 113. For building plans, see Holabird and Root, *Architectural Drawings of the State Capitol*, 1932, North Dakota Board of Administration, State Archives, Series 31286, State Historical Society of North Dakota.

they travelled internationally to understand them first hand. The result was a success, and the A Mill increased the flour-producing capacity of Minneapolis from 15,200 to 20,400 barrels per day.<sup>238</sup>

Returning to the search for architects to erect a new state capitol for North Dakota, it is notable that the Chairman of the Capitol Commission, George A. Bangs, recruited John A. Holabird to serve as a consultant. He is, of course, the same architect whose firm had designed the Chicago Board of Trade. As a distinguished professional, Holabird was a good resource. Probably viewing the conversations that would unfold as a foot in the door, he explained to Bangs in a letter dated May 5, 1931 that he was happy to provide advice that would “lead your committee to the selection of a proper architect for your State Capitol Building.” In the letter Holabird affirmed previous communication, indicating that his consultation was “understood to

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<sup>238</sup> Buffington attempted to patent his ideas for the cloudscraper after several of his clients from 1880 to 1882 encouraged him to do so, including the Minneapolis-based flour millers John Sargent Pillsbury and G. H. Christian. The patent became controversial, and his right to profit from the patents was thus denied in court. The question of his originality remains unsettled among scholars. At least one patron, nonetheless, supported Buffington’s claim with a payment. The owner of the Minneapolis Gas Company, Rufus Rand, paid him one eighth of one percent in royalties for using his patented ideas in the Rand Tower in 1929 by Holabird and Root. Whether Buffington deserved royalties for his ideas or not, it is clear from his commissions that he was a widely-respected architect and the most prominent one in Minneapolis. A definitive study of Leroy Buffington remains to be written. The most complete treatment to date is by Muriel B. Christison, “Leroy S. Buffington and the Minneapolis Boom of the 1880s,” *Minnesota History* 23, no. 3 (1942): 219-32. For a critical analysis of his proposal for a skyscraper see Everard M Upjohn, “Buffington and the Skyscraper,” *Art Bulletin* 17 (1935): 48-70. Despite a lack of scholarship, a monograph would be easily doable. Twenty boxes of his architectural drawings are available for public use in the Northwest Architectural Archives, Manuscripts Division, cataloged as the L. S. Buffington Papers, housed in the Elmer L. Andersen Library, University of Minnesota. That school also contains a copy of his memoirs. Leroy S. Buffington, *Memories of Leroy S. Buffington, Architect, Engineer: Who, What, Why, and Where: The Third Stage of Architecture -- the Braced Skeleton of Steel with Shelf -- the Cloudscraper -- the Skyscraper -- Acetylene Gas -- Concrete -- Oil Heat -- Patents -- Discoveries* (Minneapolis: Unpublished typed copy of memoirs, edited and annotated by Muriel B. Christison, collection of the University of Minnesota, TC Wilson Library call number 378.7M66 OB7346 1931, 1941). See also the obituary “Leroy Buffington, Architect, Dead,” *New York Times*, February 17, 1931, 23. In his memoirs, Buffington acknowledged that many people’s ideas were ultimately manifested in tall buildings, and he credited E. Viollet-le-Duc specifically. See Buffington, *Memories of Leroy S. Buffington*, especially parts 13, 14, 19, and note 24. Christison, “Leroy S. Buffington and the Minneapolis Boom of the 1880s,” 223-32.



be entirely informal and unofficial.” In retrospect we might see this relationship as a professional courtesy, an insider’s deal, or both. In any case the advice given to the Commission seems to have smoothed his firm’s path to landing the contract.<sup>239</sup>

The Capitol Commission created an open invitation to architects, and participants were asked to submit a portfolio, contact information, history of their practice, educational and professional background, description of the firm, and references from owners of finished buildings. This was to be supplemented by photographs of not more than three finished buildings, and a “complete set of working drawings of executed work, including structural and mechanical layout, details, [and] specifications.” Holabird and Root submitted a boastful portfolio that flaunted the committee’s guidelines and underscored the Chicago Board of Trade building. They produced photographs of seventeen buildings—far-exceeded the limit of three that had been set by the Capitol Committee. Most prominent and importantly, it sent four views of the Chicago Board of Trade Building. Besides the glut of examples, the firm provided

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<sup>239</sup> Holabird and Root letters, April 2<sup>nd</sup> 1931 to August 24<sup>th</sup> 1931, located in the North Dakota State Archives, State Historical Society of North Dakota, collection of the Director of Institutions, Board of Capitol Commissioners, Architect Selection Files, Series No. 278, Box No. 2, 151205. The advice that John Holabird gave was logical and conservative. He explained that the architect employed should have “proper education and training,” pay attention to functionality rather than copying traditional buildings, and have “taste and culture which come from travel and study.” He advised the committee to consider the “personality, character, [and] general policy or attitude in business and professional relations of the architect” to ensure that the work will be a mutually satisfying collaboration. Whoever is chosen should be well-experienced and able to provide lists of completed buildings with accompanying photographs. Such a firm of longstanding reputation was assumed to be stable, and would thus be able to answer questions about the building’s construction decades into the future. A firm that maintains department heads internally rather than employing outside engineers was noted to ensure “a measure of control.” Proving the quality of service was of utmost importance, especially in regards to scheduling accurately, supervising construction, and finances. In terms of credentialing, he noted that it was important to be a member of the American Institute of Architects in good professional and financial standing. An appropriate commission for the firm was said to be six and a half percent of the total building cost. This was half of a percent higher than standard because of the extra time and effort that would be required to accommodate the State’s wish for the construction to be done in conjunction with other, North Dakota-based, firms. Ibid. For a personal account of this commission, see George A. Bangs and Cyrilla A. Bangs, “North Dakota State Capitol,” in *Autobiography of George A. Bangs* (Self-published, c.1949), 55-78.

Photostats of celebratory news coverage of the Board of Trade, details of its operations, and a record of awards. Given that the Board of Trade was recently completed with national hoopla, and that it featured prominently in the portfolio given to the Capitol Commission, we can be assured that a smaller version of the Board of Trade was what the Commission expected the firm to erect as the next capitol building of North Dakota.<sup>240</sup>

The Capitol's reception was mixed. Praise came from *The Architectural Forum*, which noted that "the erection of a 'skyscraper' on the plains of North Dakota was not the whim of architects determined to be different at all cost, but rather the demonstrably logical solution in modern times of a complex and peculiar problem. The result is a structure for the people, beautiful, efficient, and economical." The building received international recognition when the firm displayed photographs of it at the Paris International Exposition of 1938, where they were honored with a silver medal. Not everyone saw this building in such celebratory terms, however. A writer for *The American Magazine of Art* noted that a skyscraper was an odd building type to choose for a city of approximately 11,000 residents surrounded by wheat fields and livestock.

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<sup>240</sup> Holabird and Root Portfolio, located in the North Dakota State Archives, State Historical Society of North Dakota, collection of the Director of Institutions, Board of Capitol Commissioners, Architect Selection Files, Series No. 278, Box No. 2, 151205. To allow the committee to better interpret the portfolios, each applicant was asked to provide "a brief account of other work executed, including work which may be in progress," and a statement about their "method of handling important projects." Forty two architects submitted proposals from across the nation. Members of the Commission used a rubric on note cards to assign each submission a letter grade, from A to D, and they made comments on most of the proposals. While one might expect the comments on Holabird and Root's portfolio to reveal the logic behind choosing them as the winner, they do not. The committee's response was a confident model of brevity, stating that the firm "grades in class A without comment." Additionally, the questionnaire, photos, specifications, and plans were deemed "very complete." Board of Capitol Commissioners, *State of North Dakota Capitol Building: An Invitation to Architects to Submit Professional Qualifications in Connection with the Design of the Proposed Capitol Building for the State of North Dakota* (Bismarck, ND: April 24, 1931). Available in the North Dakota State Archives, Director of Institutions, Board of Capitol Commissioners, Architect Selection Files, Series No. 278, Box No. 2, 151205, State Historical Society of North Dakota. Holabird and Root's portfolio was assessed on Card 26 located in the North Dakota State Archives, State Historical Society of North Dakota, collection of the Director of Institutions, Board of Capitol Commissioners, Architect Selection Files, Series No. 278, Box No. 1, 151205, Architects Ratings, Ex. 9.

The form was, indeed, developed for urban centers where scarcity of land made the type of building a wise investment. Holabird and Root responded to this criticism by noting that many soaring buildings in the countryside exist in the Western architectural tradition. They pointed to notable examples, including Chartres Cathedral and towers in both Italian cities and at Oxford University. They then unapologetically explained that they had intended to “use what we have learned in commercial structures to develop an efficient and useful landmark to dominate the rolling plains of North Dakota.” In other words, they had applied the principles of the Board of Trade and similar projects to the Capitol.<sup>241</sup>

Upon completion in 1934, the writer for *The Architectural Forum* tied the capitol building to the Nonpartisan League’s agendas, beginning the article by explaining some of the organization’s eccentricities:

They do things differently in North Dakota. Home of the celebrated Non-Partisan League, its citizens are accustomed to such things as the election of governors who are not even interested in politics, to recalling them for high crimes and misdemeanors and then electing them to the U.S. Senate. They have even gone so far as to have two governors at the same time. It is not at all surprising that they should pursue a most unusual way of selecting the architects for a new State capitol. Nor that they should approve a most unusual design from these architects.

Given this context, the visual similarities with the Board, and the statement by Holabird and Root it would have been clear to people that a variation on the Board of Trade was appropriate in

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<sup>241</sup> Quotation is in “A New Capitol for the People of North Dakota,” 113. See “France Gives Awards to U.S. Architects,” *New York Times*, September 2, 1938, 17. For criticism see “North Dakota’s New Capitol,” *The American Magazine of Art*, March 1934, 143. Quotation is in Holabird and Root, “Bismarck Defended,” *The American Magazine of Art*, June 1934, 349.

this context.<sup>242</sup>

Over the coming years this skyscraper rising from the prairie was also scrutinized photographically. In 1940—six years after the building’s completion—a Farm Security Administration (FSA) photographer, John Vachon, notably captured it in a series of four exposures. He was a long-term contributor to the FSA, being hired in 1936 to organize the office’s image archive. He went on occasional photographic assignments from the start of his employment, and was promoted to a full-time photographer in 1941. He held this position until being drafted into the army in 1943. In the case of the North Dakota capitol, Vachon chose vantage points to document the building that are unusual and tie it to farming. Vachon’s self-stated goal of taking photographs was to capture “the humorousness, the pity, the beauty of the situation.” Rather than conforming to scripts provided by the FSA Director Roy Stryker, he indulged his individuality. When his photographs seemed conventional he was openly disappointed in himself, as, for example, in 1942 when he captured a farm in North Dakota. He

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<sup>242</sup> The quotation about the Nonpartisan League is in “A New Capitol for the People of North Dakota,” 112. Although not stated by name, the quotation is referring to the political careers of the prominent Nonpartisan League leaders Lynn Frazier and William Langer. Frazier was removed from office during a recall election in 1921. He was then elected to the U.S. Senate in 1923 and served until 1941. Langer served as governor from 1933 to 1934. He was removed from office that year amidst accusations of illegal campaign fundraising by forcing state employees to subscribe to the *Nonpartisan Leader* newspaper. The charges led Langer to barricade himself in the governor’s mansion, declare North Dakota an independent nation, and dissolve the State Supreme Court. This strategy proved ineffective, and he was incarcerated. Interestingly, the scandal did not end Langer’s career. The conviction was reversed on appeal in 1935. Events that post-date this *Architectural Forum* article continue his political career. Langer served again as governor from 1937 to 1939, and in 1940 ran for the U.S. Senate against the aforementioned Frazier. Langer won that seat in Congress with 38% of the vote, and he served until his death in 1959. For information about Frazier see Nels Erickson, *The Gentleman from North Dakota, Lynn J. Frazier* (Bismarck: State Historical Society of North Dakota, 1986). On Langer see the work of Agnes Geelan, *The Dakota Maverick: The Political Life of William Langer Also Known As “Wild Bill” Langer* (Fargo: Kaye’s Printing, 1975), John M. Holzworth, *The Fighting Governor: The Story of William Langer and the State of North Dakota* (Chicago: Pointer Press, 1938), Glenn H. Smith, “William Langer and the Art of Personal Politics,” in *The North Dakota Political Tradition*, ed. Thomas W. Howard (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1981), 123-50. For a comic book history of Langer see *Red Ink’s Pictorial Review of the Langer Administration*, (Bismarck: Red Ink Publishers, 1934).

wrote to his wife, Penny, about these pictures that “I guess the main trouble is that they are all just formula pictures, they look like Farm Security stuff ... And I am so damned anxious to put new blood in them, new ideas, approaches, and to say something different with them.”<sup>243</sup>

In the case of the state capitol photographs, Vachon generated visual intrigue by carefully centering the skyscraper in the picture plane, while emphasizing the fortuitous surroundings. In one example he has chosen a distant vantage point, thus showing that the approach is a dirt road surrounded by modest farm houses and outbuildings (Figure 186). A small water tower and a few electrical power lines mark the background, but no other urban features are visible. Two years later, in 1942, he took another two photographs of the building, with similar goals. In one of them the building rises majestically in the background, while the foreground features a barbed wire fence and several horses (Figure 187). He celebrated this exposure in a letter to Penny, noting that “I admire that state capitol a hell of a lot. I shot at it again tonight, with horses in front of it.” The nearest of these horses seems to scratch his chin on a fence post made from an un-milled tree branch only a few feet from the viewer.<sup>244</sup>

Given the striking visual resemblance of the Chicago Board of Trade and the new Capitol of North Dakota, the history of tension between the Board and the government, the history of

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<sup>243</sup> For an analysis of Vachon’s life and work, see the introductory essay by Miles Orvell in the following anthology. John Vachon, *John Vachon’s America: Photographs and Letters from the Depression to World War II*, ed. Miles Orvell (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 3-36. Quotations are in Miles Orvell’s introduction to the aforementioned *John Vachon’s America*, pages 13, 20. Vachon organized the FSA archive by photographic assignment and date. The archive as it exists today, however, is not the result of Vachon’s work. After Vachon was promoted to photographer, his replacement, Paul Vanderbilt, reorganized the collection in 1942. It is Vanderbilt’s system of categorization based on the primary theme of each image that remains in place in 2009. The original source for the first quotation is in an undated, transcribed, conversation between Roy Stryker, Dorothea Lange, Arthur Rothstein, and John Vachon, page 26, in the possession of the Vachon family but promised to be given to the Library of Congress; the second quotation is a letter to Penny Vachon dated March 3, 1942.

<sup>244</sup> Quotation is in a letter from John Vachon to his Penny Vachon, sent from Bismarck, North Dakota, on February 28, 1942. It is reproduced in Vachon, *John Vachon’s America*, 191-92.

ambitious agricultural building projects in the state of North Dakota, the framing of the new Capitol in agricultural terms, and photographs of it that forefront the fact that the building is in a farmscape it is clear that an appropriation has taken place. What, then, is the purpose of this copying? Stepping back to the large story of these buildings, it seems that the Chicago Board of Trade building provided an alternative and non-exploitative narrative for the public to focus on—a new type of building for a newly ethical Board. Paradoxically, it did so while retaining some of the visual cues about the purpose of the building, including grain, and continuing to forefront connections with ancient mythology, such as Ceres. The powerful institution was thus able to posture as traditional and progressive simultaneously. The question of why the North Dakota capitol commission chose to hire architects that would imitate this building is less clear. As is so often the case, the deep logic of this choice was not widely articulated, and it may not have been concisely understood by the commission members themselves. Nonetheless, it must have made intuitive sense in the wake of such grandiose posturing in Chicago to counter-posture with a building that showed the state, and by implication its citizenry, as being equal in power to the barons of the grain trade. With such iconic buildings, people affiliated with each institution were assured that the struggle for equitable distribution of grain was far from over.

## **5.8 VISUALIZING FARMING IN ACADEMIA**

Returning to the work of John Davis and Ray Goldberg with the background of moralizing the farm economy and posturing among institutions in mind we can appreciate how their work was a fundamental break with the past. Rather than thinking of the agricultural economy as a series of separate stages with emotional stories attached to them their approach was to systematically and

rigorously synthesize data and present it formally. On a broad level, their work is in accordance with approaches to the study of systems that thrived at this time. This includes theories of information and hierarchies as well as the study of feedback. At the most abstract level this type of thinking was presented with mathematical relationships and formal logic in an attempt to unify the sciences—a field known as General Systems Theory. One of the pioneers of systems thinking, Ludwig von Bertalanffy, was particularly adept at formal logic, and he described the field of study in 1950 by noting that “in the past centuries, science tried to explain phenomena by reducing them to an interplay of elementary units which could be investigated independently of each other.” In contrast, General Systems Theory was a “new scientific discipline [...] the subject of which is the formulation and deduction of those principles which are valid for ‘systems’ in general.” Such approaches to the world had great potential, and they are the basis of much of the modeling undertaken in the applied sciences of the twenty-first century. Similarly, we can understand the flow chart by Davis and Goldberg as the result of rethinking the *structure* of academic thought about farming in America. They abandoned the norms of agricultural research, as established a century earlier, in favor of systemic analysis.<sup>245</sup>

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<sup>245</sup> Quotations are from an early article that summarized the field by Ludwig von Bertalanffy, “An Outline of General System Theory,” *The British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* 1, no. 2 (1950): 134, 39. For a discussion of systems thinking as it relates to Cultural Studies, poststructuralism, and other theoretical approaches common in the humanities, see the work of Debora Hammond, *The Science of Synthesis: Exploring the Social Implications of General Systems Theory* (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2003). For treatments of systems thinking that are accessible to a wide audience, see Peter Checkland, *Systems Thinking, Systems Practice* (Chichester: John Wiley and Sons, 1981), Ervin Laszlo, “Introduction: The Origins of General Systems Theory in the Work of Von Bertalanffy,” in *The Relevance of General Systems Theory: Papers Presented to Ludwig Von Bertalanffy on His Seventieth Birthday*, ed. Ervin Laszlo (New York: George Braziller, 1972), 3-11, ———, *The Systems View of the World: A Holistic Vision for Our Time* (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 1996), F. E. Emery, ed., *Systems Thinking: Selected Readings* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), C. H. Waddington, *Tools for Thought: How to Understand and Apply the Latest Scientific Techniques of Problem Solving* (New York: Basic Books, 1977).

By the 1950s the norms of academic research about agriculture were well-established. Farming had been a major focus of higher education since 1862 when Congress passed the Morrill Land-Grant Act. The act funded research and teaching of agriculture across the nation by allocating land to each state. This land was used to establish or expand institutions of higher learning. Through this initiative some of the most highly-regarded schools in the US came to prominence, including Cornell University, Iowa State University, the University of California, and The Pennsylvania State University.<sup>246</sup>

The centrality of agricultural research at these schools is often easy to see. At Pennsylvania State, for example, a mural was done by Henry Varnum Poor in the lobby of their most symbolic building—Old Main (Figure 188). It is above the landing of a stairway, and it is viewable upon first entering. The subject matter is a celebration of the Morrill act itself. The scene is rural, and in the center Abraham Lincoln—the president who signed the act into law—stands adjacent to a young man who will benefit from agricultural schooling. The student holds a pitchfork-like sapling in his hand and both men gaze out at the viewer. In the background, immediately behind the two, is the first academic building on campus. To the sides, ascending dual staircases, the mural continues with scenes of farm and industrial labor. A decorative lunette, painted with clouds, extends the fresco upward, enabling Lincoln's top hat and the academy to break into a higher space. Columns flanking the central stairs obscure portions of the mural, but also serve to frame these two men. The portion of the mural which extends up the side staircases has a diagonal lower edge which draws the eye to the middle. Taken within its architectural context all spatial elements direct our gaze toward Lincoln and the student,

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<sup>246</sup> The act is named for Justin Smith Morrill, a US Representative from Vermont who introduced the legislation. For an overview of education see Alfred Charles True, *A History of Agricultural Education in the United States 1785-1925* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1929).



underscoring the importance of this legislation as both a literal and symbolic core of the university.<sup>247</sup>

A set of murals that Grant Wood installed on two floors of the library at John Davis's alma mater, Iowa State University, can further illuminate conventional academic thinking about agricultural research and teaching. They were created from 1936 to 1940 as part of a Works Progress Administration project, and they represent the university as a whole. Wood designed them, but they were actualized with the help of other artists. Like Poor's mural, these are a site-specific set of painted panels that interact with the surrounding building to convey their meaning.<sup>248</sup>

Upon entering the building and passing through a well-lit lobby, library patrons encountered a mural titled "Breaking the Prairie" in a modestly-lit alcove (Figure 26). Although technically painted last, it was the first set that Wood designed. It wraps around three walls. A horse-drawn plow, temporarily at rest, is traversing the scene from left to right. The operator, a young man, is taking a swig from a jug—presumably brought to him by a woman at his side

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<sup>247</sup> Although I do not address them here, a second set of murals was added to the balcony of Old Main in stages by Poor at a later date. They show various research, sporting, and administrative functions of the university. All of Poor's murals were completed by 1949. For more information on Poor, see Harold E. Dickson, *The Land Grant Frescoes at the Pennsylvania State University Painted by Henry Varnum Poor (1888-1970)* (State College: Pennsylvania State University, 1940, 1981), Richard James Porter, "Henry Varnum Poor, 1887-1970: A Biography and Study of His Paintings" (PhD Dissertation, Pennsylvania State University, 1983), Harold E. Dickson and Richard Porter, *Henry Varnum Poor 1887-1970: A Retrospective Exhibition* (State College: Pennsylvania State University Museum of Art, 1984).

<sup>248</sup> The key study of Wood's murals is by DeLong, *When Tillage Begins, Other Arts Follow*. In the accompanying essays DeLong has meticulously reconstructed the process of the creation of these murals using archival documents. She includes the stories of the assistants, models, and university administrators along with those about Wood. A portion of the book is devoted to the numerous murals and sculptures created by Christian Petersen, who was the artist in residence at Iowa State from 1934 to 1955. His most innovative work on campus is the *History of Dairying* fountain from 1934 located in the courtyard of the Food Science Building. Three cows drink from a trough, with water pouring from their mouths, flanked by low relief scenes of research. Davis received his bachelor's degree from Iowa State in 1928.

holding his hat. In the background a rig is progressing in the opposite direction—this one driven by oxen. On the side walls men chop wood. Through their labor the prairie grass is gracefully turned over in sheets, and flowers spring up in the foreground. White clouds stream across a blue sky.

When viewers turn around, with their backs to the plow, they face a narrow staircase with light pouring forth from above (Figure 189). Looking up the stairs an inscription is visible, stating:

WHEN TILLAGE BEGINS  
OTHER ARTS FOLLOW

The words are Daniel Webster's and were spoken in 1840 as the second-to-last sentence of a speech praising agricultural progress (Figure 190). He ends declaring that "the farmers, therefore, are the founders of human civilization." Walking toward this panel one arrives at a landing with matching staircases on each side. Around the landing and upper stairways a cycle of murals encases the space—allegories of the university (Figure 191, Figure 192, and Figure 193). The viewer literally ascends from the earthy tillage to see the "other arts" of agriculture, home economics, and engineering bathed in the light of knowledge.<sup>249</sup>

The elements of architecture organize the space. Illusionistically painted rooms correspond to fields of study and walls correspond to colleges. The college of Agriculture is located on the left wall, where six men are variously engaged with vaccinating a pig, lifting and

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<sup>249</sup> Daniel Webster was a farmer, lawyer, and one of the most prominent politicians in antebellum America. He served as a member of Congress from Massachusetts from 1823 to 1841 and as Secretary of State first under William Henry Harrison and John Tyler from 1841 to 1843 and later under Millard Fillmore from 1850 to 1852. The quotation in Wood's mural is from January 13, 1840 and was made in the context of a speech to the Massachusetts legislature about English agriculture. Webster had visited England in 1839. Daniel Webster, "The Agriculture of England," in *The Works of Daniel Webster*, ed. Edward Everett (Boston: C.C. Little and J. Brown, 1851), 457.

lofting hay, and leading horses. Home Economics is on the center wall, where five women clean, sew, cook, and care for children. Finally, the right wall is for Engineering, which includes six men variously engaged with ceramics, chemistry, aerodynamics, and bridge-building. The murals are painted on wooden panels with tempera, and they are installed between engaged pillars. Three panels each are used for Agriculture and Engineering; two are used for Home Economics. (The walls are the same size, but a large window takes the place of a home economics panel.) Each wall includes interior scenes, and they are composed with a cutaway technique similar to that employed in *Dinner for Threshers*. The viewer's space and the painted environment merge—the pigs and horses stand on the same surface as the viewer, for example. The figures are all approximately half life size—as is appropriate given that two stories of a barn, house, and academic building fill a single story of the library.<sup>250</sup>

As a statement about academic research on farming within the university Wood reinforces a traditional division of knowledge. He has labeled each panel on the agricultural college wall with a different field of study. Veterinary medicine is shown by vaccinating a pig against hog cholera on the left. Animal husbandry is shown by horses on the right. The efforts of these animals enable the agronomic action in the center panel—pulling a chain that lofts hay. Spatially Wood has incorporated, rather than attempted to obscure, the verticality between piers. While it would have been easy enough to extend the recessed surfaces of the walls to the level of the piers, thus creating a wide and unobstructed working space to match the *Breaking the Prairie* murals downstairs, Wood relishes the vertical restriction and incorporates subject matter that

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<sup>250</sup> Anyone interested in depictions of haying should refer to the website of Alan Ritch, *Hay in Art* (Database available online: <http://www.hayinart.com/>, 2003). The site covers representations of hay world-wide from antiquity to the present, and semi-scholarly essays are also available. As of 2009 his database included over 6,700 works of hay-related art.

complements this format. Schooling thus causes literal and metaphoric ascension, as hay is lofted, women go up stairs, and machinery pierces a second story. Although never designed, Wood considered adding a third set of panels, depicting the fine arts, in a room near the top of the stairs. Thus, painting, music, theater, and dance would have been the high point of academic culture.<sup>251</sup>

Research in traditional fields of agriculture, such as those depicted by Wood, has resulted in numerous advances in farming technology. The structure of the schools, however, ultimately entrenched thinking about agriculture within the specific branches of applied science. It is notable, then, that Davis and Goldberg's work was not based in one of these traditional academic departments of agriculture, but in an experimental academic program—the Harvard Business School's Food Foundation. Rather than treating the elements of farming as individual components The Food Foundation encouraged systematic analysis. Its goals were:

1. To carry on fundamental research relating to the production, distribution, and use of agricultural and processed food products.
2. To develop fundamental economic policies governing the production, distribution, and use of such products.
3. To study and, as possible, to improve fundamental economic relationships among all engaged in the production, distribution, and use of such products.
4. Thus and otherwise to improve the food economy of the American people.<sup>252</sup>

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<sup>251</sup> It is not fully clear, but the art historian Lea Rosson DeLong noted that one of the men at work here may be intended to represent Henry Agard Wallace. DeLong, *When Tillage Begins, Other Arts Follow*, 99.

<sup>252</sup> The Food Foundation's goals are in Davis and Goldberg, *A Concept of Agribusiness*, vii.

By taking production, distribution, and consumption together they are, in effect, attempting to treat the logic behind the Populist and Nonpartisan League pipeline diagrams seriously. With a disciplinary focus of economics, this was an honest endeavor to improve the food system, but it was not holistic enough to address all of the concerns from a previous era.

Economic thought was only obliquely referred to in the murals by Grant Wood discussed above—they focus instead on how to manage the home, how to engineer machinery, and how to undertake farming. Economics was, nonetheless, addressed in the imagery from the previous era. If we look at the criticism of the food system voiced by the Populists and the Nonpartisan League in their systemic “pipeline” cartoon-diagrams, we can see that it depends upon the type of thinking in Davis and Goldberg’s diagram, and arguably pushes it further than the economists do (Figure 144 and Figure 145). As mentioned above, these diagrams are arranged as the inverse of each other. Davis and Goldberg’s is structured to show economic growth through each stage of the economy—thus showing that the food system generates wealth, and by implication generates a prosperous society. Understanding the making of money through trade is, indeed, a cornerstone of economic inquiry. Zimmerman and Morris’s pipelines, however, scrutinize the beginning of the food-trading system—the farm family—and show that progressive economic growth does not cause all players to benefit equally. Indeed, by tracing the stages backward, their work could be understood as a critique of the type of thinking so masterfully developed by Davis and Goldberg. This is not about how much wealth can be generated by the time food reaches a consumer, but about how people catching the cash flowing through the “channel of trade” are powerless. They may each benefit slightly, but ultimately there is little that they can do other than be satisfied with the drips or gushes of money from an opening in the pipe that they squat at. This is about the joys and difficulties of working within the confines of a social and institutional

system beyond the control of any one individual. As cartoons aimed at rural families, these images depicted the farmer more sympathetically than the consumer, middle man, commission house, railroads, and ware houses, but the critique is valid for each of them. Concluding by looking back over some of the issues raised previously, we can see some of these other needs that should be contended with.

## **5.9 CONCLUSION**

By appropriating the paradigm of a “farmer in a business suit” that Grant Wood introduced in 1930—a conflation of the farmer who is imagined to be in symbiosis with nature, anti-intellectual in spirit, and naive with money, along with the businessman who is removed from earthiness, informed by new knowledge, and cunning with finances—a framework for the new concept of agribusiness was achieved. This depended upon the fact that the small-scale family farmer working the land with folk-knowledge began to be perceived as outmoded in the decades before Davis and Goldberg penned their treatises on agribusiness published in 1957. As the authors posited, a paradigm shift had already been taking place in slow motion, with profound implications for the rural economy. Farmers were being framed as individuals who were fully aware of food production, distribution, and consumption, including both the potential for great progress and profound injustices.

As William Allen White observed in his 1897 essay about bonanza farms, the norm had been for fragmentation of the food system into discreet, disconnected personal identities, rather than synthesis into integrated and interconnected ones: “When one is cataloguing the callings of men one says ‘the business man, and the farmer,’ never ‘the business man and farmer’ or the

‘businessman engaged in farming.’” Such words resonate with Grant Wood’s *American Gothic*—a literal farmer in a business jacket—hinting that we should ponder the assumptions of big farming from the earlier era. This includes dilemmas that White boldly posited in the nineteenth century, including that:

The successful farmer of this generation must be a business man first, and a tiller of the soil afterward. In him must be combined many talents. He must be a capitalist, cautious and crafty; he must be an operator of industrial affairs, daring and resourceful, and he must play labor’s part, with patience and humility. He is in business as certainly as the banker.

Farming in the modern and contemporary era is inextricably tied to commerce, but the visual debates from this era suggest that factors besides the profit margins articulated above should be integral to making decisions about the food system.<sup>253</sup>

We should take seriously the questions asked by the radical Nonpartisan League cartoonist John Miller Baer, who argued during the teens that we needed a “New Deal!” for farmers to ensure that the most powerful individuals and institutions are also the most ethical. With over seven decades of hindsight, we might see the New Deal that was enacted on behalf of farmers and the broader nation—under the purview of the Roosevelt administration and Secretary of Agriculture Henry Agard Wallace—as a slate of reforms with both beneficial and devastating consequences. While this era integrated insights from scientific research into farm practices and stabilized the farm economy through administrative oversight, it also endorsed an unsustainable, resource-intensive, system of agronomy. By looking at this era we can come to terms with the history of the Yellow Dent corn developed by James Reid, celebrated in Grant

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<sup>253</sup> Quotations are from White, “The Business of a Wheat Farm,” 531-32.

Wood's *Corn Rooms*, and ultimately institutionalized in hybrid form as the quintessential crop of the US. And when looking at the food system as a whole we can see that just as much as the stages of the food system are interconnected economically, as diagrammed by John Davis and Ray Goldberg, they are also tied to the social struggles and human needs envisioned by Frank Norris.

I am ending this history during the 1950s, when the concept of agribusiness was new, and Grant Wood's art was resurging in popularity. While agribusiness originally referred to all forms of modern farming, as analyzed using systems theory, its meaning was destined to change. Indeed, it has become the key term for describing the scientifically-informed, vertically-integrated, corporate-controlled, resource-intensive, large-scale, and ethically-debatable farming of the twenty-first century. Knowledge from this earlier era has been used to transform the farm economy since the 1950s, but whether these transformations have improved life for humankind is a matter of great debate. Whatever conclusions we may reach about the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the concerns of the era continue to resonate. Ethical food production and consumption remain a cultural challenge. Indeed, while productivity has soared since the nineteenth century, malnutrition and environmental degradation have not yet been overcome. A robust examination of contemporary agricultural practices would require a lengthier exegesis than can be presented here. Nonetheless, to address some of this legacy, and especially to examine how the visual vocabulary coined during this era has continued to inform debates about farming, a brief coda follows this chapter.



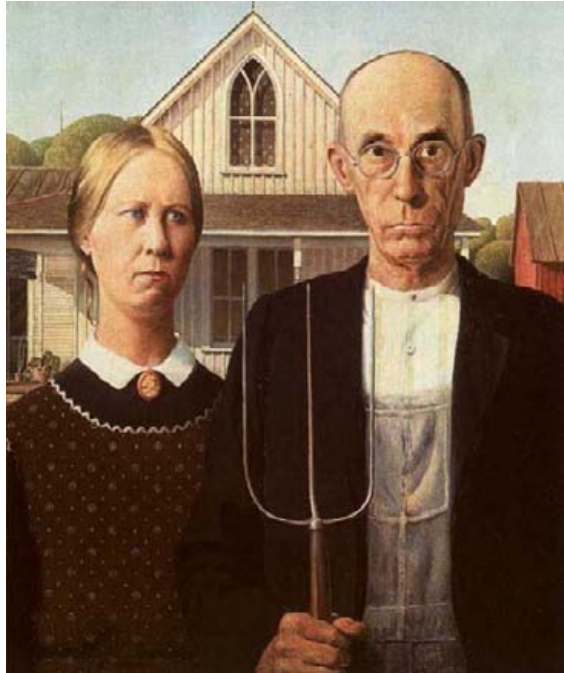


Figure 131. Grant Wood, *American Gothic*, 1930, oil on beaverboard. Collection of the Art Institute of Chicago.



Figure 132. "A. Fake" photography studio. Cartoon by Billican, *The Nonpartisan Leader*, November 15, 1917,

page 7.



Figure 133. Farmers wearing suits while watching a deminstration by the county extension agent, photo from the USDA, c. 1925.



Figure 134. “John M. Baer, Leader cartoonist and a few of his noted characters.” John Miller Baer, *The Nonpartisan Leader*, August 31, 1916, page 18.



Figure 135. John Miller Baer, "The Peacemaker," *The Nonpartisan Leader*, September 7, 1916, page 13.



Figure 136. John Miller Baer, "The New Freedom," *The Nonpartisan Leader*, June 15, 1916, page 13.



Figure 137. Billican's cover for his periodical, *The Goat*, February-March, 1920.

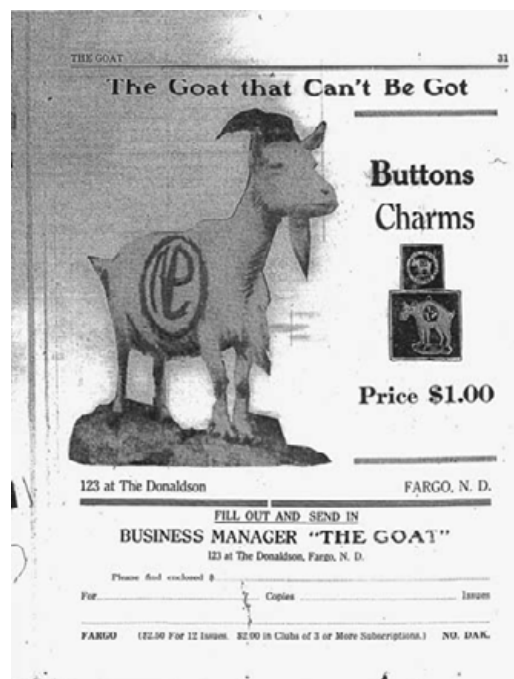


Figure 138. *The Goat*, order form for buttons and charms, February-March, 1920, page 31.



Figure 139. Detail of “North Dakota Equity Delegates--All Boosters for the Nonpartisan League and the Leader--and Who’s This? Hanna’s Goat, So They Say,” *The Nonpartisan Leader*, March 9, 1916, pages 8-9.

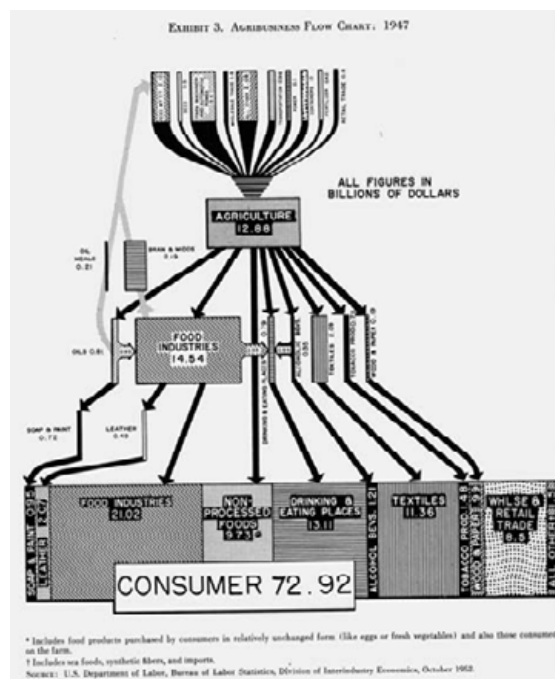


Figure 140. Grant Wood at the Stone City Art Colony, 1932 or 1933.





**Figure 141. J.C. Leyendecker, *In the Stands 2*, Arrow Collar advertisement, *The Saturday Evening Post*, October 11, 1913, pages 36-37.**



**Figure 142.** John Davis and Ray Goldberg, “Agribusiness Flow Chart: 1947,” *A Concept of Agribusiness*, 1957, page 30.

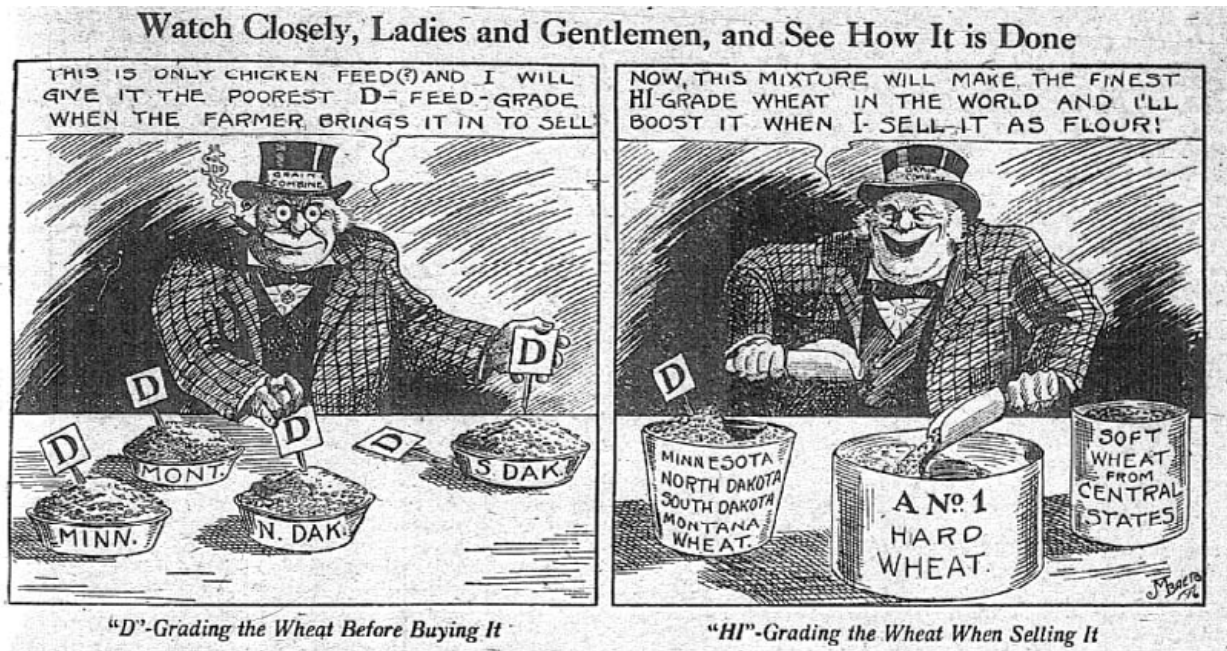


Figure 143. John Miller Baer's personification of the Grain Combine, "Watch Closely, Ladies and Gentlemen, and See How It is Done," *The Nonpartisan Leader*, December 21, 1916, page 3.



Figure 144. Eugene Zimmerman, "The Channel of Trade," *Judge*, May 15, 1886.

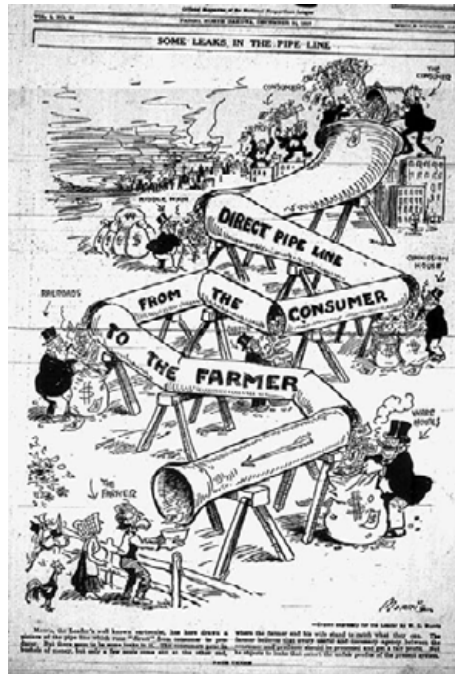


Figure 145. W.C. Morris, “Direct Pipe Line from the Consumer to the Farmer,” *The Nonpartisan Leader*, December 24, 1917, page 3.

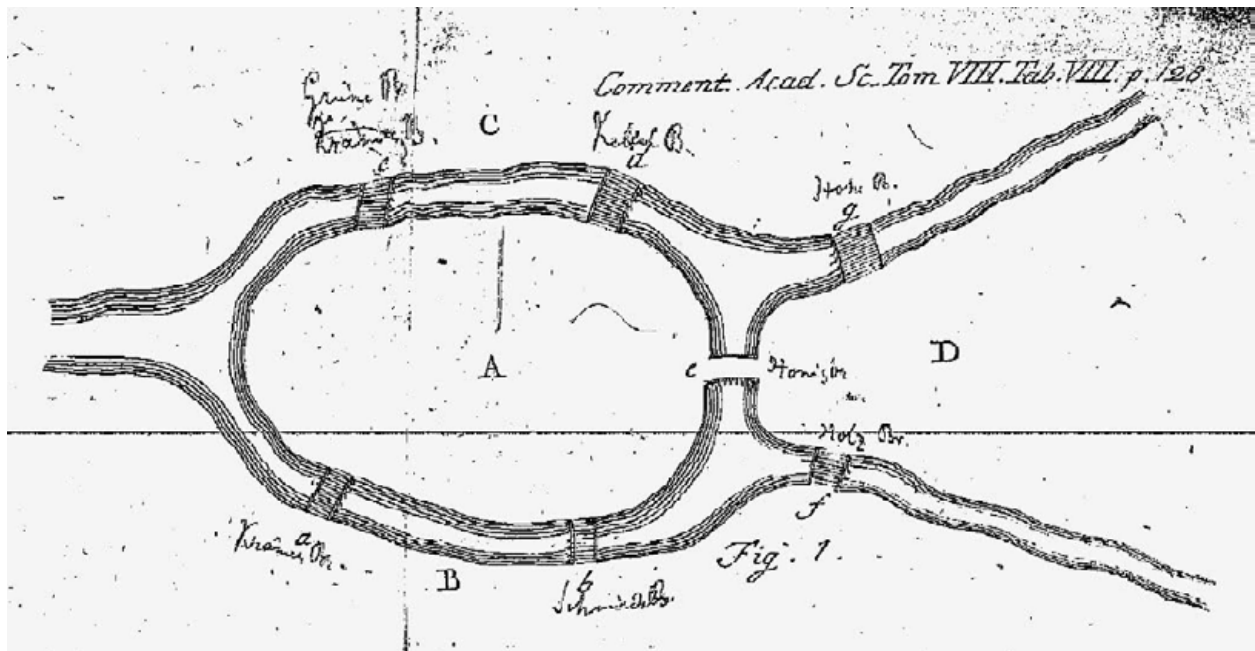


Figure 146. Leonhard Euler, map of the seven bridges of Königsberg, published in “Solutio Problematis Ad Geometriam Situs Pertinentis,” *Commentarii academiae scientiarum Petropolitanae* 8 (1741): page 128.



Figure 147 shows a large, complex data table titled "Interindustry flow of Goods and Services" from the book "A Concept of Agribusiness" (1957) by John Davis and Ray Goldberg. The table is organized into columns representing different economic sectors and rows representing various goods and services. The data is presented in a grid format with numerical values indicating the flow between these sectors.

Figure 147. John Davis and Ray Goldberg, data table explaining “Agribusiness and the National Economy: 1947. Interindustry flow of Goods and Services,” from *A Concept of Agribusiness*, 1957.

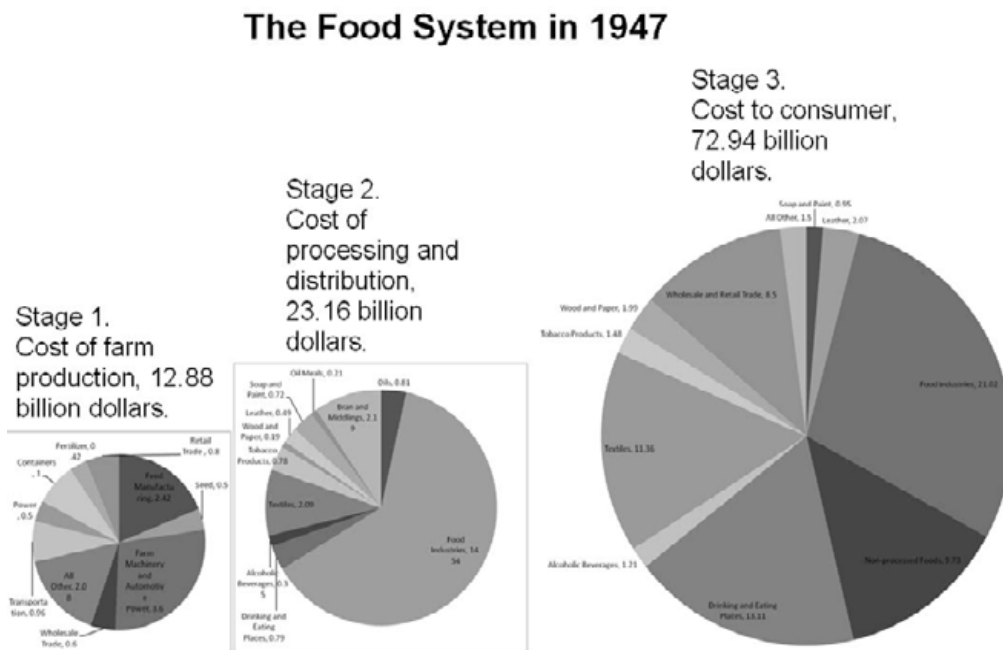


Figure 148. Pie charts of the food system in 1947, by Travis Nygard.



An Etching by Frank Norris.

Figure 149. Frank Norris, etching reproduced in *The Pacific Monthly*, March 1907, page 315.

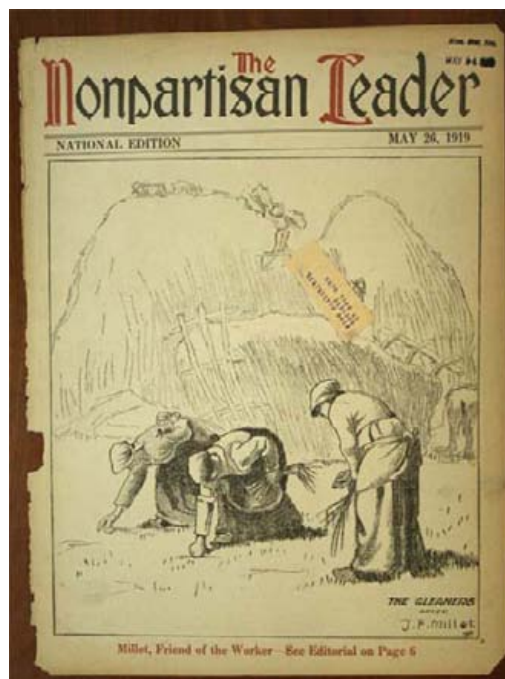


Figure 150. Foss, cover of *The Nonpartisan Leader*, May 26, 1919, after Jean François Millet, *The Gleaners*, 1857, oil on canvas.



**Figure 151.** Jean François Millet, *The Gleaners*, 1857, oil on canvas. Collection of the Musée d'Orsay.



**Figure 152.** William-Adolphe Bouguereau, *Return of Spring*, 1886, oil on canvas. Collection of the Joslyn Art Museum.



Figure 153. Will Grefe, “Bouguereau ‘fills a place,’ he answered. ‘But I cannot admire his art,’” illustration for *The Pit* by Frank Norris, as serialized in *The Saturday Evening Post*.



Figure 154. Will Grefe, detail of illustration for *The Pit* by Frank Norris, as serialized in *The Saturday Evening Post*.





Figure 155. Charles Dana Gibson, drawing of a woman's head, c.1900.

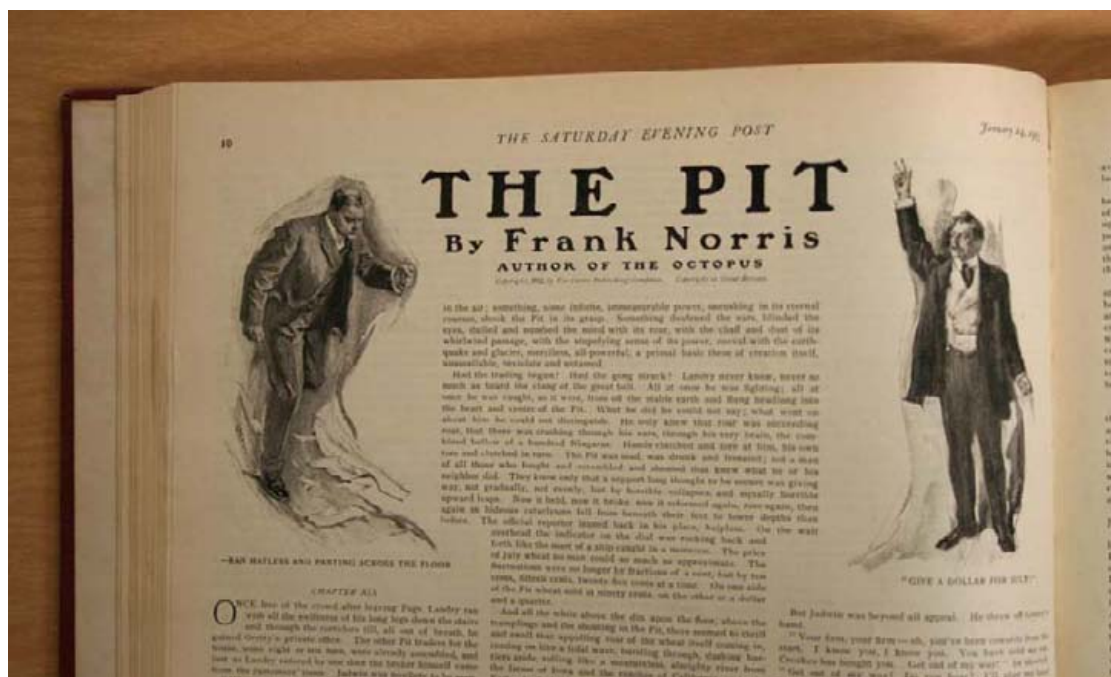


Figure 156. Will Grefe, “Ran hatless and panting across the floor,” and “Give a dollar for July.” Illustrations for Frank Norris’s *The Pit* as serialized in *The Saturday Evening Post*, January 24, 1903, page 10.



**Figure 157. J.C. Leyendecker, ““Sell a thousand may at one-fifty’ vociferated the bear broker.” Illustration for “A Deal in Wheat” by Frank Norris, 1903.**



**Figure 158. Edward Burling, Chamber of Commerce Building, housed the Chicago Board of Trade from 1865-1871. Photo in the collection of the Chicago History Museum.**



**Figure 159. Cochrane and Miller, The Chicago Board of Trade Building, built in 1872. Photo in the collection of the Chicago History Museum.**



**Figure 160. Wheelock and Clay, The Chicago Board of Trade Building, 1885.**



Figure 161. D.W. Griffith, film stills from *A Corner in Wheat*, 1909.



Figure 162. D.W. Griffith, film still from *A Corner in Wheat*, 1909.





Figure 163. Jean François Millet, *The Sower*, 1850, oil on canvas. Collection of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts.



Figure 164. D.W. Griffith, film still from *A Corner in Wheat*, 1909.



Figure 165. Jean François Millet, *The Angelus*, 1857, oil on canvas. Collection of the Musée d'Orsay.



Figure 166. D.W. Griffith, film still from *A Corner in Wheat*, 1909.

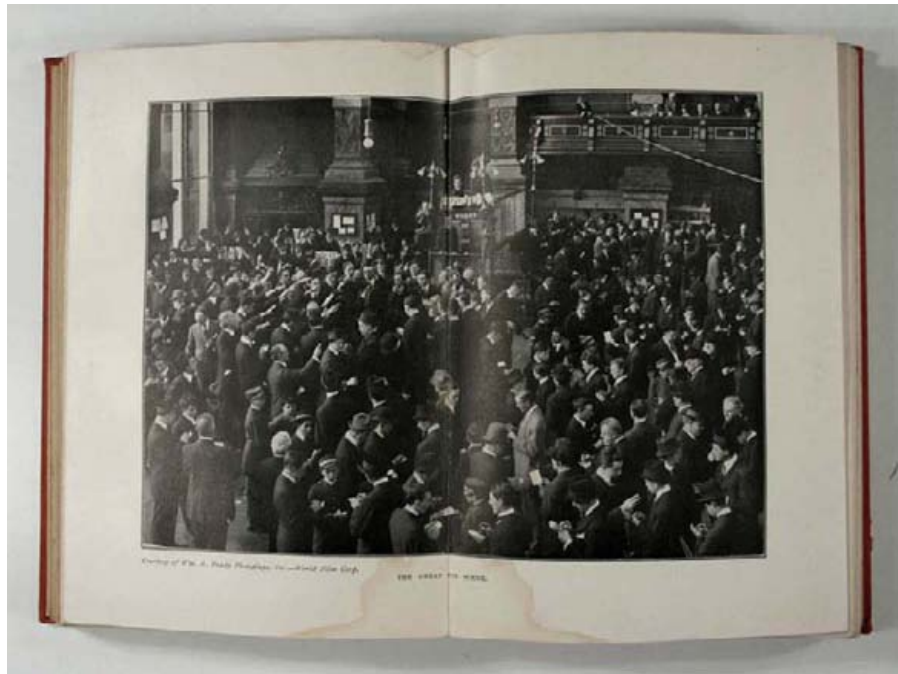
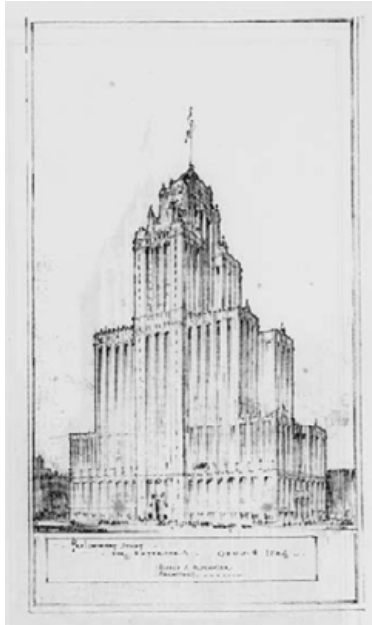


Figure 167. “The Great Pit Scene” from the photoplay edition of *The Pit* by Frank Norris, text written 1902, film and photoplay edition released 1914.



Figure 168. Holabird and Root, The Chicago Board of Trade Building, completed in 1930. Photograph by Travis Nygard.



**Figure 169. Alfred S. Alschuler Incorporated, un-built proposal for the Chicago Board of Trade Building, c.1925. The Chicago Board of Trade collection in Richard J. Daley Library's Special Collections department, University of Illinois at Chicago.**



**Figure 170. D.H. Burnham and Company, un-built proposal for the Chicago Board of Trade Building, c.1925. The Chicago Board of Trade collection in Richard J. Daley Library's Special Collections department, University of Illinois at Chicago.**



**Figure 171. D.H. Burnham and Company, un-built proposal for the Chicago Board of Trade Building, c.1925.**

**The Chicago Board of Trade collection in Richard J. Daley Library's Special Collections department,  
University of Illinois at Chicago.**



**Figure 172. Art deco ornamentation on the trading floor of the Chicago Board of Trade, completed by  
Holabird and Root in 1930.**





**Figure 173. Alvin Meyer, sculpture on the Chicago Board of Trade facade, completed in 1930. Photograph by Travis Nygard.**



**Figure 174. Photograph of John Storrs's *Ceres* on the top of the Chicago Board of Trade Building, 1930.**



**Figure 175. John Storrs , *Forms in Space*, 1927, stainless steel and copper, 20 1/2 x 4 x 5/8 in. Collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.**

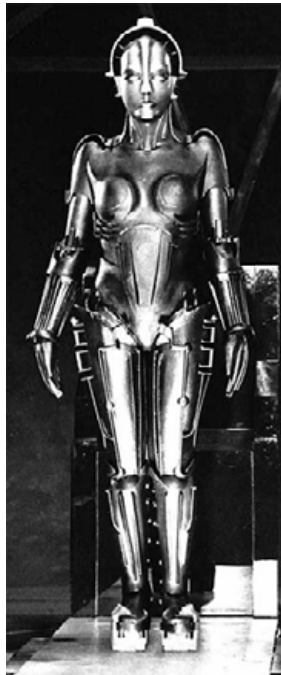


**Figure 176. Holabird and Root, front elevation drawing of the Chicago Board of Trade Building, dated March 1, 1929.**



**Figure 177.** John Storrs, small-scale replica of *Ceres* on the Chicago Board of Trade, c. 1930, cast aluminum.

Collection of the Art Institute of Chicago. Photograph by Travis Nygard.



**Figure 178.** Robot "Maria" from Fritz Lang's film *Metropolis*, released 1927.





**Figure 179.** Mariano Fortuny, Delphos tea gown, silk and beads, c.1930. Brooklyn Museum Costume Collection at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of the Brooklyn Museum, 2009; Gift of Diana S. Field; Photographed by Lea Christiano.



**Figure 180.** John Warner Norton, lithograph of *Ceres* mural from the Chicago Board of Trade, 1930.

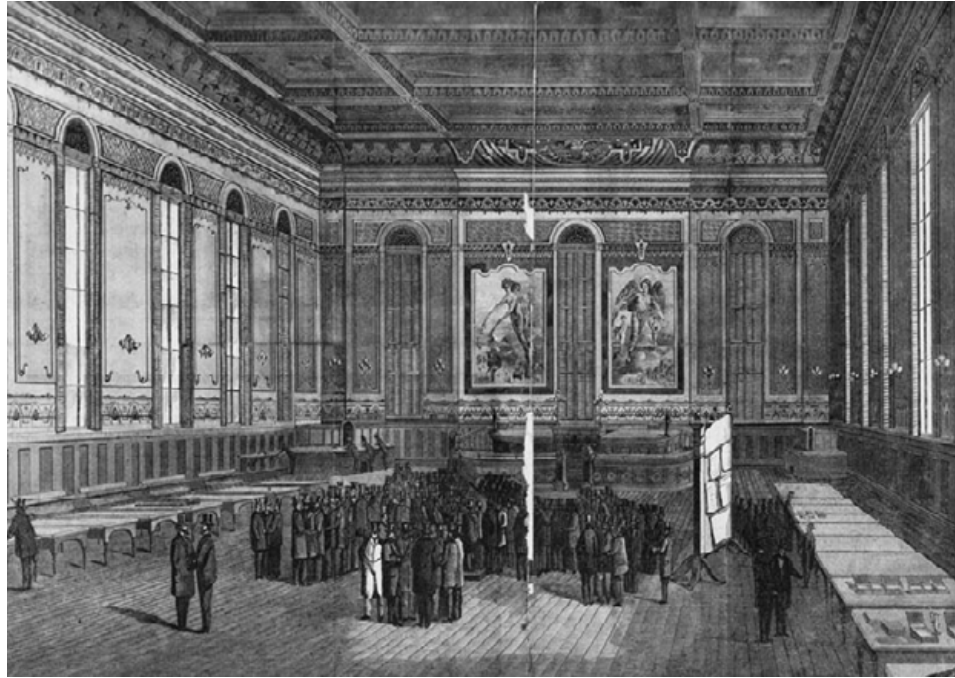


Figure 181. Interior of the Chicago Board of Trade Building, built 1872, showing murals of *Mercury* (left) and *Ceres* (right). Engraving in the collection of the Chicago History Museum.



Figure 182. Allegory of Agriculture from Chicago Board of Trade entrance, 1885. Photograph by Travis Nygard.



**Figure 183. Holabird and Root, North Dakota State Capitol, 1934. Photograph by Travis Nygard.**



**Figure 184. Leroy Buffington, plan for the North Dakota State Capitol Building, 1889. Collection of the State Historical Society of North Dakota.**



**Figure 185. LeRoy S. Buffington, Pillsbury's A flour mill, Minneapolis, 1879-81, largest flour mill in world until 1921.**



**Figure 186. John Vachon. Bismarck, North Dakota. State capitol. FSA Photograph. November 1940. Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA-OWI Collection, LC-USF34-061590-D DLC.**





**Figure 187. John Vachon. Bismarck, North Dakota. State capitol. FSA Photograph. February 1942. Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA-OWI Collection, LC-USF34-064892-D DLC.**



**Figure 188. Henry Varnum Poor, *Land-Grant Fresco*, 1940, located in Old Main of The Pennsylvania State University. Photograph by Travis Nygard.**



**Figure 189. Stairway leading to Grant Wood's second set of mural panels in the library at Iowa State University, Ames, cycle painted from 1936 to 1940. Photograph by Travis Nygard.**



**Figure 190. Quotation at top of stairway leading to Grant Wood's second set of mural panels in the library at Iowa State University, Ames, cycle painted from 1936 to 1940. Photograph by Travis Nygard.**



Figure 191. Grant Wood, *Agriculture* and *Home Economics* panels in the library at Iowa State University, Ames, cycle painted from 1936 to 1940. Photograph by Travis Nygard.



Figure 192. Grant Wood, *Home Economics* panels in the library at Iowa State University, Ames, cycle painted from 1936 to 1940.



**Figure 193. Grant Wood, *Engineering and Home Economics* panels in the library at Iowa State University, Ames, cycle painted from 1936 to 1940. Photograph by Travis Nygard.**



## **6.0 CHAPTER SIX: CODA**

This dissertation has explored the visual culture of agribusiness in the Midwest, focusing on grain farming. Although agribusiness is most-often associated with the middle of the twentieth century through the twenty-first, I focused on an earlier era when these ideas were in a formative stage. This is thus the “biography” of the infancy and childhood of a visual vocabulary and an idea. The concept of a biography is both useful and limiting when thinking about the legacy of this era. Indeed, while many people have discussed how “things” have social lives, applying a metaphor developed for understanding prominent humans to the analysis of images and ideas is a challenging task. An implicit assumption is that exploring the genesis of imagery and ideas can help us to understand their more longstanding significance, just as exploring the childhoods of people can help us to understand their life stories. To that extent I note that the types of questions about imagery and food production voiced during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries remain pertinent a century later. How do we depict and interpret large farms? What aspects of food production and distribution are worthy of scrutiny, debate, reverence, and protest? What should our food look like? And how can we understand the food system as a whole and change it for the better? To answer such questions about agribusiness required historical inquiry about visual forms, and we might now ask how contentious debates from this era live on. While some of the visual forms that I have discussed in the preceding chapters have

been nearly forgotten, others have become omnipresent in our debates about the food system of the twenty-first century.<sup>254</sup>

The dissertation has also focused on a prominent artist, Grant Wood. It is, however, not intended to be a conventional biography of the man. Such a study was done well by Darrell Garwood, who reconstructed Wood's life from birth to death, drawing heavily on the personal knowledge of siblings, friends, pupils, and employers. My work is instead a reframing of his art in a new critical context. By using a wide array of imagery I have shown that his paintings and drawings were embedded in dialogues about the fundamental changes in farm practices, and I demonstrated that Wood was aware of new ideas circulating within rural culture. Framing his art in the broader context of American visual culture can be understood as in accordance with Wood's own wishes. He articulated them in an autobiographical statement published as a booklet in 1935—*Revolt Against the City*. This document is usually understood as a manifesto of the Regionalist art movement, and it was indeed produced for promotional purposes. The main point is simple—that Wood values the rural Midwest. It is important to note, however, that in this document he alludes to many of the complex phenomena I have explored visually—politics, business, literature, economics, and agrarian unrest.<sup>255</sup>

By placing Wood's art amidst this broader visual culture, we can understand him as part of an array of individuals who shaped how Americans understood the imagery that surrounded them. We might thus expect the later lives of people whose imagery drove the narrative of this dissertation to be insightful when considering the legacy of the era. Such a literal biographical

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<sup>254</sup> Much of the scholarship on this legacy was inspired by the groundbreaking volume of essays compiled by the anthropologist Arjun Appadurai, ed., *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

<sup>255</sup> Garwood, *Artist in Iowa*, Wood, *Revolt against the City*.

approach, however, is unenlightening. Indeed, it is difficult to find sustained significance, tied to agribusiness, when juxtaposing their broader lives. Grant Wood died before the term agribusiness was coined—a victim of liver cancer in 1942 at age 51. John Miller Baer enjoyed a long career as the transportation union’s cartoonist until his death in 1970. Billican became estranged from the Nonpartisan League, stopped publishing, and moved to Minnesota. There he led a Boy Scout troop and soon disappeared from public consciousness. Carey Warbinton, who vandalized a Bouguereau painting, was acquitted at trial and left the Midwest to start his life over in California. Ten years later he disappeared while hiking with friends in the mountains. His body was found at the bottom of a ravine, and it was unclear if the death was an accident, murder, or suicide. A.C. Townley remained active in politics for the remainder of his life, but he changed his agendas frequently and was never a charismatic success after imprisonment in 1921. By the end of his life in 1959—when his car collided with a truck—he had become an impoverished insurance salesman living in a mobile home. Henry Agard Wallace ran for President of the U.S. in 1948 under the Progressive Party banner and lost the election. He then retired to a life of farming, research, and writing in New York state. There he died in 1965 of Lou Gehrig’s disease. J.C. Leyendecker continued to draw, but he became a secretive, depressed, and paranoid recluse in his New Rochelle, New York home. Near the end of his career he landed few commissions and was forced to sell much of his property. He requested that his entire creative output be burned, but when he died from a heart attack in 1951 his companion Charles Beach sold it at a rummage sale instead. John Davis left the field of agricultural economics almost immediately after his books on the topic were published in 1957. He then dedicated his life to encouraging peace in the Middle East and serving as the Commissioner General of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees. He died in 1988. In contrast,

his coauthor Ray Goldberg remained a prominent professor in the Harvard Business School until his retirement in 1997. Clearly, terse summations of the idiosyncratic life paths that these individuals took are less important than the legacy of images and ideas that they created.<sup>256</sup>

Whether conscious imitations of this earlier era, or similar solutions to similar problems, much of the visual vocabulary discussed in this dissertation has remained culturally significant. Types of imagery do not have easily predictable life stories. Indeed, the art historian George Kubler famously explained in 1962 that at any given time a visual paradigm may be living or dead, emerging or longstanding, mutating or stable. One of the most successful images is Grant Wood's *American Gothic*, which has become the quintessential image of rural life in the US, reproduced and recontextualized in support of numerous agendas.<sup>257</sup>

One reuse of *American Gothic* from 2007, a collage by the graphic artist Roberto Carra, can be used to illustrate some of the ways that imagery from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century continues to live on (Figure 194). Carra's work was used as the cover of a book by Daniel Imhoff titled *Food Fight: A Citizen's Guide to a Food and Farm Bill*. This book bolsters the ideas of Watershed Media, an organization that uses graphic arts to create a conversation about sustainable food production. The book focuses on the Farm Bill—a piece of legislation enacted every few years by the US Congress since 1973 with precedents dating to at least as early as the Federal Farm Loan Act of 1916—and correctly explains that by regulating

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<sup>256</sup> Some of the best sources of information on the legacy of these people include: Cutler and Cutler, *J.C. Leyendecker*, Killgore, "Dr. John H. Davis," 12, available online at: <http://www.wrmea.com/backissues/123085/851230012.html>, Larry R. Remele, "The Lost Years of A.C. Townley (after the Nonpartisan League)," *ND Humanities Council Occasional Paper*, no. 1 (1988): 1-27, "Warbinton Made It Good. Fate of Him Who Threw Chair through 'Return of Spring'," *Omaha (NE) World Herald*, June 8, 1901, 9, "Ray A. Goldberg (MBA '50)," available online: <http://www.alumni.hbs.edu/bulletin/2001/august/goldberg.html>, Culver and Hyde, *American Dreamer*.

<sup>257</sup> Kubler, *The Shape of Time*.

the markets for grain and other commodities the bill dictates what is grown and eaten across the nation.

What is relevant in the context of this dissertation is how Carra's collage exploits longstanding traditions of image-making to convey meaning about agribusiness. In it Wood's rigidly posed man and woman are surrounded by money and chaos. The man has been hit with a tomato and an egg. An ear of yellow dent corn has been skewered on his pitchfork. Kernels of wheat litter the front of the woman's dress. They are juxtaposed with a quaint lawn of corn plants, a cow, and an African woman carrying American flour. The US Capitol Building looms in the background, behind a fence of hundred dollar bills.<sup>258</sup>

Many of the huge farms discussed in chapter one, indirectly founded by Congress, are defunct, but an example that has continued to thrive is the King Ranch on the prairies of Texas. The company's corporate website uses imagery that evokes the nineteenth century bonanza farms and boasts of its involvement in agronomy. This 825,000-acre farming corporation, founded in 1853, became famous for the number of cattle on the property, and it has been involved in the production of many crops including grain. It was founded by Richard King on a modest scale, and by purchasing the tracts of land originating from the railroad land grants he was able to create a gargantuan operation. In one photograph on the website in 2009 a field of grasses recedes in all directions—evoking the panoramic photographs of a century earlier. This photograph also evokes the stereoscopic photograph of a combine harvester by Truman Ingersoll, with machinery bearing down on the viewer. Rather than a twenty-six-mule team slowly pulling a rig, however, what we are presented with is an airplane swooping at the viewer

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<sup>258</sup> Daniel Imhoff, *Food Fight: The Citizen's Guide to a Food and Farm Bill* (Healdsburg, CA: Watershed Media distributed by the University of California Press, 2007).

while spraying a fertilizer or pesticide. In another photograph of the King Ranch three combine harvesters work in tandem, moving toward the viewer in a field of sorghum. Such strategies evoke the choreographed industrial machinery of an earlier era.<sup>259</sup>

Debates about the distribution and milling of American wheat, discussed in chapter two, are also evoked in Carra's collage by kernels of grain in the lower foreground and an African woman carrying a sack of "American Wheat Flour" farther up the page. If we are to judge flour mills by their business success, the legacy of both the private industrial millers founded in the nineteenth century and the socialized alternative of the early twentieth are germane. General Mills thrived over the course of the twentieth century and became transnational. It absorbed its competitor Pillsbury in 2001. However, so as not to be an illegal monopoly, the right to produce the Pillsbury line of baking products was leased to a competitor, Smucker's. By the 1930s, similarly, the State Mill and Elevator of North Dakota was thriving and profitable, and it remains an active institution in 2009 producing flour as well mixes for pancakes and bread machines. Betty Crocker's image, born of a rivalry between the two institutions, has been reworked seven times since Neysa McMein's first in 1936. The incarnation used in 2009, like the original, is a composite of facial features. Rather than reflecting the staff at General Mills, however, this one merged the faces of cooks who won the company's baking contest in 1996.

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<sup>259</sup> For historical information on the King Ranch, see: John Cypher, *Bob Kleberg and the King Ranch: A Worldwide Sea of Grass* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), Robert Moorman Denhardt, *The King Ranch Quarter Horses, and Something of the Ranch and the Men That Bred Them* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1970), Frank Goodwyn, *Life on the King Ranch* (New York: Crowell, 1951), Tom Lea and Richard King, *The King Ranch* (Boston: Little, 1957), "King Ranch, Inc.," in *International Directory of Company Histories* (St. James Press, Reproduced in Business and Company Resource Center. Farmington Hills, MI:Gale Group. 2009. <http://galenet.galegroup.com/servlet/BCRC> Document Number: I2501308576, 2004). The photograph with an airplane was available on the King Ranch's website in October, 2009 at: <http://www.king-ranch.com/texas.html> The photographs of combines harvesting sorghum was also available on the web, at: <http://www.king-ranch.com/milo.html>

The valuing of specific visual forms of corn, as discussed in chapter three, is hinted at in Carra's collage by the beautiful ear impaled on a pitchfork. Through the efforts of breeders and subsidies by the federal government the US has become the largest producer of corn in the world—growing 39% of the global supply on 86 million acres—and on a corporate level Pioneer Hi-Bred leads the industry. While the specific visual vocabulary of political cartoonists is in a constant state of flux, the media remains central to debates about the state of food production. For example, a drawing published on March 15, 2001 by Clay Bennett, the former cartoonist for the *Pittsburgh Post Gazette* who later worked for the *Christian Science Monitor*, features an ear of beautiful yellow corn being eaten by a consternated man. After biting off half of the kernels a notice that the ear's patent is pending has emerged on the cob—a fact that evokes the unease that many people have with private ownership of genomes and transgenic foods.<sup>260</sup>

Carra's collage of cultural references evokes some of the complexity of systemic analysis, as discussed in chapter four, although it does not do so in a rigorously scientific way. How commodities transverse the system, often brokered in the Wheat Pit at the Chicago Board of Trade, continues to fascinate the public. Holabird and Root's building to house this institution still stands during the early twenty-first century, and it remains a key feature of the Chicago skyline. The action in the Pit, however, is changing. Since 2006 electronic trading has existed alongside open-outcry auctions, and increasingly brokers are choosing to bid via computers. The contemporary photographer Andreas Gursky captured the bustle, grandeur, and power of this space in 1999, and he has exhibited it across the world in an oversized format—approximately

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<sup>260</sup> A copy of this cartoon was available in 2009 on the artist's website, having originally been published in the *Christian Science Monitor*: [http://www.claybennett.com/pages/patent\\_pending.html](http://www.claybennett.com/pages/patent_pending.html) For an overview of the business-side of corn growing see "Corn," in *Encyclopedia of American Industries* (Farmington Hills, MI: Gale, reproduced in the Business and Company Resource Center. <http://galenet.galegroup.com/servlet/BCRC> Document Number: I2501400461, 2010).

six feet tall and eight feet wide. By using double exposures and saturating the color he intensified the space. In the details of this photograph traders can be seen wearing their quintessential business jackets. The norms of attire, however, have diverged from the conservative black fabrics rendered by Grant Wood, J.C. Leyendecker, and Will Grefe. The cut of twenty-first century trading jackets, often custom-designed by Peco, Inc., is based on traditional tailoring. The fabric of such garments, however, is brightly colored or patterned to draw the eye of the auctioneer, and back sides are often made from athletic mesh to enable ventilation. The traders also wear platform shoes, attempting to loom largest in the crowd.<sup>261</sup>

The case studies discussed throughout this dissertation address questions that shaped an earlier generation's relationship to their food and laid the foundation for the food system of today. Understanding them can serve as a step toward coming to terms with the challenges of farming in our own era. In light of the fact that Wood's paintings quickly became some of the most recognizable and celebrated art of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, their relevance lives on. To the extent that art historians contextualize fine art by means of the logic of the era in which objects were created, examining the intellectual history of farming is a necessary road to understanding Wood's work. As scholars of art have increasingly recognized, the significance of objects continues to speak to successive generations. Americans continue to view images of farming from earlier eras in search of an ethical, profitable, and sustainable food system. Thus,

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<sup>261</sup> On Andreas Gursky's art see the book by Bernhard Mendes Bürgi, Beate Söntgen, and Nina Zimmer, *Andreas Gursky* (Ostfildern: Exhibition catalog from the Kunstmuseum Basel published in collaboration with Hatje Cantz, 2007). See also the article by Katy Siegel, "The Big Picture - Interpretation of Andreas Gursky's Photographs - Critical Essay," *Artforum*, January 2001, available online: [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m0268/is\\_5\\_39/ai\\_75577242/](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0268/is_5_39/ai_75577242/). For a discussion of Trading Jackets, see an article in the journal for the profession written by Jim Overdahl, "Why Do Traders Wear Trading Jackets?," *Futures*, Fall 2005, 13-14. On the Peco, Inc. website in 2009 grain traders could choose from numerous fabrics and styles for their suit jackets. <http://www.tradingjackets.com/>



the concerns that Wood struggled to come to terms with as he made his paintings, drawings, and prints—some of which we now associate with the experiences, arguments, crops, and theories of agribusiness—are worth pondering decades later.

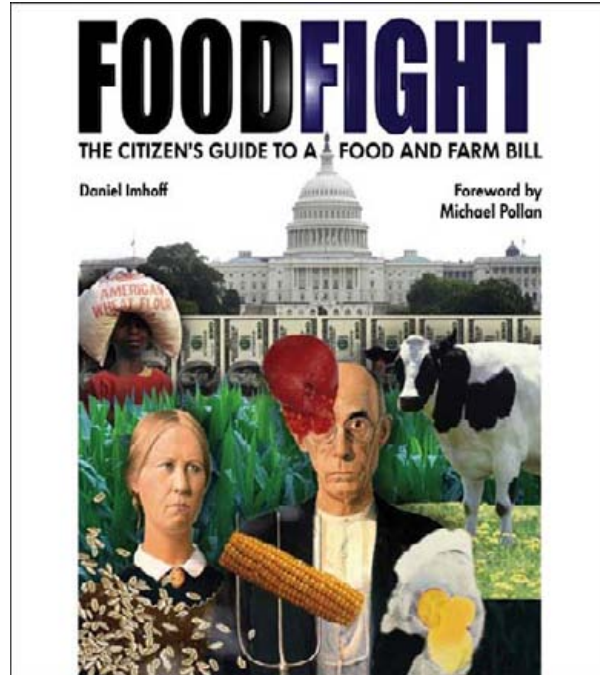


Figure 194. Roberto Carra, collage on the cover of the book by Daniel Imhoff, *Food Fight*, 2007.

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