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Article Summary: In order to gain some insight into the "Real West," statistics and information were collected for 37 western Nebraska counties, and the totals then compared with the state and eastern totals. The idea was to find out how much western Nebraskans differed from eastern Nebraskans.

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Photographs / Images: Irrigating sugar beets, 1928, Scotts Bluff County; Steam tractor plowing, 1910, Buffalo County; Heading wheat in Red Willow County; Harvesting barley with Holt Combination Harvester, Morrow farm, Cheyenne County, 1926

# AGRICULTURE IN WESTERN NEBRASKA

## 1906-1966

BY JOHN T. SCHLEBECKER

THIS history covers only sixty years but it seems longer because we live in such interesting times. As everyone knows, this period embraced two world wars, two little wars, two foreign aid programs, two major depressions, three Deals from Square to Fair, a New Frontier, and a Great Society. Yet we know little about just western Nebraska during these years. Indeed, we know little about the physiographic province of the Great Plains. Usually we really write about the Plains states rather than the Great Plains.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Howard W. Ottoson, Eleanor M. Birch, Philip A. Henderson and A. H. Anderson, *Land and People in the Northern Plains Transition Area*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966), for example, shows virtually no strictly Plains figures except for some quoted from Jorgenson (see footnote 19) and for some county studies which are not always concerned with the right counties.

*Dr. Schlebecker, Curator of the Division of Agriculture and Forest Products, Smithsonian Institution, delivered this paper at the Organization of American Historians meeting in Chicago on April 27, 1967.*

The problem is not simply to define the Great Plains. Too little is known of the province, no matter how defined. A history of western Nebraska may help throw some light on the history of the whole province. Those who insist on cosmic usefulness may find it important to know how men successfully exploited an area which, if found anywhere else, would be declared a scenic wonder or a game preserve. Similar regions may be awaiting development elsewhere in the world, and perhaps an account of what men did in western Nebraska, and how they did it, may show others how to accommodate to similar conditions.

Detailed study of the full physiographic area is so difficult that, as far as I know, no one has collected very much data for just the Plains. Quite possibly the Plains include around 300 counties in 10 states.<sup>2</sup> Gathering material for a group of counties this large has been so disheartening that it has yet to be done. A survey of just one set of counties for one state, may however, indicate what a more complete history of the Plains might show.

In order to gain some insight to the Real West, statistics and information were collected for 37 western Nebraska counties, and the totals were then compared with the state and eastern totals. The idea was to find out how much the westerner differed from eastern Nebraskans.<sup>3</sup>

The area arbitrarily called the Nebraska Plains embraces about 57% of the land area of the state. These

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<sup>2</sup> Homer E. Socolofsky, "Introduction to the Great Plains Number," *Journal of the West*, (January, 1967), pp. 1-5; the definition of the Plains as made by Congress in 1957 seems too generous, and appears to be based more on a climatic region than upon a physiographic province. For a closer definition see John T. Schlebecker, *Cattle Raising on the Plains, 1900-1961*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1963), p. vii.

<sup>3</sup> The counties selected as being in, or mostly in the Great Plains were: Arthur, Banner, Blaine, Box Butte, Brown, Chase, Cherry, Cheyenne, Custer, Dawes, Dawson, Deuel, Dundy, Frontier, Furnas, Garden, Gosper, Grant, Harlan, Hayes, Hitchcock, Hooker, Keith, Kimball, Lincoln, Logan, Loup, McPherson, Morrill, Perkins, Phelps, Red Willow, Rock, Scotts Bluff, Sheridan, Sioux, and Thomas.

Plains contain some river valleys, but generally the topography ranges from gently rolling to rough, has a natural grass cover, high wind velocities, and modest precipitation. Geography and climate did not change across the years, but other things did although not always clearly. In the course of time statistical items appeared and disappeared in the records, and sometimes comparisons became nearly impossible. Even so, in spite of discontinuous data and in spite of fluctuations in levels of production, costs, and the like, some fairly constant ratios between east and west appeared for the full sixty years.

The Plains produced little feed grain, much of the bread grain, a lot of the beef, but hardly any of the pork raised in Nebraska. Corn acreage, for example, came to about 25% of the state total. Spring wheat apparently disappeared sometime after 1946, but until then plainsmen planted about 70% of the crop. From beginning to end, however, eastern farmers could, if they wanted, out-produce the Plains in anything at any time. In 1918, for example, although total spring wheat acreage rose on the Plains, the east grew 62% of the crop.

Winter wheat statistics appear for the whole period, 1906-1966. War especially influenced winter wheat producers. Up to 1916 the Plains farmers planted about 20% of the winter wheat, but in 1917 they planted 60% of the crop. Thereafter they planted or grew about 40% of the total, until the Second World War when they grew around 50% of the winter wheat. They continued at that level through 1964.<sup>4</sup> On the whole, livestock ratios responded hardly at all to wars or anything else. Plainsmen produced about 40% of the cattle of Nebraska, tending to produce slightly more of the total over time. The number

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<sup>4</sup>Up to 1925 the figures are for acres planted, for the years 1931 to 1964 the figures are for acres harvested. "Agricultural Statistics," *Annual Report, Nebraska State Board of Agriculture*, (Lincoln: The Board), for 1907, 1913, 1914, 1915, 1916, 1917, and 1918; *Nebraska Agricultural Statistics*, (Lincoln: Nebraska Department of Agriculture and Inspection, and the USDA), for 1925, 1931, 1934, 1941, 1942, 1946, and 1964.

of swine decreased sharply across the years, horses declined in time but remained at about 36% of the total, and sheep followed some sort of private cycle. Only in sheep did the Plains ever produce more animals than the east.<sup>5</sup>

Plains farmers also raised most of the potatoes in Nebraska, starting with 33% of the crop in 1907, and erratically rising to 75% in 1964. Potatoes proved to be one of the most profitable crops in western Nebraska, although grown in a small area. Plains farmers even more obviously dominated the sugar-beet industry, and already grew 97% of the Nebraska crop by 1925. The percentage apparently never fell below 90% except in 1942. Except for wild hay, the Plains rarely produced as much as 40% of the total forage and silage crops.<sup>6</sup>

Good times and bad, high yields and low, through wars and depressions, wet years and dry, farmers on the Plains regularly produced their portion of most commodities. The size of the total production made no great differences in the ratios. The proportions changed for some of the crops in the long run, but the short-range fluctuations in production and in percentages had no real bearing on the long run changes. Winter wheat, for example, seemed to be greatly influenced by wars, but at a distance it appears that the wars merely accelerated long run shifts. In short, Plains farmers and eastern farmers encountered much the same problems and opportunities and all responded about the same. Plainsmen seemed always to hold their own, but little more. If Plains farmers happened to be more or less prosperous than other Nebraskans, the cause could not be simply traced to larger or smaller amounts of anything, since the east also moved up or down at the same time.

Obviously, considering only land area, the Plains farmers regularly produced less than their share of most

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<sup>5</sup> "Agricultural Statistics," *op. cit.*; *Nebraska Statistics, op. cit.*

<sup>6</sup> "Agricultural Statistics," *op. cit.*; *Nebraska Statistics, op. cit.*

commodities. Statewide statistics, if used to reflect conditions on the Plains, seriously overstate Plains production of winter wheat, corn, and livestock. The same statistics, however, overstate the amounts of spring wheat, sugar beets, potatoes, and dry edible beans grown in the east. A truer picture of life on the Plains requires a segregation of the information. This has seldom been done systematically, even now.

Segregated evidence strongly suggests that something, probably the Plains environment, prevented many inadequate persons from even settling the region, and the subsequent struggle for survival soon washed out the unlucky and the incompetent. The unfortunate became non-residents, non-producers, and non-statistics. Those who survived managed to keep advancing economically between 1906 and 1966. This history centers on the winners rather than the losers. No callousness is intended, and every sympathy is extended to the dispossessed. On the other hand, many plainsmen have felt that the story of the defeated has occupied too much of the historians' attention. Of course, historians need not always cheer for the winners, but now and then somebody should note who won, and why.

Perhaps those who enter at a late stage of technological development do have an advantage in reaching a high level of sustained growth. As it happened, for example, large farms eventually proved to be more adaptable to 20th century science, technology, and economy. Plains farmers began with large units, and they retained their advantage. The figures are again in a state of disarray, but some patterns appear.

Plains farms started out in 1906 being three times larger than the eastern farms and ended up over four times larger on the average. These larger farms, born mostly of necessity and ruined dreams, turned out to be more economical as time went on. They eventually symbolized comparative prosperity, and probably helped cause it. Furthermore, although angry farmers facing ruin may

dispute the point, it seems that in recent times, the fewer the farmers the more efficient the farming. Across the years the Plains had about one-fourth of the farmers in Nebraska, although the total number of farmers decreased regularly after 1935. After that year both regions lost farmers, but the Plains lost proportionately more. In 1915 the Plains had 29% of the farmers, but in 1959 had 23% of them.<sup>7</sup>

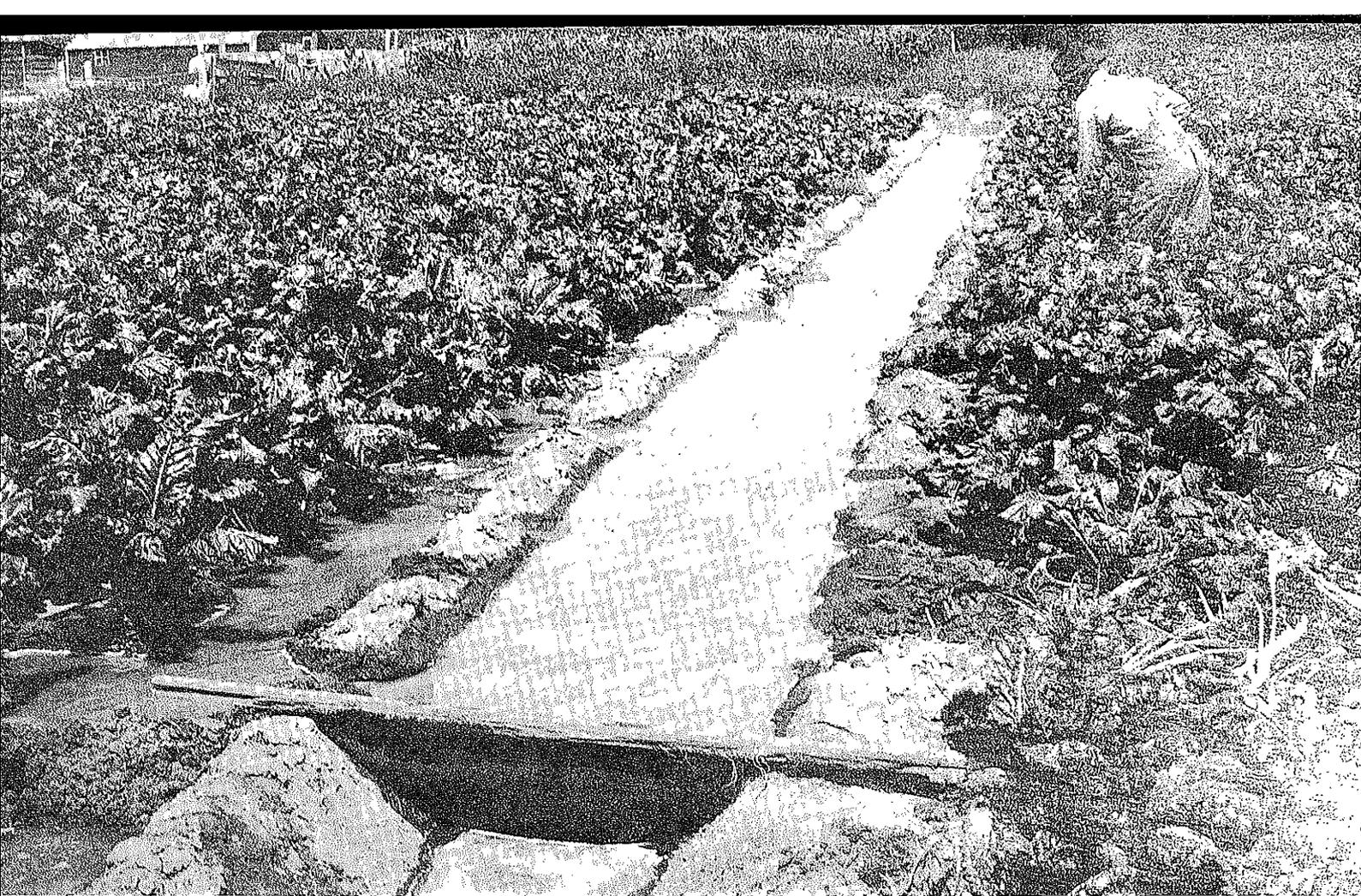
Other useful and comparable economic figures for counties are not easily available. Up to 1925, and possibly beyond, the Plains had proportionately fewer tenants than did the east. Tenantry, which so concerned Nebraska farm editors during the Twenties, afflicted the east more than the Plains. Indeed, quite a bit more. Except for 1915, the Plains never had even a fourth of the total tenants in the state, and usually had remarkably fewer.<sup>8</sup> Since tenantry often represented foreclosed mortgages, the economic indication seems clear.

Several other indexes suggest slowly but regularly rising prosperity for Plains farmers. The average value of farm land and buildings as shown by Pressly and Scofield indicates a constantly rising value of Plains real estate in comparison with the east. In 1910, for example, the average Plains real estate value came to \$19.91 an acre, compared to an average of \$64.90 in the east. The Plains average value per acre rose proportionately from about one-third of the eastern values to nearly one-half in 1954, and two-thirds in 1959. In that year the Plains value per acre stood at \$60.40 compared to \$90.04 in the east. The real estate inflation produced by the First World War

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<sup>7</sup> "Agricultural Statistics," *op. cit.*; *Nebraska Statistics, op. cit.*; Bureau of the Census, *Sixteenth Census of the United States: 1940, Agriculture, Statistics for Counties*, v. 2, pt. 1, (Washington: Department of Commerce, 1942); Bureau of the Census, "Nebraska," *United States Census of Agriculture, 1950*, v. 1, pt. 12, (Washington: Department of Commerce, 1952); Bureau of the Census, *U. S. Census of Agriculture, 1959, Nebraska Counties*, v. 1, pt. 20, (Washington: Department of Commerce, 1961).

<sup>8</sup> "Agricultural Statistics," *op. cit.*; *Nebraska Statistics, 1925, op. cit.*



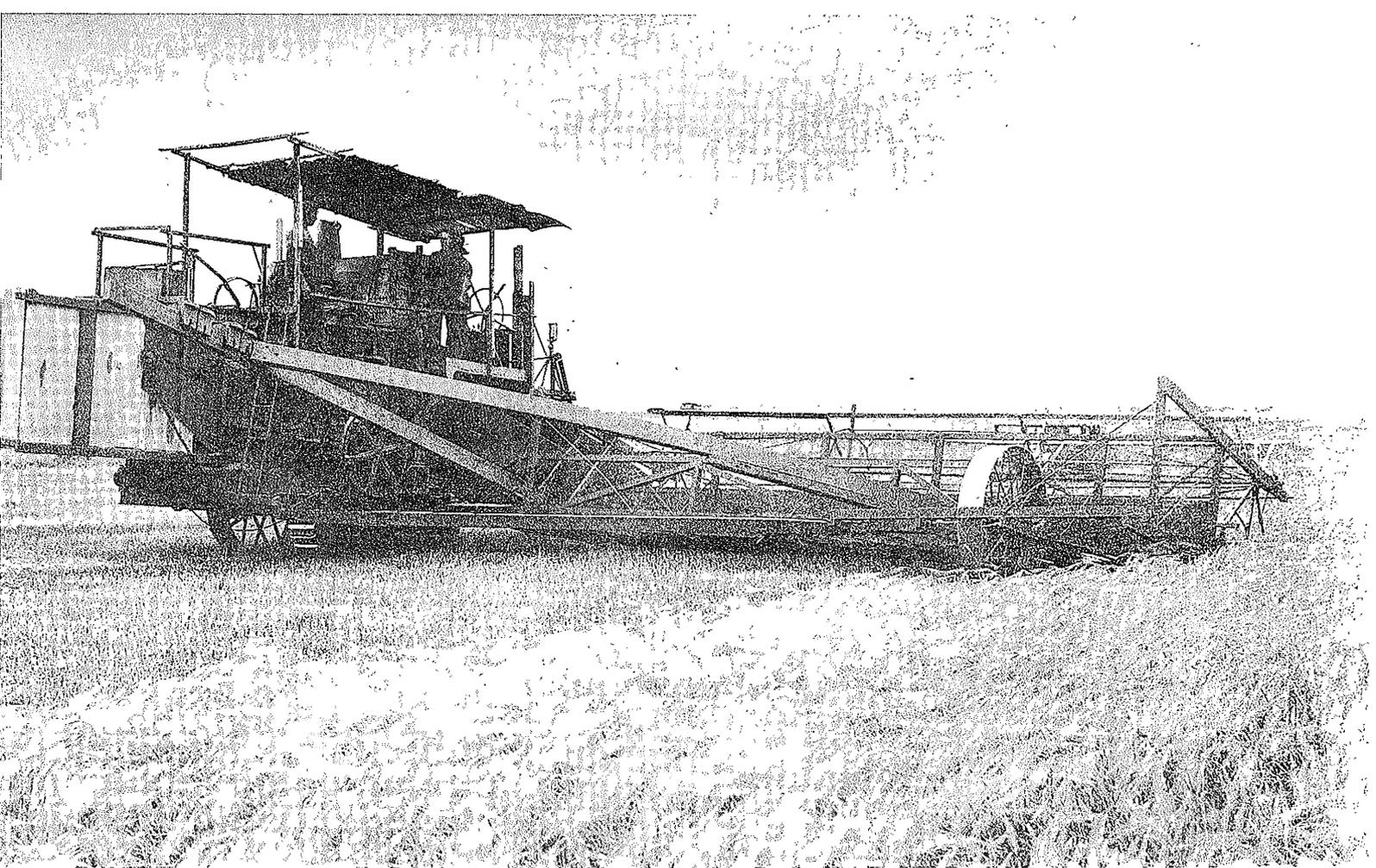
Irrigating sugar beets in 1928, Scotts Bluff County.



Steam tractor plowing, Buffalo County, circa 1910.



Heading wheat in Red Willow County.



Harvesting barley with Holt Combination Harvester,  
Morrow farm, Cheyenne County, 1926.

did not hit the Plains as hard as it did other sections, and subsequently values on the Plains did not drop as sharply either. Low values meant, among other things, that the Plains farmer had relatively lighter taxes, lower total interest, and lower costs for land needed to expand holdings. Steadily but moderately rising values suggested increasing over-all prosperity.

The Census figures tend to confirm this conclusion as well as might be expected. In 1920 the average Plains farmer had a debt of \$5,534 on which he paid about 6.2% interest, while the average eastern farmer had a debt of \$7,646 on which he paid an interest of perhaps 5.5%. This is for farmers reporting such debts, of course. In 1930 the average Plains farm reporting any debt carried a load of \$5,277, while the eastern farmer had a debt of \$8,475. The Great Depression equalized things a bit, and in 1940 the Plains farmers carried an average debt of \$4,469 compared to \$5,572 for the easterners.<sup>9</sup>

Easterners seem to have invested more in capital equipment in the years before 1940. Tractors, for example, took greater hold first in the east where farmers had many more per farm than did the plainsmen. By 1940, however, the Plains farmers forged ahead on tractors per farm, and the plainsmen definitely had the larger share of the tractors by 1950.<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, the size and use of tractors probably favored the plainsmen. Writing of Perkins county in 1920 one observer noted:

I was impressed, when on the roads of the county, with the number, size, and quality of the motor trucks in use in hauling grain to the markets. This is motor-truck country.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas J. Pressly and William H. Scofield, *Farm Real Estate Values in the United States by Counties, 1850-1959*, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1965), pp. 39-40; Bureau of the Census, *Fourteenth Census of the United States: Nebraska*, (Washington: Department of Commerce, 1925); Bureau of the Census, *Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930, Agriculture, The Northern States*, v. 2, pt. 1, (Washington: Department of Commerce, 1932); Census, 1940, *op. cit.*; Census, 1950, *op. cit.*; Census, 1959, *op. cit.*

<sup>10</sup> "Agricultural Statistics," 1918, *op. cit.*; *Nebraska Statistics, 1925, op. cit.*; Census, 1940, *op. cit.*; Census, 1950, *op. cit.*

It is rather exceptional to see teams hauling grain. One gets the same impression with reference to tractors. Farmers use them for pulling binders, headers, and combination harvesters; for threshing, plowing, and other field work. The combination harvesting machines are not so uncommon here. They seem to work well. I was told by one farmer, having one, that in cutting more than 400 acres of wheat he had been stopped an hour all told because of trouble with his machine. After heavy rains, for some days, the tractor would sink into soft places and give trouble, but the "combine" worked perfectly operated by its own, mounted, stationary, 47-horse-power gasoline engine. It cut 35 acres a day in wheat yielding about 20 bushels to the acre. One man operated the combine, one the tractor, and two men with trucks delivered the grain to town, where the distance was not too great.<sup>11</sup>

Gross farm income from sales of products could be found only for the years since 1929. In 1930 the average Plains farm had a cash sale income of \$3,591, or more than \$700 more than the eastern farm. The gap widened. In 1940 the average Plains farm sold \$2,152 of crops and livestock; the eastern farm only \$1,378. By 1944 gross cash income on the Plains farm rose to \$5,944, the eastern farm only to \$4,476. In 1949 sales rose to \$6,060 for the Plains and \$6,562 for the east. In 1954 sales came to \$10,457 on the Plains and \$8,149 in the east. The gap reached spectacular proportions in 1959 when gross sales averaged \$17,122 for the Plains, but only \$12,042 for eastern Nebraska. This is not the picture usually presented.<sup>12</sup>

Costs, of course, determine how much the farmer actually had left. Costs of farm operation, transportation charges for commodities, and other expenses are almost impossible to secure. In general, the available figures show that although plainsmen had the heavier expenses, their sales more than overcame the costs in relation to the easterners. In 1919, any and all operating expenses for farms reporting, show expenses on the Plains to be generally heavier than in the east. In 1919 the average plainsman's expenses came to \$708, that of the easterner to

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<sup>11</sup> F. H. Beedle, "Perkins County, Seen Close Up," *Nebraska Farm Journal*, (Omaha, Oct. 15, 1920), p. 20.

<sup>12</sup> Census, 1940, *op. cit.*; Census, 1950, *op. cit.*; Census, 1959, *op. cit.*

\$502, but the easterner had over \$2,100 more debt. Most likely the higher expenses at the end of the First World War did not make the plainsman much worse off, if it did that. As time went on, income from sales became progressively higher in this under-developed area.

Statistics for any and all expenses were not available on a county basis in the other years until 1959. Expenses for 1929 seem not to have been recorded in any easily accessible place. In 1939 and 1949 expenses appeared by counties only for categories such as labor hire, machinery hire, petroleum costs, and the like. The farms reporting varied for each category, and this made it difficult to average all costs. Statistical elegance, however, seems less important than probable trends. Simply adding the averages for labor hire, machinery hire, and petroleum costs, shows that in 1939 the Plains farmer paid \$1,017 and the eastern farmer \$600. In 1949 the Plains farmer paid \$1,954 compared to \$1,063 for the easterner. In both these years the greater cash sales of the plainsmen left them with the larger margin, and the margin increased in each census year.<sup>13</sup>

In 1959 all farm expenses on the Plains came to \$7,189, while eastern costs came to \$7,010. Subtraction of these costs from sales shows that the Plains farmer cleared some \$10,000 and the easterner only \$5,000 in 1959.<sup>14</sup> All told, from 1919 on the plainsmen made a better living than the easterners.

Although this report does not pretend to great precision, this general conclusion will most likely be confirmed by subsequent research. The question remains: Why did this happen? The chief answer seems to be that the plainsmen got off to a late start, and so they had fewer burdens to get rid of, and fewer adjustments to make. Although eastern Nebraska had entered the Golden Age of American

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<sup>13</sup> Censuses of 1920, 1930, 1940, 1950, 1959, *op. cit.*

<sup>14</sup> Census, 1959, *op. cit.*

Agriculture by 1906, the Plains had not. The early Plains farmers still tried to use traditional farming methods. In 1907, for example, they raised some 521,000 hogs. This number dropped abruptly to 292,000 by 1914 as the farm enterprise changed on the Plains. On the other hand, cattle, wheat, corn, hay, and forage crops all rose in amount, but declined in proportion to the state as a whole. The Plains avoided the expansive excesses of the Golden Age, in spite of the Kinkaid Act of 1904 and the Enlarged Homestead Act of 1909. Probably the reputation of the Plains which dated from the drought of the 1890s, plus the still remaining damage, and the later attacks of Hessian flies, and a couple of harsh winters, all taught caution to the new pioneers.<sup>15</sup>

By 1915 dry farming methods had become fairly common practice in large areas of the Plains. The entire region concentrated on cattle and wheat. The Kinkaiders either failed or became large ranchers or wheat growers. Many of the cattlemen had started as homesteaders but ended up in animal husbandry by 1915. The comparative newness of settlement meant that the land was rather fertile and the use of fertilizers and crop rotations were not necessary during the First World War. Consequently, the plainsmen got along fairly well. When soil fertility started to decline, farmers used legumes in rotations, which

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<sup>15</sup> *Annual Report, Nebraska State Board of Agriculture*, (Lincoln: The Board), 1908, 1913, 1914; Weather Bureau, *Climatological Data, Nebraska*, (printed in Nebraska and assembled at Washington, issues for 1906 through 1914); Kansas National Forest, Grazing Report, G-Allowances, Region 2, Division of Range Management, National Archives, Record Group 95, for 1908-1914; Supervisor's Annual Working Plan, Nebraska National Forest, G-Allowances, Region 2, DRM, NA, RG 95, for 1913-1914; Horace C. Filley, *Effects of Inflation and Deflation Upon Nebraska Agriculture, 1914 to 1932*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Ag. Exp. Sta. Research Bulletin 71, 1934), p. 131.

not only restored fertility but provided feed for livestock.<sup>16</sup> Thus as the open range slowly shrank, farmers and stockmen gradually raised ever larger amounts of forage crops.

Meanwhile, important irrigation projects began on the Great Plains following the passage of the Newlands Act of 1902. By 1910 Morrill and Scotts Bluff counties irrigated about 150,000 acres. Farmers in the western part of the state began to grow potatoes, beans, and sugar beets. To a surprising extent, however, farmers used irrigated land to raise alfalfa.<sup>17</sup>

Then came the era of total war from 1915 to 1918. Most of American agriculture became badly disoriented. The Plains, however, actually benefited in the long run because the commodities most in demand, meat and wheat, fitted the Plains better than any other crops. Per capita beef and veal consumption rose 13.5 pounds, and the number of animals in Nebraska rose in spite of heavy slaughter. Western Nebraska increased its share of cattle by 5% as prices for range cattle nearly doubled, rising from \$7.75 a hundredweight in 1915, to \$14.50 a hundred in 1918. Profits easily outran costs.<sup>18</sup>

Western cattlemen did not have to buy much land, and the comparatively high interest rates discouraged extensive purchase. As a result, the westerners did not run up

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<sup>16</sup> Frank A. Hayes, "Agricultural Geography of Dawes County, Nebraska," *Annual Report, Nebraska State Board of Agriculture, 1916*, (Lincoln: The Board, 1916), pp. 327-331; G. E. Condra, "The Development of Nebraska's Sandhill Areas," *Annual Report, Nebraska State Board of Agriculture, 1915*, (Lincoln: The Board, 1915), pp. 293-297; W. W. Burr, "The Future of Wheat Growing in Nebraska," *Annual Report, Nebraska Board of Agriculture, 1917*, (Lincoln: The Board, 1917), pp. 275-277; Filley, *op. cit.*; H. D. Lute, "The Growing and Care of Forage Crops," *Annual Report, Nebraska State Board of Agriculture, 1909*, (Lincoln: The Board, 1909), pp. 190-192; Hayes, *op. cit.*, pp. 328-329.

<sup>17</sup> James C. Olson, *History of Nebraska*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1955), p. 326; Condra, *op. cit.*

<sup>18</sup> Agricultural Marketing Service, *Livestock and Meat Statistics*, (Washington: USDA, Statistical Bulletin 230, 1958), pp. 204, 283; "Agricultural Statistics," *op. cit.*, 1915-1918; *The Cattleman*, (Fort Worth, March, 1922), p. 23; Rudolf A. Clemens, *The American Livestock and Meat Industry*, (New York: Ronald Press, 1923), p. 294.

much of a debt and so suffered less when depression hit in the 1920s. Farmers in western Nebraska experienced little over-expansion, and they also made the best long run accommodation to their region. After the war the number of tenant farmers, a fair indicator of foreclosures, rose rather more in the east than in the west.<sup>19</sup>

The end of the subsidized wartime economy led to a period of governmental fumbling in America from 1919 to 1941. Before the First World War farmers on the Plains had come into contact with the federal government chiefly through the General Land Office and the Forest Service. The Bureau of Reclamation, established in 1902, became especially important only after the war when farmers discussed irrigation as a form of farm relief. During the war the Grain Corporation was founded to help guarantee high production. Many farmers seem to have felt that the corporation had actually kept prices down. In the middle of 1920, however, the Corporation stopped buying wheat and in 15 days the price fell 79 cents a bushel. Now some farmers began to demand that the government do something, as it had done something during the war.<sup>20</sup>

In a way, the government was already doing something. By 1920 the County Agent and the Extension Ser-

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<sup>19</sup> C. W. Thompson, *Costs and Sources of Farm-Mortgage Loans in United States*, (Washington: USDA, Bulletin 384, 1916), pp. 2, 4-5; Lloyd P. Jorgenson, "Agricultural Expansion into the Semiarid Lands of the West North Central States During the First World War," *Agricultural History*, (Jan. 1949), p. 32; *Nebraska Statistics*, *op. cit.*, for 1925, pp. 24-25; *Federal Writers' Project of the Works Progress Administration, Nebraska: A Guide to the Cornhusker State*, (New York: Viking, 1939), p. 78.

<sup>20</sup> Condra, *op. cit.*; Arthur R. Reynolds, "The Kinkaid Act and Its Effects on Western Nebraska," *Agricultural History*, (Jan., 1949), p. 26; Samuel T. Dana, *Forest and Range Policy: Its Development in the United States*, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1956), pp. 198-199; "How Farm Bureau Aided to Get Water Contract," *The Business Farmer*, (Scottsbluff, Feb. 26, 1926), p. 1; "Farm Relief Committee," *The Business Farmer*, (Scottsbluff, Jan. 16, 1926), p. 9; Arthur Capper, "Washington Comment," *Nebraska Farm Journal*, (Omaha, Mar. 15, 1920), p. 12; Ben C. Rose, "Wheat Growers Organizing," *Nebraska Farm Journal*, (Omaha, Oct. 15, 1920), pp. 22-23.

vice had entered the Plains and on the whole the farmers seem to have welcomed the newcomers. The Extension Service led to the American Farm Bureau Federation which in 1921 began urging Congress to set up a national marketing arrangement for grain. Possibly the Capper-Volstead Act of 1922 met some of these demands, but not all of them. When the McNary-Haugen bills began to come up, many farmers and the Farm Bureau apparently hoped for some relief through price support legislation.<sup>21</sup>

Meanwhile, the tight money policy of the Federal Reserve System introduced farmers to another government agency. The Grain Corporation, the Forest Service, the Bureau of Reclamation, the General Land Office, the Federal Reserve System, and the Tariff Commission all seemed involved in the farm business. Before long, some farmers and their leaders decided that since these agencies would not disappear, they might just as well be helping farmers. At the same time, the Farm Bureau also began speaking out for parity, the two-price system, and the McNary-Haugen bills. In 1929 the potato growers protested their exclusion under the McNary-Haugen bill of that year, and the sugar beet farmers complained about the low tariff on Cuban sugar.<sup>22</sup>

The Farm Bureau of Western Nebraska also looked at the Bureau of Public Roads to see if it could be manipulated for the relief of farmers. One way or another farmers sought to mobilize the federal government to assist in re-

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<sup>21</sup> Annual Report of County Agent, 1922, Kimball County Nebraska, Unassembled Reports of the Nebraska State Extension Service, Lincoln, Nebraska; Kimball County Annual Farm Bureau Report, 1922, Unassembled Extension Records, Nebraska Extension Service, Lincoln, Nebraska, p. 20; G. R. Schroll, Annual Report of the County Agent, Morrill County, 1922, Unassembled Reports of the Nebraska Extension Service, Lincoln, Nebraska; "Endorse Grain Marketing Plan," *Nebraska Farmer*, (Lincoln, April 2, 1921), p. 568.

<sup>22</sup> "You are to be Congratulated," *The Business Farmer*, (Scottsbluff, June 18, 1929), p. 1; "Co-operatives May be Organized by Government," *The Business Farmer*, (Scottsbluff, Sept. 30, 1929), p. 1; "Farm Bureau Adopts Good Roads Program," *The Business Farmer*, (Scottsbluff, Nov. 15, 1929), p. 1.

ducing the effects of the depression. When the Agricultural Marketing Act became law in 1929, however, many farmers and farm leaders thought it inadequate. And all of this happened well before the Great Depression, and four full years before the New Deal.<sup>23</sup>

Drought, dust, and depression struck the Plains in the Thirties. Although humid land farming cannot be well carried on with less than 20 inches of precipitation, dry farming works well enough down to around 14 inches. Precipitation fell below 14 inches on the Nebraska Plains only in 1934 and 1936, but moisture ran above 20 inches in 1930, 1935, 1938, and 1941. In the other years, the low precipitation did moderate damage.<sup>24</sup> Still, as one Plains farmer observed:

Even so, there never was a time when we could not look out across green hills and see our White Faces grazing in contentment. It was so in '34 too. There is no land I know where the grass grows so well in spite of the elements as in the sandhills of Nebraska.<sup>25</sup>

When disaster struck in the Thirties, western Nebraska had not been long nor densely settled. In the northern part of the Plains over half the crop land lay in wild hay, and in general, large amounts of virgin land still existed. About half the state was still in pasture in 1930 and land cost little. In Perkins County, for example, farmers had broken some 80% to 90% of the land only after 1918. Since most of it had recently been plowed for the first time it still had an unusual fertility. The fertility, the relative sparseness of people, the large units, and the low land prices, all gave western Nebraskans peculiar oppor-

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<sup>23</sup> "Letters from the People," *The Business Farmer*, (Scottsbluff, Sept. 24, 1926), pp. 3, 10; "Farm Bureau Sets Out Policy in Plain Terms," *The Business Farmer*, (Scottsbluff, Jan. 28, 1927), p. 3; "Objections to the Debenture Plan," *The Business Farmer*, (Scottsbluff, May 14, 1929), p. 1; "Trying to Eliminate the Potato Growers," *The Business Farmer*, (Scottsbluff, May 14, 1929), p. 1; "Farm Bureau Backs Beets Industry," *The Business Farmer*, (Scottsbluff, June 29, 1929), p. 4.

<sup>24</sup> Weather Bureau, 1930-1941, *op. cit.*

<sup>25</sup> Sam R. McKelvie, "Another Year at By the Way," *Nebraska Farmer*, (Lincoln, Jan. 2, 1937), pp. 3, 23.

tunities to survive and to expand operations. Between 1930 and 1940, land in farms grew in the west by 2,176,442 acres, but in the east grew by only 458,974 acres. Between 1935 and 1940, however, the eastern part of Nebraska actually lost land in farms.<sup>26</sup>

Apparently western farmers turned heavily to wheat in the late twenties and early thirties, largely because of the economies possible in the west. Costs ran possibly as much as 20 cents a bushel lower on the Plains, in part because the westerners could and did use combines. Indeed, one estimate placed the difference of cost as high as 50% between the combine and the old binder-thresher system. The plainsmen had less interest in wheat, however, as yields fell because of drought. On the other hand, government price supports after 1933 helped raise the income of the bigger western wheat farmers. The farmers of the Plains had, with their rather late interest in wheat, managed to get into production just in time to have an historic record of growing the commodity. They thus qualified for help, but had not been producing long enough to have ruined themselves waiting for relief. In the years after 1934 the eastern corn and hog producers apparently did not benefit as much from price supports.<sup>27</sup>

Per capita consumption of beef and veal hit high marks in 1934 and 1936. Not counting this government sponsored eating, beef and veal consumption rose 13.2 pounds per capita between 1930 and 1941. Cattle prices fell 50% between 1930 and 1934, then rose irregularly to

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<sup>26</sup> W. E. Hanlin, Annual Report of the County Agent, Perkins County, 1930, Unassembled Reports of the Nebraska State Extension Service, Lincoln, Nebraska; L. F. Garey, *Factors Determining Type-of-Farming Areas in Nebraska*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Ag. Exp. Sta. Bul. 299, 1936), p. 21; A. E. Anderson, *Nebraska Then and Now: Fifty Years of Progress in Agriculture*, (Lincoln: Nebraska State Board of Agriculture, 1931), pp. 6, 12, 14; Census, 1940, *op. cit.*

<sup>27</sup> Filley, *op. cit.*, p. 83; "Will Seek to Get Corn and Hog Act to Help Morrill," *The Business Farmer*, (Scottsbluff, Dec. 7, 1933), p. 1; "Conditions of Crops Throughout the State Reported on July 1," *The Business Farmer*, (Scottsbluff, July 22, 1936), p. 1.

end up at \$9.14 a hundred.<sup>28</sup> High cattle prices meant a lot to the plainsmen, although it is hard to say how much, because figures are difficult to segregate. Anyhow, between 1931 and 1934, livestock furnished between 77% and 83% of the total sales of commodities from Nebraska. Except for 1934, a bit less than half of the livestock revenue came from hogs, the rest from cattle, sheep, and dairying.<sup>29</sup> Because they relied on high priced cattle and price supported wheat, plainsmen with good land holdings and good luck could do rather well, comparatively.

In the Thirties, the Great Plains of the United States became a disaster area and the federal government began many programs to fight poverty in that region. The several programs saved lives, retarded erosion, and advanced better farming methods, but the programs did not save the little farm with its desperate farmer. The programs did, however, provide that marginal bit which the more efficient and better situated farmers needed to survive and then to prosper. In retrospect it seems that farmers on the Plains entered the agricultural stream at a doubly advantageous time. They not only hit the first full flow of technological advance, but the first real flood of governmental aid.

Only with the creation of a new command economy in 1942 did Nebraska and the Plains really start to prosper. The new subsidies and price supports made it possible for plainsmen to introduce innovations on a large scale. The innovations all tended to benefit most those who had the larger farms, and within reason, the drier climate. The farmers on the Plains understandably profited more because they had the farms and the climate ready made.

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<sup>28</sup> *Livestock and Meat Statistics, op. cit.*

<sup>29</sup> "Cash Farm Income, Calendar Year Basis, 1929-1931," *Nebraska Agricultural Statistics, Annual Report, 1931*, (Lincoln: Nebraska Department of Ag. and Inspection and USDA, 1931), p. 54; "Cash Farm Income, Calendar Year Basis, 1932-1934," *Nebraska Agricultural Statistics, Annual Report, 1934*, (Lincoln: Nebraska Department of Agriculture and Inspection and USDA, 1934), p. 54; Garey, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

The greatest burst in innovation, however, seems to have taken place since 1953. Since then the process has become self-sustaining. Any breakdown in the economy has become unthinkable and so various governmental efforts to sustain it have been employed. In the 1960s the mixed economy with heavy governmental involvement appeared again after a brief absence, and seemed to have become a fixed part of American life. Simultaneously the plainsmen emerged from a take-off stage to the self-sustained stage of growth.

The causes for all of this seem to be external to the Plains. The innovations in technology and the involvement of the federal government originated mostly outside the Plains. The plainsmen just happened to be ideally situated for taking advantage of the newer conditions. Because of the hostility of nature, men entered on the Plains at a comparatively late stage. This time of entry proved important, for it meant that fewer farmers had to be dispossessed, fewer farms had to be consolidated, less capital had to be lost or abandoned, and the major crop specialties did not have to be changed.

Prosperity on the Plains owed very little to changing enterprises or to overall increases in production. If increased production had been the key, the east would have been just as prosperous, because except for winter wheat, the east always maintained its share of the total product, no matter how much the product increased. Rather the plainsmen illustrated the proposition that those who enter after technology and the economy have developed have an advantage in reaching a high level of growth.

This idea is hardly new. Generations of historians have observed that from the beginning Americans benefited from riding the crest of European technological advance, while remaining free from the restraints of Old World tyranny and feudalism. Furthermore, the extraordinary influence of vast amounts of vacant land has been noted over and over. The history of the Plains of Nebraska

thus merely repeats an old American tale, but with a few differences like price supports.