"Waste Not, Want Not": Farmers' Reactions to the New Deal in Minnesota

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“Waste Not, Want Not”:
Farmers’ Reactions to the New Deal in Minnesota

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Submitted for partial fulfillment of requirements
For graduation with honors in History
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A farmer stands out in his field, surveying his land. The year was 1932 and it had been another season with little rain and desperately low prices to hardly make a profit with what little crops had been harvested. The farmer bends down and scoops dirt into his hands, only for the dry soil to blow away in the wind. He had heard agricultural experts express hope and advocate persistence; that conditions, both environmental and financial, would improve. The farmer looks over his shoulder to observe his children playing in the yard, while his wife yells for them to change out of their church clothes before they ruin their Sunday best, their only spare set of clothing. He thinks it is easy for experts to encourage hope when they do not have families depending on the crops in dry fields. The farmer questions how much longer he will be able to justify remaining on his family’s land and be capable of sufficiently providing for his family. This was my great-grandfather’s reality.

For farmers in Minnesota, and across the United States, the New Deal posed the only semblance of hope for better times as they faced the calamities of the Great Depression and the uncertainty of their livelihoods. With the government’s attitude that “The farm is a basic factor in American life and it will remain an essential spark-plug in the economic and social development for generations and probably for centuries,” the New Deal focused its attention on the recovery of the agricultural sector, and in turn, invested in the outcome of the family farm.1

Advances in farming techniques during the early 1900s allowed for higher production by American farmers; however, it also exacerbated the land and market to the point of crisis. Intensified planting and grazing depleted the soil in the Great Plains and Midwest of its nutrients and paved the way for the dust storms of the 1930s. The advent of the tractor led many farmers to purchase new machinery on credit; a debt they would be left with once the Great Depression took root in the United States. Technological progress in hybrid corn and chemical fertilizer,
along with the tractor, allowed for higher efficiency and increased yields, but produced a surplus of commodities that the market was unable to absorb. As countries recovered following World War I, demand for American agricultural commodities plunged, and the surpluses created with higher production methods caused prices to plummet alongside demand, placing farmers in financial crisis.

By the time of the Stock Market Crash in 1929, farmers in America were already in financial trouble with the drop in demand after World War I. With poverty and malnourishment rampant, the motto of the Great Depression became “waste not, want not.” The government focused on alleviating human suffering in President Franklin Roosevelt’s “Hundred Days” of 1933 and instituted numerous legislative acts for relief, with special attention paid to farmers. As the rest of the nation fell into economic hardship, the government gave unprecedented attention to agriculture and developed relief programs to aid farmers and their families. The Agriculture Adjustment Administration sought to control surpluses in the market, and the Commodity Credit Corporation offered low-interest loans to participating farmers. Additionally, the Resettlement Administration, and eventually the Farm Security Administration, provided further low-interest loans and support for farmers selected for their potential to operate independently. The most popular agency, the Rural Electrification Administration, made available electricity to rural areas. The New Deal reforms were the first intervention of the federal government into the agricultural markets and source of revenue for farmers in the United States; these programs set the precedent for government involvement in the agricultural industry that continues to control the market and grant subsidies to cooperating farmers up to today. Some historians claim that the New Deal only aided large farmers; however, I argue that small farmers in Minnesota survived the Great Depression because of the New Deal’s agricultural
programs. Furthermore, I contend that commodity diversification prior to the market collapse and the utilization of a barter economy in rural areas enabled continued ownership of farm land and allowed for the passage of farms to the next generation.

My research explores the conditions of the Great Depression on Minnesota farms and how farm families perceived the programs of the New Deal, the first of their kind. Only recently have historians begun to analyze primary sources from the bottom, the views of ordinary people on the margins of society, rather than the top, the movers and shakers from a time period. While the New Deal leaders, program officials, and official program records are mostly used to analyze the Great Depression and the agricultural crisis, this work documents the voices and opinions of farmers from Minnesota. For that end, I use oral histories from farmers, farm family members, and small business owners in rural areas, together with newspaper articles from farming regions in Minnesota, and United States farm census reports for the state. Although oral histories are entirely dependent on inconsistent memory, interviews provide one of the only means to investigate the viewpoints of farmers who rarely kept diaries or letters or any written material besides farm ledgers. I employed oral history projects published by the Minnesota Historical Society, and while I was able to glean information from these sources, the interviews were limited to the original research question and concentration. “Minnesota’s Greatest Generation Oral History Project” focuses on the World War II era, with the Great Depression and New Deal reforms presented as background information to the home front setting. The “Minnesota Farm Economy Oral History Project” chronicles the transformation of the agricultural industry in Minnesota, and compares the Great Depression in agriculture to the farm crisis of the 1980s. Lastly, the “Red River Valley Sugarbeet Industry Oral History Project” records the American Crystal Sugar Company in northern Minnesota and only narrates the perspectives of farmers
from that region regarding the New Deal and their survival tactics during the time. In addition to these oral histories, I conducted two interviews with two of my family members, Minnesota farmers themselves. Newspapers also present the public opinion of the agricultural communities in Minnesota, and census reports supply the number of farms, acreage, and crop failures in Minnesota throughout the Great Depression.

This paper will begin with an overview of the debate in the field surrounding the Great Depression and New Deal in its greater context of the nineteenth century agricultural evolution, regionally, and in Minnesota, specifically. I will continue to provide a narrative for farming methods in the 1920s, the subsequent farm crisis, and the New Deal programs designed to combat the financial hardship in the agricultural sector. After presenting the context for the Great Depression on farms, I will focus on the experiences of farmers and their families from Minnesota during the era and examine their perspectives of the New Deal programs on the farm.

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To a great extent, studies of farmers in the Great Depression in rural United States have remained in the realm of local history. Scholars have undertaken studies with the New Deal farm programs, designed to combat surpluses, an unstable market, and the poor living conditions of rural residents, within the framework of agriculture in the nineteenth century and debate the New Deal’s foundation for government involvement in modern agribusiness as more help or hindrance. Regional historians have also dissected the New Deal to reveal the varied calamities endured by farmers during the Great Depression in different areas of the United States. With similar premises, historians of the Deep South, West, and Great Plains assert that the interests of sharecroppers and small farmers were opposed in New Deal reforms that catered to the consolidation of farms by larger landholders and acted as the foundation for contemporary
agriculture, edging out small farmers. Additionally, Midwest historians argue that the New Deal fostered progressive agriculture, a “get big or get out” mentality, and the New Deal programs, along with technological advances, changed the dynamics of rural life with fewer demands for hired labor. Specifically concerning Minnesota, historians claim that the New Deal generally enhanced the lives of nearly everyone during the Great Depression, while analyzing only a few of the farm programs. In contrast, this paper maintains that small farmers in Minnesota benefitted from the New Deal programs that prevented further indebtedness from necessary operational purchases and enabled small farmers to hold onto their land, while also making the most of available produce from diversification and a developed rural barter economy.

R. Douglas Hurt, in Problems of Plenty: the American Farmer in the Twentieth Century (2002), argues that the growth of the agricultural industry has also accompanied an increase in the dependence of agriculture on governmental aid, beginning with the farm programs established by the New Deal. Using accounts of farmers who participated in these government programs of the 1930s, he claims this assistance expanded from technical support in the 1920s to price support and acreage reduction in the 1930s and has further developed into contemporary agriculture. With farmers currently producing surpluses due to higher yields and government programs supporting their prices, Hurt contends that farmers will continue to require unnecessary government involvement. This established dependency on government participation in agriculture, Hurt maintains, has given farmers a sense of “entitlement”. However, Hurt’s focus on New Deal farmers lacks evidence for his claim of contemporary farmers’ sense of “entitlement.”

policies, coinciding with technological advances, until present-day farming. Although a tad nostalgic, he bases this work on personal memories and his sister’s memoirs about growing up on a Tennessee Farm. Conkin recognizes the growth in agriculture with the Farm Board and Agriculture Adjustment Act of 1933 as positive, in opposition to Hurt’s view of the programs as the establishment of government dependence. Preceding the crash of 1929, the Agricultural Marketing Act established the Farm Board as a means to stabilize the agricultural market after the decrease in demand following the reconstruction of Europe after WWII. Subsequent to the Great Depression, when it became apparent that more reforms were needed to aid farmers, the Agricultural Adjustment Act was passed to develop the Agricultural Adjustment Administration and drive prices back up through acreage allotments of the chief crops and decrease surpluses. Although the number of farmers has dropped by six million in the 1930s to 350,000 today, American farmers are able to produce enough crops to feed 6.5 billion people. This ability, according to Conkin, cannot be viewed as anything but beneficial to the nation and to the world. On the other hand, Conkin regrettably ignores those farmers who lost their land and were displaced due to the Great Depression and the partiality of the New Deal farm programs on behalf of larger landholders.

In an overview of the Great Depression era, Robert S. McElvaine’s *The Great Depression: America, 1929-1941* (1993) draws on both social and political history in an attempt to weave together the perspectives of the elite politicians and ordinary American citizens. McElvaine argues that the New Deal forever shaped the workings of the United States through the coming together of the middle and working classes in their shared belief that the government should aid the poor and destitute. Specifically, the reforms in agriculture are interspersed throughout the work as they appear chronologically and in importance to the goals of the New
Deal. Considered as the way out of the Depression, the farm programs are the focus of McElvaine’s chapters regarding the beginnings of the Great Depression and FDR’s response in the “One Hundred Days.” In spite of this argument on behalf of ordinary citizens, McElvaine’s work is concentrated on President Roosevelt and his past experiences in shaping the New Deal.

Giving attention to the sharecroppers in the South, Jane Adams and D. Gorton in “This Land Ain’t My Land: The Eviction of Sharecroppers by the Farm Security Administration” (2009) contend that modernization in the South allowed landowners to reduce their labor force through mechanization. This allowed landowners to farm more land with less labor, resulting in the increase in the eviction of sharecroppers. Adams and Gorton use Farm Security Administration photographs, captions, interviews, and correspondence from the Mississippi Delta region in the South to contrast the goal of the Farm Security Administration, to rehabilitate and improve the quality of life of farm families, with the reality of the programs. Further, Adams and Gorton discuss the racial inequality within the New Deal programs in the South, based on a case study on the Transylvania Plantation in Louisiana, and maintain that African American tenants were displaced in favor of white Resettlement Administration, and later Farm Security Administration, clients. Created as the Resettlement Administration, and later embraced as a portion of the Farm Security Administration, poor sharecroppers and small farmers in the Resettlement Administration were relocated to more arable land and received training in financial matters of the farming operation. The preference of white clients over African Americans, argue Adams and Gorton, fueled the fire in the Mississippi River Delta to set in motion a challenge to white supremacy in the region and the eventual Civil Rights Movement. Although their work provides a specific focus on the African American sharecroppers, Adams
and Gorton unfortunately neglect to complete the story of the displaced African American sharecroppers, leaving the reader wondering what subsequently happened to these people.

Taking a broader stance, Gilbert C. Fite argues that farmers in the South were caught in a cycle where only more money would allow them to expand their business in “The Agricultural Trap in the South” (1986). Using production statistics, Fite maintains that cotton became the cash crop for the South in the early nineteenth century to compete in an increasingly capitalistic economy. However, because this required more land, equipment, and fertilizer, sharecroppers were often unable to farm above subsistence. Fite reasons that sharecroppers were trapped in an industry that favored landowners, with little alternatives to gain the needed capital for sharecroppers to purchase the things necessary to begin their own farming operations. Even though Fite claims the New Deal was the answer to the sharecroppers’ need for capital, he does not explain the programs or if they actually reached sharecroppers in the South.

Pete Daniel, in “The Transformation of the Rural South: 1930 to the Present” (1985), presents the claim that the New Deal programs replaced landowners in the furnishing system in agriculture in the South. Traditionally, large landholders in the South equipped their slaves and then sharecroppers and farmhands with housing, shares of food, and basic necessities of life in return for their work. As the New Deal programs developed in the South and provided these essentials to sharecroppers, landholders no longer saw the need to provide laborers with these items, and in turn, were able to produce more yields with less labor cost. With the implementation of the federal programs, sharecroppers were “sacrificed to modernization,” as the programs often benefitted the landowner far more than the sharecropper. Using literary sources, letters, and documents from the National Archives, Daniel argues that the New Deal relief mainly reached landlords, who then proceeded to use the relief money to mechanize and
increase their land holdings. This mechanization allowed landowners to use less labor and evict sharecroppers from their land. Daniel describes the New Deal in the South as a failure and in a similar light as natural disasters, like the boll weevil, flood, and drought. However in his identification of the New Deal as a disappointment, Daniel overlooks the few sharecroppers who did receive aid from government programs and were able to expand their operations from the aid they were granted.

In “Federal Reclamation and the American West in the Twentieth Century,” Donald J. Pisani focuses on the New Deal in the West, and specifically, the Federal Reclamation Act enacted in 1902. After the agricultural depression in the 1890s, the goal of the Bureau of Reclamation, created by this particular act, was to create more family farms in the West. Utilizing records from the Bureau, Pisani argues that this goal failed during the Great Depression with the development of agribusiness. Pisani asserts that inaccurate assumptions concerning farming operations made by the Bureau of Reclamation, like severely underscoring the soil and plants’ needs for water, along with the inability of government farmers to make their payments during the Great Depression, led to the collapse of the Reclamation’s farm goals and the Bureau’s change of focus to aid Native Americans in the West. However, other than the Reclamation Act, Pisani does not discuss other government farm programs to further his argument of the breakdown of family farms in the West during the Great Depression.

Focusing exclusively on California, Victoria Saker Woeste in “Land, Monopoly, Agribusiness, and the State” (2000) contradicts the primary view that large-scale farming operations controlled California agriculture. Saker Woeste makes use of the United States Census data to argue that along with the growth of industrial farms, small farms of under 50 acres also increased during the Great Depression in California. Additionally, Saker Woeste
claims that these small farmers also were able to wield political influence in the California Prorate Law, implemented following the Agriculture Adjustment Act in 1933; the Prorate Law allowed farmers to opt for a controlled market, when surpluses drove prices down, only after two thirds of the farmers of a specific commodity approved the adjustment, giving the farmers the authority, rather than the government, to contain surpluses as they saw fit. In spite of this argument, the census data limits what information can be disclosed, other than statistics on the growth of farms.

Concentrating on the broader picture of the West, Richard Lowitt in *The New Deal and the West* (1984) discusses the programs of the Great Depression era as they affected the western half of the United States. Lowitt employs records from the Departments of Agriculture and the Interior in his work to examine the efforts of the farming programs in the plains states, the prairieland west of the Mississippi River and east of the Rocky Mountains. Also, Lowitt examines unemployment relief in the Rocky Mountain and Basin states and New Deal regional planning in the Pacific Northwest. Although grouped together in an overarching perspective of the West in the New Deal, Lowitt argues that there were regional differences within the West; the Plains, Mountains, and Basin states all endured diverse calamities during the Great Depression and should be considered separately.

Michael Johnston Grant, in *Down and Out on the Family Farm: Rural Rehabilitation in the Great Plains, 1929-1945* (2002), gives attention to the federal rural rehabilitation program that aimed to provide low-interest loans and financial advice to promising farmers. In particular, Johnston Grant focuses on the states of North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, and Kansas and those farmers caught in between poverty and the potential to become financially stable, what he names the “borderline farmers.” Johnston Grant claims that farmers in these states wanted to
compete in the progressively capitalistic economy and needed to “get big or get out” and expand their land holdings and production yields. Because the Great Depression produced such catastrophes, like the economic collapse and the Dust Bowl, Johnston Grant reasons that farmers relinquished their autonomy as entrepreneurs to the government out of sheer need. On the other hand, Johnston Grant claims that farmers then also rejected programs that were imposed by the government that limited farmers’ autonomy, specifically the rural rehabilitation program. For example, farmers agreed to participate in the allotments in the Agricultural Adjustment Administration, but landlords did not like to be told how to farm by officials in Washington. However, the line between the programs that were welcomed in exchange for farmers’ sovereignty and the programs that were supposedly forced on farmers is not clear.

Studying Kansas in particular, Peter Fearon analyzes relief given to the unemployed and distressed farmers by the federal government in *Kansas in the Great Depression: Work Relief, the Dole, and Rehabilitation* (2007). Aid in Kansas was set in motion with the Reconstruction Finance Corporation (RFC) in 1932, a federal program that loaned money to states that proved they had exhausted all other means of obtaining relief money. Fearon claims that Kansas welcomed the New Deal and its programs for relief, and particularly investigated the Federal Emergency Relief Administration, which replaced the federal loans of the RFC with federal grants to states in need of aid. In this work, Fearon analyzes the working relationship during the Great Depression between the federal government that provided the relief and the local governments in Kansas that allocated the funds. An examination of this relationship, according to Fearon, explains the tensions that arose during the era surrounding federal aid to the states. Finally, Fearon maintains that issues in Kansas regarding the New Deal and federal relief were representative of every state.
Concentrating further on Kansas, Jewell County in particular, Neil Maher argues that innovations in agriculture were accompanied by the inclusion of the federal government in local farming communities. In “Crazy Quilt Farming on Round Land: The Great Depression, the Soil Conservation Service, and the Politics of Landscape Change on the Great Plains During the New Deal” (2000), Maher argues that technological advances, like planting on hills in curved lines around the hill rather than straight vertical lines for decreased erosion, is an example of the turn towards the federal government for new farming strategies and the federal government’s replacement of county agents. In examining nature along with politics, Maher maintains that conservational measures, encouraged by the Soil Conservation Service in Kansas, influenced grain elevators, banks, and social systems in agricultural communities. Maher further reasons that this was a gradual change that has left farming communities tied to the federal government. Nevertheless, Maher’s case overemphasizes the linear themes in city planning, architecture, and farming.

Defining states where corn is the major crop, Dennis S. Nordin analyzes changes in the agricultural industry in the Midwest in From Prairie Farmer to Entrepreneur: The Transformation of Midwestern Agriculture (2005). Nordin studies changes ranging from what seeds were planted and how hybrid seeds evolved to various breeds of livestock raised in the Midwest. In his work, Nordin argues that farmers had to become progressive in their operational methods during the Great Depression, including the need to implement technology, like the use of tractors, electronic cream separators, and insecticides and pesticides, to remain on the land. The Great Depression and New Deal are placed in context between the “Golden Age” of agriculture and the economic recovery of World War II in the work. Nordin makes the case that as farmers accepted relief via legislation, farmers also began to embrace advances, such as
tractors, cars, and radios. Spanning larger issues, Nordin questions if there really ever was a “Golden Age” of agriculture prior to the Great Depression and claims that, at best, it was only ever “gold-plated” due to the human cost in stress from debt, tenancy, and increased injury, illness, and death. Finally, although Nordin acknowledges that some farmers were unable to adapt to their ever-evolving industry, he maintains that this loss built the “entrepreneurial basis” for agribusiness and the most efficient farming operations in the world. Although Nordin makes a compelling case for the progressive technological advances, he fails to give the reactions of the farmers to the liberal ideals of the New Deal programs.

Examining North and South Dakota, Catherine McNicol Stock discusses class and social changes surrounding culture in *Main Street in Crisis: The Great Depression and the Old Middle Class on the Northern Plains* (1992). Stock defines the “old middle class” as the traditionally small, independent property owners in the Dakotas with contradictory values rooted in capitalism and tradition. Staying true to this class, Stock utilizes letters, diaries, and memoirs to make a case that the New Deal was the point at which the “old middle class” and the new middle class of the New Deal agencies met. In this work, Stock seeks to recreate the “old middle class” culture and its perceptions of community tradition in a capitalistic society and considers the effects of the Great Depression on this culture. Furthermore, Stock delves into the methods of survival by Dakotans during this time, and finally, evaluates the long-term effects of these tactics in today’s culture in the Northern Plains. Observing culture in North and South Dakota today, Stock concludes that the “old middle class” and its values has survived, but barely, and the hard times first encountered during the Great Depression have not completely disappeared. While Stock classifies the “old middle class” and describes its distinctive values, she overlooks the definition of the new middle class that she claims upset the traditions of North and South Dakota.
In *Preserving the Family Farm: Women, Community, and the Foundations of Agribusiness, 1900-1940* (1995), Mary Neth changes the discussion from class to gender, focusing on the roles of women in farm families. Analyzing diaries and oral histories of farm families themselves, Neth gives attention to the Midwest. Case studies of Wisconsin, Iowa, and North Dakota are used to provide a larger representation of dairy, corn, and livestock operations, the three main farm products in the region. Neth classifies the stereotype of a farmer as a man and expands her focus to include the social circle of community support and wives surrounding farmers. During the early twentieth century, Neth claims that family and community were essential to the financial stability of farmers through labor and the direct exchange of produce, bypassing the unstable markets. Neth’s argument contends that the New Deal isolated farmers from their working relationships with farm women and the surrounding communities. Mechanization replaced family labor and in turn, transformed the farm family into consumers instead of producers. Additionally, the New Deal policies, according to Neth, encouraged consolidation and displaced small farmers, tenants, and hired workers, effectively removing the social circle encompassing farmers. Neth maintains that this isolation launched by the New Deal caused women to become consumers instead of laborers, and therefore, lowered their status in terms of contribution to the family business in the patriarchal farming tradition. Neth asserts that focusing on women in agricultural communities will allow the development of a better understanding of the capitalist transformation in rural regions that will aid in future policymaking. In spite of this, Neth’s work loses sense of time and deemphasizes the context in which these changes were occurring. The isolation of the farmer may be regrettable to Neth; however, farmers did not enjoy many alternative options, other than participation in government programs during the Great Depression.
Presenting an overview of the state history of Minnesota, Annette Atkins briefly discusses the Great Depression in *Creating Minnesota: A History from the Inside Out* (2007). Rather than concentrate on the “heroes” of history, or main characters, Atkins endeavors to tell the narrative of ordinary Minnesota citizens throughout history. Atkins reasons that these average Minnesotans are the ones with the real “story-making power,” not the political leaders. The work begins in the 1840s and discusses the foremost themes of territory and impending statehood and encompasses each decade until the surge of political activity surrounding Hubert Humphrey in the 1960s. Each decade receives a chapter in Atkins’ work, with the sentiment of the Great Depression reflected in its chapter title, “Hanging on for Dear Life”.

Atkins’ chronicle of the 1930s commences with the early signs of the impending farm crisis following World War I. Only briefly discussing the Rural Electrification Administration, a New Deal program aimed at providing and constructing affordable electric lines to rural areas, Atkins gives more attention to the plight of urban communities in her summary of the Works Progress Administration, a New Deal agency that employed those without jobs to construct public works projects or, if educated, to embark on art or literary projects. Regarding the Great Depression, Atkins argues that the New Deal developed a new “social, cultural, and physical infrastructure” in Minnesota and enhanced the lives of almost all Minnesotans. Finally, in an overarching contention, Atkins maintains that Minnesota is exemplary of being American in overcoming adversity and hardship. For Atkins’ claims of the overarching success of the New Deal programs, she fails to provide sufficient evidence for the farm programs other than the Rural Electrification Administration.

Also concentrating on Minnesota Agriculture, Bert Henningson in “Farm Surpluses- A Policy and Its Consequences” (1987) traces the transformation in agricultural operations in the
state through a compilation of essays. In this work, Henningson maintains that the federal government’s policies encouraging surpluses opposed the interests of farmers. In the article, the three short paragraphs dedicated to the Great Depression claim that the New Deal and its farm programs were not effective until they were later reformed in 1938 and later in 1942. Following the Great Depression, Henningson follows the later agricultural changes in seeds, chemicals, and mechanization to conclude that a more economical and environmental policy is necessary to preserve the land for future generations. In this work, Henningson disappointingly skims over the Great Depression and does not provide any examples of specific New Deal reforms or an explanation as to why the programs were ineffective or needed to be later amended, as he claims.

Exclusively focusing on Minnesota during the Great Depression, D. Jerome Tweton in Depression: Minnesota in the 1930s (1981), examines the political activity surrounding farmers and the labor movement. Tweton deliberates on the Farmers’ Holiday Association in Minnesota and their movement to restore buying power to farmers through withholding their farm products, resulting in the creation of new farm mortgage legislation in Minnesota in 1933. Additionally, Tweton asserts that farmers in Southern Minnesota fared better during the hardships of the Great Depression than farmers in West Central Minnesota, due to adequate rainfall and the earlier diversification of crops, therefore, allowing subsistence farming during the 1930s. Tweton’s work continues to discuss the labor movement in Minnesota during the Great Depression and their subsequent political activity, like the 1934 Minneapolis Truckers’ Strike. Consequently, Tweton reasons that the New Deal benefitted farmers, laborers, and businessmen alike for the money placed into the state economy by the federal government, jobs provided through programs like the Civilian Conservation Corps, and the hope the New Deal offered to those enduring the destitution of the Great Depression. Although Tweton does acknowledge farmers in Minnesota,
he overlooks the perspective of the farmers themselves and rather investigates the political activity through the leaders of the Farmers’ Holiday Association.

Further narrowing his focus, Tweton also provides a case study of Otter Tail County, Minnesota during the Great Depression in *The New Deal at the Grass Roots: Programs for the People in Otter Tail County, Minnesota* (1988). Arguing that New Deal historians have only illustrated the perspective of Washington officials, the New Dealers themselves, Tweton pursues the viewpoints of the common citizens who participated in the programs and their responses to the new government policies. Tweton relies on interviews, oral histories, newspapers, county records, and documents from the Works Progress Administration and Rural Electrification Administration. Because of the office locations of the Civilian Conservation Corps and Rural Electrification Administration in Otter Tail County, Tweton describes the county as the “quintessential window” to view the workings of the New Deal. Few counties in the United States held offices for all three programs, and because of Otter Tail County’s involvement in the New Deal, Tweton claims that this particular county is characteristic of the management of New Deal programs at the county level. In his concluding argument, Tweton claims that the New Deal ultimately altered Otter Tail County for the better. Conversely, a main theme vocalized by the oral history sources used by Tweton disagree that there was a lasting change in Otter Tail from the New Deal. Ultimately, Tweton’s argument falls short as interviewees maintain that the New Deal policies lasted only as long as the Great Depression, rather than having a lasting impact, and by the beginning of World War II, the citizens of Otter Tail County resumed their conservative traditions and behaviors.

Although histories of agriculture in Minnesota have been written, including a case study in the Great Depression, more research is needed. Atkins only briefly discusses the impact of the
New Deal on the agricultural industry in Minnesota, and Tweton’s case study leaves a contradictory conclusion. Furthermore, a case study of Otter Tail County fails to describe other counties in Minnesota where New Deal programs were not located. Minnesota farmers’ voices from all over the state are needed to offer an understanding of any shared or varied experience with the New Deal programs during the Great Depression. I will use interviews and memoirs of farmers and their families from throughout Minnesota to provide their distinctive perspectives. These sources reflect the hardships endured by farm families and shed new light on the effectiveness of the New Deal in rural United States.

Linda Shopes outlines the problems issues faced by oral history and community history critics in “Oral History and the Study of Communities: Problems, Paradoxes, and Possibilities” (2002). In the article, Shopes describes community oral history as “one defined by locale… focusing on a particular group’s experience in a particular place” (588). She divides oral history work into two categories; one carried out by members of a community for their own public history projects and the other completed by scholars for their own specific research questions. While each group encounters their own issues, according to Shopes, interviews conducted by community members often fail to grasp history as more than merely an “accumulation of facts” and portray their communities in the best light, avoiding tough questions. On the other hand, scholars’ interviews in communities offer little use to future researchers, as the interview questions are strictly focused around the historian’s thesis and too narrow to be used for other similar topics from a region. With disadvantages for each category of interviews in mind, Shopes ultimately argues that the most successful oral histories are archival projects intended for a broad use to future researchers and those that address the lack of documentation in a community. Not forgetting the communities themselves, Shopes also adds that the best of both
the public and scholarly worlds have the potential to meet and develop historical dialogue in community history projects.

While Charles T. Morrissey acknowledges that sources from the time of an event in history are more reliable than oral history, he also argues that oral histories have their advantages in “Public Historians and Oral History: Problems of Concept and Methods” (1980). Oral histories are capable of filling a lack of documentation in archive collections, grant researchers the opportunity to question their sources and receive answers to “why?” questions, and can dedicate attention to groups of people forgotten by mainstream history. Morrissey emphasizes that interviews and archival research go hand-in-hand: oral histories can also be made reliable and supported by primary source documents. In addition, Morrissey urges historians conducting interviews to delve deeper into events and not hesitate to ask tough questions that may make the interviewee uncomfortable or otherwise risk a “shallow history of minimal usefulness”.

Prior to the Great Depression, American farmers felt the effects of decreased demand following and subsequent low prices following World War I, before the rest of the nation encountered economic hardship. The beginning of the twentieth century brought more advanced farming techniques and higher crop productivity to the United States. This higher productivity benefited the economy while there was demand for American farm products from nations suffering in the wake of World War I. However, as European nations recovered, demand decreased and American farmers were left with surpluses, driving crop prices dangerously low. In an effort to augment low prices, farmers began to experiment with advanced production methods, like mechanization and hybrid seeds, creating even higher yields, and therefore surpluses, of agricultural products. Farm families began to lose their farms, as small landowners
and sharecroppers were “tractored off the land” and were unable to keep up with modern agricultural methods. Feeling the economic hardship, farmers organized into political organizations in the 1920s to draw attention to their plight and compel the federal government to enact legislation for farmers. Their efforts eventually resulted in Congressional attention in the McNary-Haugen Bills drafted throughout the 1920s, but it was not until FDR and the “One Hundred Days” of the New Deal that farmers would have the full attention of lawmakers.

During World War I, farmers in the United States were encouraged to produce as much as possible for the war effort and to “Plow to the Fence for National Defense.” High demand from European countries for agricultural products from the United States allowed American farmers to benefit from high commodity prices. By 1920, European countries had recovered sufficiently to rely less on American products. Additionally, Australia, Argentina, and Canada began to compete internationally with American farm products. Reflecting this drop in demand, corn prices dropped 78%, wheat decreased by 64%, and cotton plummeted 57% by 1920. While farm commodity prices were high, American farmers had increased their land holdings and purchased machinery on credit, resulting in debts once commodity prices collapsed and farmers had little income to spare and were unable to make their payments. Throughout the decade following World War I, half a million farmers when bankrupt: they had “overinvested in land and equipment in the war years.” Prices that farmers received for their commodities dropped to prewar levels, but prices for operational costs remained the same, like fertilizer and seed purchases required to plant the following season. This drop in agricultural prices and continuance of the funds required to plant and harvest utterly weakened the purchasing power of farmers. Although numerous farm families had left rural areas after losing their farms in the 1920s, there still remained a surplus of farmers producing a surplus of commodities.
With farmers attempting to increase their efficiency and productivity in order to show a profit with the low prices of the market, the invention of the tractor emerged as the “most important advancement” in agriculture.\textsuperscript{16} Tractors first entered farming operations with steam engines and burned coal, wood, oil, and straw. However, the steam engines proved to be too expensive, unwieldy, and incompatible with American agricultural methods that favored row-crop farming.\textsuperscript{17} Farmers were skeptical of the new mechanism and maintained a “wait-and-see attitude” to observe whether or not the tractor would justify its hefty cost.\textsuperscript{18} The invention of the Farmall tractor in 1924 by the International Harvester Company quickly altered this attitude. Specifically constructed to meet the needs of row-crop farming, the Farmall was also cost-effective.\textsuperscript{19} Manufacturers shortly thereafter developed power take-off, allowing farmers to haul farm equipment, such as harvesters and mowers, behind their now-maneuverable tractors and increase yields while decreasing labor on the same amount of acres.\textsuperscript{20} The later development of rubber tires on tractors permitted farmers to travel on gravel roads to other farms and allowed farmers to purchase lands that were not explicitly adjacent to their home sites.\textsuperscript{21} The operation of tractors created a new reliance on the oil that ran the tractors, but farmers gained approximately five acres of crops for every draft animal that was no longer needed to pull equipment.\textsuperscript{22}

Tractors were the first indication of farm consolidation and the enlargement of the average farm acreage, as less labor was needed to farm more land with mechanization.\textsuperscript{23} In one study, 36 tractors supplanted 67 farm families.\textsuperscript{24} Giving caution to small farmers and promoting their machinery in 1929, International Harvester stated, “The man who places his dependence on muscle power is severely handicapped.”\textsuperscript{25} Most farms during the 1920s were less than 100 acres, but the USDA asserted that at least 130 acres were necessary for mechanized farms to
make a profit after the purchase of a tractor. From 1916 to 1930, the rural population had decreased from 32.5 to 30.5 million residents. Corresponding to the reduction in population, farm size increased from 145 acres in 1920 to 157 acres in 1930, revealing the farm consolidation trend and the loss of the small farmers.

Along with the implementation of the tractor, farmers also began to use hybrid seeds and chemical agents to expand their production, yet again with the purpose of higher production and efficiency in the fields. Previously, farmers had selected which corn to plant based on physical attributes of the ears and individual kernels, believing that “good-looking corn” produced the best. Following World War I, scientists and private seed companies in the Midwest experimented with corn genetics and developed hybrid corn. By crossbreeding two or more specific corn plants, scientists were able to isolate particular traits that better resisted insects and disease and also increased yields from 40 to 120 bushels per acre. Encouraging the spread of hybrid corn, Secretary of Agriculture, Henry A. Wallace, was the first commercial producer of hybrid corn in 1926. Farmers also began to employ chemicals in fields to further increase their yields. Because of the rise of mechanization, farmers lost the fertilizer attributed to their draft animals and, with the technological advances in production, now needed to purchase it in chemical form. From 1924 to 1929, farmers increased their use of commercial fertilizer by one million tons. Chemicals were viewed as an unnecessary expenditure during the Great Depression and their usage declined, but did eventually pick up following World War II with demand.

In the midst of these production advancements, farmers and their families had enlarged their operations from merely subsistence farming and expected higher standards of living. Rural families by 1925 only received 70% of the income obtained by their urban neighbors.
to combat the issues faced by farmers and their families, the Farm Bureau was organized at a national level in 1920 and was composed of several state level bureaus. Members of the Farm Bureau hailed from 28 states and were categorized as fairly conservative and financially stable farmers. The Farm Bureau aspired to improve the marketing of farm commodities through cooperatives and increase production with better methods to supplement the low prices of the market. Observing the obvious strains on the agricultural market, and farm families, it was apparent by 1921 that farmers were seriously affected by the drop in demand after World War I and needed assistance to retain their land and continue farming.

Similarly, Senators and Representatives from the Great Plains, Midwest, and South launched the Farm Bloc in 1921 in an endeavor to respond to their constituents’ concerns and develop favorable farm legislation. Their efforts resulted in the Packers and Stockyards Act of 1921, which checked meat consumers’ exploitation of prices. The Farm Bloc also passed the Capper-Volstead Act in 1922 and exempted farm cooperatives from the Clayton Anti-Trust Act, which permitted farmers to join together and remove competition from the market. Furthering the farm cause, the Farm Bloc introduced a series of McNary-Haugen bills from 1924 through 1928, none of which were enacted into law much to the disappointment of farmers nationwide. In this plan, the federal government would estimate the necessary farm commodities for domestic use and the surplus of products would be sold at the international market, meanwhile increasing prices and farmer purchasing power. Vetoed by President Calvin Coolidge in 1928, the executive argued that the bill favored grain producers over dairy farmers. President Coolidge and his successor, President Herbert Hoover, preferred to address the farm crisis through cooperative marketing methods to retain commodities and keep prices stabilized.
The Agricultural Marketing Act of 1929 was the first federal legislation passed to aid the broad range of American farmers. Aligning with President Hoover’s advocacy for farm cooperatives, the Agricultural Marketing Act granted a $500 million federal loan to cooperatives to purchase members’ surplus products and store and keep them off the market, theoretically increasing prices. Through the Agricultural Marketing Act, the Federal Farm Board was also founded to manage price stabilization, specifically the prices of grain and cotton. Without enough funds to wholly stabilize the market for all farm products, the Farm Board failed by 1932 and completely lost $184 million.  

Shortly before its demise, the Farm Board counseled, “Prices cannot be kept at a fair level unless production is adjusted to meet market demands.”

The disappointment of the Agricultural Marketing Act and the Farm Board revealed that the farm problem could not be solved through cooperative marking tactics. Rather, direct government aid and regulation was needed in the agricultural industry to stabilize prices and restore farmers’ purchasing power.

Acting in response to the lack of direct assistance from the federal government, agricultural organizations sprang up around the country demanding the intervention of the government in the farm industry. The Farmers’ Holiday Association was launched in 1920 from the Farmers’ Union, an organization created in 1902 that aimed to improve the overall conditions of rural life through cooperative marketing of agricultural commodities. Members were spurred to take action into their own hands following increased farm foreclosures, continued low commodity prices, and the pervasive feeling of hopelessness amongst farmers. Called the “most violent agricultural movement in American history,” the Farmers’ Holiday Association was created by the more radical members of the Farmers’ Union from the Midwest. In protest to the low prices of the market, the Farmers’ Holiday Association arranged for a farm “holiday”
commencing on August 15, 1932, where farmers would withhold their farm products and pause their consumerism. This strike was intended to “close food-processing plants and empty grocery-store shelves.” Set for Des Moines, Iowa, the “holiday” included mostly farmers from Iowa, but also those from six nearby states. Although the action was originally planned for Des Moines, farmers in Sioux City, Iowa instigated the movement four days before the agreed-upon date, as dairy farmers blockaded main roads in an attempt to raise the price of milk. Spreading like wildfire, other farmers began to construct barricades on roads to main markets in Iowa and Nebraska, and in further measures of protest, the farmers dumped milk into ditches, disrupted railroad service, and engaged law enforcement officers in conflicts. Nevertheless, for all their efforts, the “holiday” movement faltered after two weeks when farmers needed to sell their products in order to feed their families. The longer farmers boycotted the market, the more bills piled up. Moreover, farmers realized that when the time came to eventually sell their products, the market would flood with previously withheld commodities, dropping prices even further. Even though the movement failed in Iowa, the concept quickly spread to Wisconsin and became a “bonafide war” between farmers and police officers and the National Guard. The Wisconsin Farmer’s Holiday boycott brought about several deaths, even more injuries, and the arrest of 300 farmers for their resistance to the law. Following these withholding skirmishes and their seeming failure to bring about an increase in prices, the Farmers’ Holiday Association repositioned itself and set their martial focus on behalf of farmers encountering foreclosures. During farm auctions, members of the Farmers’ Holiday Association bid only a few cents on everything for sale in “penny auctions” and intimidated and threatened banks to accept the sum as full repayment of a farmer’s debt. As FDR conferred more attention to farmers and their struggles in the New Deal, militant movements like the Farmers’ Holiday Association became
less necessary, as the plight of the farmer received center stage in the New Deal. Farmers now
looked to the new administration for price stabilization and improvements in rural standards of
living.

By the time of the Stock Market Crash in 1929, farmers were already encountering
economic crisis. The Great Depression encompassed the entire nation, and the rest of the United
States quickly met financial hardship. Americans halted unnecessary spending, thereby
deteriorating demand, lowering manufactured product prices, and cutting employment wages or
jobs altogether. The Red Cross declared widespread malnutrition as the unemployment rate
escalated from 3.2% in 1929 to 24.9% in 1933. Elected in the midst of despair, FDR addressed
the rising fear amongst Americans in his inauguration speech, declaring, “This great nation will
endure as it has endured, will revive and will prosper… the only thing we have to fear is fear
itself- nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat
into advance.” This advance, according to the New Dealers, and the country’s ascent out of the
Great Depression was to be brought about by farmers. Dubbed the “Hundred Days,” FDR called
a special session of Congress on March 9, 1933 and closed all banks to attend to the severe
economic depression in the country. After legalizing alcohol, outlawed during Prohibition, in
an attempt to raise morale, as Prohibition remained in effect until the end of the calendar year,
FDR and Congress launched into implementing “some of the most unprecedented and long-
lasting legislation in American history.” Because the New Dealers believed increased
consumerism by farmers and their families would restore prosperity, a main portion of these
reforms centered on the recovery of the agricultural industry. After facing already low prices
during the 1920s, farmers and their families endured even lower prices following the Crash of
1929- throwing 960,000 rural families below the poverty line of $1,000 earned a year, including
the value of bartered goods.\textsuperscript{51} If farmers were going to lead the nation out of the Great Depression, not only their incomes, but also their standards of living needed to be dealt with by the federal government.

Influenced by Secretary of Agriculture Wallace, and developed around the idea of crop reduction in a time of surplus, the Agriculture Adjustment Act was passed by Congress on May 12, 1933.\textsuperscript{52} It established the Agriculture Adjustment Administration (AAA) and implemented a nation-wide program of acreage limitation for seven commodities in acute surplus: corn, cotton, hogs, milk, rice, tobacco, and wheat.\textsuperscript{53} These commodity producers were considered to be in more serious financial predicaments than producers of other agricultural products because of extreme surpluses and low prices. Because these seven agricultural products also entailed processing before human consumption or use, the government employed a tax on processors to pay for farmers’ incentives to participate in. The AAA aimed to return agricultural product prices to parity, pre-World War I levels, and granted payments, from the processing tax, to participating farmers for reducing their production. Farmers received the difference between a price set by the government for their product and the actual market price. By reviving commodity prices, the government hoped that farm families would begin to once again consume manufactured goods, and therefore, stimulate the economy.\textsuperscript{54} The AAA began as a voluntary program to provide farmers with income in spite of a surplus of commodities and low market prices. However, signing a contract for acreage reduction with the AAA became a necessity for farmers with essentially no profit from the previous seasons. The AAA quickly established itself as the “difference between having an income or going on relief.”\textsuperscript{55}

Questioning how exactly to administer the program efficiently, the AAA decided to allow farmers to administer the crop control and subsidy program for themselves.\textsuperscript{56} Cooperating
farmers in an area joined a local committee at either the township or county level and elected a three member county committee. Different committees could also be created for different commodities; one county could have a corn committee and also wheat committee regulating production in the same region. These county committees set production limits for the area in general and for each individual participating farmer. The committee members were further compensated for their time visiting farms and investigating AAA compliance in their jurisdiction.\(^5\) These county committees served as the contact for local farmers and the government creating legislation on their behalf.

After its initial creation in 1933, the AAA immediately faced issues and criticisms. The program was brought to farmers in the spring season, with cotton in the South already planted for the season and hogs having already had their spring litters. Moving forward with their campaign, the AAA granted subsidies to farmers to plow up 10.4 million acres of cotton in the South and slaughter six million hogs nationwide.\(^5\) As a result, the AAA and federal government received harsh condemnation from Americans for wasting food in a time of want.\(^5\) The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) then made the decision to buy “from those who had too much, in order to give to those who had too little.”\(^6\) With this determination, the federal government purchased two million hogs and allowed the Red Cross to distribute the food to relief programs in the country.\(^6\) Furthermore, the AAA was critiqued for benefitting landowners more than sharecroppers and tenants. Because landowners had more land to set aside from production, they were often able to retire their least productive land or the land of a tenant. With fewer acres, small farmers were unable to remove land from production; all acres were essential for livestock feed. The payments received from the government for these production limitations allowed landowners to mechanize, further designating sharecroppers and tenants as disposable.\(^6\)
Although in operation since 1933, the United States Supreme Court declared the AAA unconstitutional in 1936. The Supreme Court ruled that the processing tax exploited processors for the benefit of producers. In addition, the Court decided that the subsidies granted to participating AAA farmers “coerced” them into signing contracts, and although the AAA claimed to be voluntary, it was not; because farmers were in dire need of income of any kind, the Supreme Court decided that farmers were compelled by sheer need to participate. Spurred by anxious farmers afraid of losing their payments, Congress quickly pushed through and passed the Soil Conservation and Domestic Allotment Act. Differing only slightly from the AAA, the new act granted funds to participating farmers from a general fund for planting “soil-conserving” crops, rather than “soil-depleting.” The crops classified as “soil-depleting” were those in surplus, in so doing the government still aimed to lower production and surpluses, only through planting cover crops instead of overall acreage reduction. The acreage reduction program was eventually secured in the passage of another Agriculture Adjustment Act in 1938. The second AAA also provided low-interest loans available over longer periods of time to farmers through the Commodity Credit Corporation. The Secretary of Agriculture was also conferred with the authority to set marketing quotes if the Secretary believed that surpluses were threatening prices. With the permission of 2/3 of farmers of a specific commodity, the Secretary of Agriculture would be able to limit sales of agricultural products for the sake of stabilizing the market. Furthermore, the second AAA also established crop insurance for the first time and broadened the safety net of cooperating farmers to protect against potential environmental calamities and financial losses. By the time of the passage of the second AAA in 1938, it had become a permanent piece of agricultural legislation, providing the foundation for future farm bills.
As another benefit to cooperative farmers, along with the acreage reduction payments from the AAA, participating farmers were also given the opportunity for long term and low interest loans from the Commodity Credit Corporation (CCC), created by executive order in October 1933.\textsuperscript{65} Originally providing price-stabilizing loans for corn and cotton, the CCC later expanded to include other basic commodities in surplus in the United States.\textsuperscript{66} The federal government granted loans around 60% parity in order to prevent commodities from flooding the market and further lowering prices. If the prices of products were above the loan rate at the time of sale, then the farmer was able to sell the crop, pay the loan off, and pocket the profit. For the further advantage of program farmers, if the prices were below the loan rate, farmers could forfeit their crop to the government, avert surplus, and the loan was forgiven. Designed as “nonrecourse,” forgivable, loans, the CCC was another program aimed at stabilizing the market and maintaining adequate prices for farmers.\textsuperscript{67} Although not intentionally, the CCC ultimately assured farmers of a price floor for their specific commodities and protected participating farmers from any debts greater than their loan.\textsuperscript{68}

To combat criticisms regarding the preferment of the AAA towards landowners, the Resettlement Administration (RA) was developed in 1935 by executive order to aid the “victims” of the New Deal, mainly sharecroppers and tenants.\textsuperscript{69} The goal of the RA was two-fold: to contend with rural poverty and restore the environment. The RA purchased submarginal farmland and retired it from production and then resettled the displaced farm family on better, more arable land. Additionally, the program settled evicted sharecroppers and tenants on government-built farms complete with equipment and seed.\textsuperscript{70} RA farmers were subject to federal inspection prior to receiving land from the government. With the purpose of developing self-sustaining farm operations, the RA ensured that the land met production standards, the
farmer had sufficient equipment to compete, and that the family had done everything possible to “make the best use of the land.” Agents of the RA also drafted a budget for individual farmers and managed plans for farmers’ autonomy. By 1936, the RA had aided 500,000 farm families with relief efforts ranging from resettlement to funds for food and clothing essentials.

Lacking funds and resources, the RA operations were transferred to the Farm Security Administration (FSA) in 1937, instituted by the Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Act to organize and administer the various farm programs of the New Deal. The FSA continued the goals of the RA and worked to provide loans to farmers selected for their aptitude to succeed independently, with the purpose of building participating farmers’ operations. FSA loans purchased food, clothing, seed, and fertilizer for selected farmers and their families. Like the RA, the FSA continued to provide a management program for FSA farmers to learn agriculture and business skills to ultimately become self-supporting. However, for all the efforts of the RA and FSA, their goals were widely recognized as a “fool’s errand.” Neither agency was granted enough funds to wholly support a widespread rehabilitation program, and both agencies found that, to a large extent, poor farmers lacked the financial and agricultural knowledge to become self-sufficient. In the end, the RA and FSA were tasked with “saving a handful of relatively promising farmers and letting the rest go.”

Perhaps the most successful of the New Deal agriculture reforms, the Rural Electrification Administration (REA) was established in 1935 by executive order and sought to bring electricity to neglected rural areas. By 1930, only 10% of the rural population had electricity, and the REA set out to change that statistic to improve the standard of living in the countryside. The REA was based on the success of the Tennessee Valley Authority, which brought electricity to seven southern states through hydroelectric power from dams at reasonable
rates.\textsuperscript{79} Previously, rural areas had pressed private electric companies to bring power to the country, but were rejected; the companies argued that the profit from a sparse population was not worth the cost of constructing power lines.\textsuperscript{80} In response to this contention, the REA bypassed utility companies and gave funding directly to cooperatives to build power lines, wire homes, and finally generate electricity. The REA also applied the initiative for “area coverage.” This balanced the costs of electricity for each farm, allowing farmers of various incomes to participate in the REA.\textsuperscript{81} As of the late 1930s, the REA had undergone 350 projects in 45 states and had generated electricity for 1.5 million farms.\textsuperscript{82} The REA raised the standard of living on farms and made work, domestic and agricultural, less physically demanding and more productive.\textsuperscript{83} Farm wives now enjoyed the luxuries of their urban counterparts with indoor plumbing, electric irons and stoves, and vacuums. Farmers also benefited from the use of electric cream separators, feed grinders, hay elevators, and the replacement of dim kerosene lanterns with electric lights in barns.\textsuperscript{84} Keeping with the motto of the REA, “If you put a light on every farm, you put a light in every heart,” the agency positively altered farm life more than any other New Deal program.\textsuperscript{85}

In the region of the Deep South in the United States, the New Deal faced controversy from landowners increasing their holdings and the subsequent eviction and poverty of their tenants and sharecroppers. Alternative incomes for those who did not own their land, tenants, sharecroppers, and wage hands, ended in 1929 with the Stock Market Crash. Laborers who had previously earned a supplementary income from work in cotton gins, sawmills, and from other odd jobs were now completely dependent on the agricultural industry.\textsuperscript{86} Even with New Deal programs, by 1935, 8.5 million sharecroppers and tenants resided in the South, caught in the endless cycle of rural poverty.\textsuperscript{87} After being implemented in the South, New Deal programs replaced the traditionally paternalistic system between planters and their sharecroppers.
Laborers received more income from the government relief programs than they had ever earned in the fields from their landowner. In the earlier furnishing system, Southern landowners supplied tenants, sharecroppers, and wage hands with employment, housing, and credit; however, the New Deal quickly assumed this role and provided for laborers and their families. Furthermore, the New Deal asserted itself over the planters with acreage reduction payments from the AAA, creating landowners’ dependency on the federal government. By 1934, it had become clear to the AAA that planters were not equally sharing their payments with their tenants. In response to this, cotton contracts in 1934 and 1935 contained agreements that landowners were obligated to distribute their AAA checks with their tenants. Additionally, tenants already living on the land were to remain in their homes rent-free and were able to cut firewood and plant gardens on the landlord’s land at no cost. Even with these provisions, landlords continued to manipulate the New Deal programs in the South; for example, planters tore up fences dividing tenants’ shares to form larger fields, increase their land holdings, and allowing them to receive payments for reducing acreage, really the tenants’ previously farmed land, from the AAA. Planters also used AAA payments to purchase machinery, again to increase their productivity in efforts to consolidate and replaced laborers. With landlords squeezing out laborers, many tenants and sharecroppers fled the South in search of employment, and by 1940, 30% of sharecroppers had been driven off the land in the South.

While the agricultural situation in the South comprised of the plight of the sharecropper, California, symbolic of farming in the West, remained chiefly small-scale agriculture. Alongside the economic breakdown in the country, California suffered from low prices for cotton, fruits, and vegetables. Even while prices were low, California farmers benefitted from the thousands of migrants who left despondent areas, like the Great Plains and other countries in
even greater financial crisis than the United States. These migrants increased the demand in the domestic market in California and provided producers with an extra income boost. However, with ever-growing populations of migrants, conflicts of job competition arose between white laborers and workers from ethnic minorities. These quarrels escalated to numerous strikes across California farms. Living in poverty, first the RA, then the FSA, made available relief to migrant workers and their families, but only once their standards of living had become critically desperate. In California, the FSA was unable to prevent the root of the migrant problem: lack of jobs. The FSA constructed camps for migrant workers and provided clean housing, uncontaminated water, and hygienic community amenities. The programs hoped that the camps would serve as a model for other migrant communities and planters to imitate, addressing issues of cleanliness among migrants and creating a sense of community with camp newspapers, dances, and meetings. While small landowners were the principal producers in California, large landholders, as in other areas of the country, were still able to take advantage of New Deal programs to further their enterprises and utilize the cheap and desperate labor force of migrant workers.

Farmers in the Great Plains region endured not only the economic collapse of the Great Depression, but also suffered from environmental calamities beyond their control in the appearance of an unrelenting and debilitating drought. The drought ensued throughout 1930 until 1936 in the Great Plains like clockwork, with the years of 1934 and 1936 receiving less than half the average amount of rainfall in the growing season. To make matters worse for Plains farmers, extreme heat accompanied the droughts and promptly evaporated any moisture in the soil. Wells, springs, and even some lakes dried up during the drought, and temperatures in North Dakota reached a record high of 121 degrees. Crops and natural prairie grasses withered
and died in the severe heat and lack of precipitation. Wheat fields yielded as little as five bushels per acre, and in a field in Nebraska that normally would have produced 260 bushels of wheat, a farmer harvested a measly nine bushels. If a crop did manage to survive heat and drought, plagues of grasshoppers, which thrived in the dry environment, quickly made their presence known, destroying fields, and even clothing left out to dry on clotheslines.

As heat, drought, and finally grasshoppers obliterated crops in the Great Plains, nothing was left to hold the soil down, and the wind blew. Dust storms were not uncommon in the region, but the scope of the storms during the Great Depression surpassed any previous scale. Named “black blizzards,” the dust storms often caught people unaware. On farms, cattle were found wandering in pastures with digestive tracts full of dirt and many calves and piglets suffocated during the storms. Dirt invaded every nook and cranny in rural houses, and numerous young children and the elderly were diagnosed with “dust pneumonia,” a deadly respiratory condition. Government aid in the Great Plains became not only a matter of retaining farms, but of survival. Journalist Lorena Hickok judged the need in a single North Dakota county in 1933 to include “5,000 suits of underwear, 5,000 pairs of shoes and socks, 20,000 yards of dress material, 1,500 heavy quilts, and 1,000 blankets.” With rural local communities dependent on the agricultural industry, New Deal aid was vital to support both farm and local economies. The New Deal programs became matters of necessity in the Great Plains, as AAA payments provided essential income to farmers and low-interest loans to endure drought and plant another season and rehabilitation programs supplied basics to feed and clothe rural families.

Although hardships in the Midwest were not as evident as in other regions of the United States, Midwest farmers still faced struggles of their own. Believing farmers had maintained
subsistence, urban residents held the misconception that life in the Great Depression was more comfortable on a farm. However, many farmers in the Midwest had abandoned subsistence farming in favor of crop specialization, mechanization, and greater profits in the 1920s. Like their city-dwelling neighbors, farm families relied on the grocery store in town for their food. As a result of earlier mechanization and the subsequent purchase of more land, farmers from the Midwest carried 61% of debt from land in the United States into the Great Depression, confronting rising interest rates from the stock market crash and increasing indebtedness. Experiencing “hunger, uncertainty, and foreclosure,” farm families across the Midwest cancelled newspaper subscriptions and telephone contracts, sewed clothing out of feed sacks, and used surplus corn for heat and cook stoves. Sweltering summer heat accompanied droughts, simultaneously occurring in the Great Plains, in 1934 and 1936. Along with the drought and heat, grasshoppers made their way to the Midwest and destroyed corn in the fields. Cinch bugs and corn borers also made themselves at home in the region, flourishing after mild winters and warm summers. Mounting levels of alcohol consumption and suicide rates among farmers reflected the tremendous desperation felt by Midwestern farmers.

While commodity prices were at extreme lows during the Great Depression, farmers in the Midwest attempted to offset the prices with increased production. Hybrid corn planting increased in the Midwest during a time of corn overproduction at the encouragement of agronomists from land-grant colleges and county agents. Escalating throughout the 1930s, 95% of corn planted in Iowa was hybrid corn by 1941. In addition to hybrid corn, the application of chemical fertilizers was promoted as another means to produce higher yields. While the Great Plains farmers continued to use manure and crop rotation, farmers in the Midwest and their utilization of chemical fertilizer increased their yields from 10% to 15%
Livestock producers benefited from the new breed of American Landrace, providing leaner and more meat from cattle. The utilization of milking machines decreased labor time for dairy farmers by 50%, and while diary farmers were once forced to own smaller herds, more efficient machinery allowed farmers to purchase extra dairy cows. Supplementing low prices with higher production, farmers in the Midwest challenged the New Deal programs of commodity reduction.

Even though landowning farmers questioned the New Deal, relief programs were still necessary for small farmers, tenants, and hired hands in Midwest. Wage hands earned approximately half the income of a factory worker in the city and brought in about $400 a year. Mechanization eliminated the majority of need for additional labor on farms; however, corn harvests continued to require the labor of hired hands, who earned anywhere from three cents to five cents for every bushel of husked corn. After the AAA offered payments to farmers to reduce corn acreage, farmers in the Midwest utilized increased production methods, like hybrid corn and chemical fertilizer, on their allotted acres. Furthermore, the CCC offered credit extensions for farmers who owed money on machinery in exchange for surplus crop. The REA also operated in the Midwest and paved 49% of the dirt roads in the countryside. Regardless of the support given to farmers by the New Deal, incomes in the Midwest only rose as the economy of the United States began to lift up as a whole. Landowners in the Midwest continued to disapprove of direct relief and this distaste spurred one Illinois farmer to assert, “It used to be a disgrace to be on relief. Now it seems to be an honor.”

Similar to the larger Midwest, Minnesota farmers faced the same level of indebtedness; however, agricultural conditions varied across the state. With one third of the state population residing on farms, slightly over half lived on mortgaged land. The average size of a farm in
one representative Minnesota county was 167 acres and practiced diversification; raising chickens, hogs, and dairy cows and cultivating corn and grains. After farm product prices dropped considerably lower in 1932, farmers who had diversified were capable of adjusting their operations to correspond to the ever-changing market. Even with corn selling for $0.32 and wheat prices at $0.38 per bushel, Minnesota farmers and their diversified operations fared better than the one-crop cultures of cotton and wheat in the South and Great Plains, respectively. As endured on a sweeping scale in the Great Plains and a lesser degree in the Midwest as a whole, drought plagued farmers in Minnesota during the early 1930s. Along with the drought, extreme heat scorched and devastated crops in Minnesota. Throughout the driest years of 1934 and 1936, grasshoppers “ate everything but the mortgage,” obliterating crops in their path and beleaguering Minnesota farmers. Fluctuating across the state, Southern Minnesota received the most rainfall and as farms had often been in families for more than one generation, farmers in this area were in less debt than other Minnesotans. The area of the Red River Valley, northwestern Minnesota, received less precipitation than average, but enough for crops to grow moderately well. On the other hand, farmers in west central Minnesota suffered drought and grasshoppers akin to that in the Great Plains. Even with sufficient rainfall, the exceedingly low prices of the agricultural market and the farmers’ relationships with local economies required government relief in the form of the New Deal.

Fueled by critically low commodity prices and desperation, Minnesota farmers united to spur government action and call attention to their plight in the Farmers’ Holiday Associations. Of the different Farmers’ Holiday Associations, Minnesota’s membership was the largest and planned its own statewide withholding strike for September 21, 1932. The members aimed to hold back farm commodities for thirty days, and fulfilling this goal, the strike ended on October
22. During this time, one casualty occurred as one farmer attempted to take his produce to market and was killed by an aggressive member of the Minnesota Farmers’ Holiday Association.\textsuperscript{124} By 1934 the Minnesota chapter retained 4,000 members, but numbers dwindled in subsequent years as New Deal programs addressed the concerns of the agricultural industry and farm prices gradually rose.

The AAA gave “Millions to Minnesota” in acreage reduction payments to farmers, and the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) offered immediate aid to rural and urban areas, granting $67.7 million to Minnesota throughout its span as a program.\textsuperscript{125} FERA presented jobs to improve roads, schools, streets, and other public spaces. Additionally, FERA provided direct relief to families in dire circumstances.\textsuperscript{126} After a year of implementation, by 1934, 18% of Minnesota families received aid from FERA; more than in Iowa or Wisconsin, but less than North and South Dakota.\textsuperscript{127} That same year, the Civilian Conservation Corps, a New Deal agency that employed and housed single men, increased the number of men allowed in its program due to extreme drought and the need of farm families.\textsuperscript{128} The Civilian Conservation Corps employed approximately 13,000 young and single Minnesota men a month. Each worker earned $30 a month, but $25 of that wage was sent home to the laborer’s family, aiding both single men and their families.\textsuperscript{129} Allocated $85 million by the federal government, Minnesota set up 74 Civilian Conservation Corps camps to restore and conserve natural parklands and increased the state’s park holdings from 40,000 acres to 100,000 acres during the Great Depression.\textsuperscript{130} Furthermore, with electricity in rural Minnesota below the nation’s average of 10%, the REA labored to wire farms and replace dim kerosene lanterns with bright electric lights.\textsuperscript{131} More importantly, electricity was first wired to the barns on Minnesota farms, as farm income is earned in the barns, and was then brought into homes towards the end of the
Depression era; very few major purchases of electric appliances were made until farm prices increased following the start of WWII. The REA operated less like a relief program and more as a means to improve rural standards of living, and held in high esteem, has often been cited as the most popular and triumphant farm program of the New Deal.

Encapsulating their lives during the Great Depression, a Minnesota farmer and his wife claimed, “We were poor. But we were happy.” Diversified crops and livestock were typical of farming operations in Minnesota during the Great Depression, challenging generalizations made by Midwest agricultural historians of the era. Farms were comprised of small grains, potatoes, cattle, pigs, and chickens, and farmers were influenced by previous generations, looking back to their parents, as one farmer remembered, “My father had always diversified, and he seemed like he always had a living.” For some Minnesota farmers, diversification was a necessary means to not only attempt to make a living, but to simply break even. A widow and farmer in her own right from southern Minnesota maintained that during the Great Depression, “You had to raise for feed and corn. Feed for your stock and that.” Selling grains as a cash crop greatly depended on the farmer’s acreage; smaller farms did not have the opportunity to sell grains when it was needed for livestock feed. The main income across farms in Minnesota came from selling the cream from dairy cows; proceeds from the cream were “what we lived on,” according to one farmer. With no money to spare for even groceries, rural communities employed a barter economy; farmers were able to trade cream and eggs in town for necessary groceries, like flour and sugar.

With no modern conveniences, such as running water or electricity, farmsteads depended on hard labor, “everything was done the hard way.” Unable to invest in machinery, farmers in
Minnesota invested in their own labor in order to continue ownership of their farms. In order to earn their money from cream, farmers had to milk all of their cows, separate the cream from the milk, and then haul the cream into town to sell to merchants. Ever true to the motto, “waste not, want not,” leftover skim milk was then mixed into hog feed, utilizing everything extracted from the cow. With their own share of labor, potatoes had to be planted, harvested, and removed from the field with one-row equipment drawn by horses. The use of horse drawn equipment required additional labor and care was needed for the horses themselves, including feeding, training, and hitching the horses to equipment before work in the fields could begin. In one harvest in southern Minnesota, in order to reap the highest yield from five acres of corn, a farmer rejected using a picker and instead chose to pick the individual corn ears by hand because equipment during the Great Depression typically left abundant amounts of grain in the field. Occurring in an early winter, the corn was buried under mounds of snow and in order to save as much corn as possible, the farmer pulled each stalk out of the snow and picked the corn, one ear and one stalk at a time. All this was done in addition to milking ten cows and other regular chores around the farmstead. Recalling the story, the farmer’s brother stated, “He hitched a team of horses on the wagon, and he’d go pick one row of corn.”

Lacking funds to purchase materials, farmers in Minnesota made the most of their available resources to further reduce expenditures and employed a barter economy to endure their financial difficulties. Even the highest yields earned little income for Minnesota farmers: “Regardless of what you had, a quantity of anything, you still didn’t have any money. A thousand bushels of barley would have only been $150.” Unable to purchase anything with no capital to exchange, farmers in Minnesota traded with commodities they did have: eggs and cream. Burdened with heavy surpluses, many rural families took to burning the excess corn
for heat during the winter. However, after reflecting on the widespread starvation in the United States, one farmer remembered his parents debating the irony that “people were starving and we were burning corn:” the family halted the practice after this conversation. Additionally, as farmers needed money, banks closed due to copious withdrawals of cash. A farmer from Ottertail County recounted his father’s tale of immediate monetary need from the Ottertail First National Bank, recalling that he persistently begged “just had to have five dollars… from his checking account.” Not unlike others in the same community, the bank quickly filled up that day with more farmers and their demands for withdrawals. The Ottertail First National Bank responded to the demands with coffee and donuts, as an employee rushed to the larger, sister bank in Fergus Falls, Minnesota. Fortunately for the people of Ottertail First National Bank, they were able to accommodate all requested withdrawals because of the reserve in Fergus Falls. With bank closings rampant, many banks nationwide did not fare as well as the Ottertail First National Bank.

Furthermore, with farmers low on available cash and income, many families in Minnesota required a supplemental income away from the farm; in order to remain on the farm, any available work was considered good work. While not generally approved by societal standards in this era, a farmer’s wife continued to teach following her marriage for $90 a month to help with expenses, as she recognized, “It was a time when there were more teachers than there were schools.” Desperate for any additional income, one farmer took time out of chores to haul one load of hay per day for just $5; any additional earnings were much appreciated in farm households. A farmer gave his account as a teenager, and one of ten children, working for the Civilian Conservation Corps after searching for work to fill slow times on the farm from October through March. Earning $30 a month, $15 of which was sent home to the family, the
farmer from southern Minnesota worked as a volunteer fireman and on a project to build a concrete spillway near a ravine. Moving home, the farmer found further work picking corn for a neighbor who needed help with harvest for five cents a bushel, averaging 90 bushels a day and a wage of $4.50. Because of the poor economic situation of farmers during the Great Depression, farmers in Minnesota were compelled to seek outside incomes to enhance their earnings and provide for their families.

Despite government aid, farms in Minnesota during the Great Depression faced foreclosure and left farmers with a constant fear of losing their land. “Everybody was in the same predicament just about,” reasoned one southern Minnesota farm wife. Acknowledging that his region was not in a “real depression area,” a farmer from northwest Minnesota also asserted, “There was just damned little land that wasn’t foreclosed.” An additional farmer remembered, “There were so many people that lived in a place for one year and they didn’t pay their rent right or their taxes right and somebody else moved in.” As banks accumulated land, they would often sell farmland to farmers for a comparatively reduced price. In southern Minnesota, a farm widow purchased her deceased husband’s land, regularly priced for $9,000, for a total sum of $2,700. Farmers Holiday Association members in northern Minnesota pooled their local influence and led by a minister, intimidated bank officials to allow farm debts to slide; in one instance, 300 farmers showed up to prevent a single farm foreclosure. In Minnesota, like in the Great Plains, one farmer argues that people bought land for low prices in the early 1920s and were unable to retain their holdings; “People that went out and bought a lot of this land at $200 and $250 an acre, they lost it all.”

Along with financial struggles, farmers in Minnesota were also threatened by environmental calamities, which affected their ability to grow crops worth selling in return for
the government loans necessary for further farming operations. They encountered dust from eroded land and plagues of grasshoppers during the summer months, early and late frosts, and unpredictable winter weather. In the northwest portion of the state, one farmer listed, “’28 was a wet year, ’29 was a dry year, ’30 was mediocre, ’31 was a fair year, ’32 was a good year but not price.”154 A Minnesota farmer with land near the North Dakota border harked back to 1935 as the year “all of the wheat rusted out, and a lot of it wasn’t even harvested. It was burnt.”155 In a similar situation in southern Minnesota, a farm wife stated that during four years of extremely low production, even when grains were harvested, they “had to cut it for hay for the cattle” and had no opportunity to sell their crops.156 During the years-long drought, “one year they didn’t even thresh any grain” in western Minnesota.157 Detailing a comparable story as those from the Great Plains region, a farmer in western Minnesota recalled, “I can remember in 1936 going out to Western Township and seeing the fences covered, fences four and a half feed high, all covered with ground that had been blown off the fields…”158 Although smaller in scale than the environmental disasters that occurred in the Great Plains, some Minnesota farming regions also bore comparable droughts, severe heat, and storms of dust and grasshoppers.

Although cited as a war won, the grasshopper plagues in Minnesota particularly endangered crop outlooks and yields and farmers’ abilities to produce a decent crop. Preoccupied with grasshopper outbreaks, the Marshall Daily Messenger recorded a 90% reduction of the insect’s ranks by May of 1933. At this time, the state of Minnesota had allocated $250,000 to fight the bugs and a state entomologist claimed, “The organized poison war that farmers waged against the devastating hoards of grasshoppers last year is the direct cause of the tremendous drop in the estimated volume of the pest for this year.”159 Even with these optimistic hopes for the decline of grasshoppers in Minnesota, the Fergus Falls Journal
reported a continuation of the battle against the creatures in 1935. Further funds from the government financed a second push to rid the state of grasshoppers, and Minnesota received the same poison recipe as the beleaguered states of Kansas, Nebraska, and North and South Dakota. By 1938, the grasshopper affliction in Minnesota had still not abated, according to the *Mankato Free Press*, as “Preliminary plans to combat the Minnesota grasshopper menace, especially threatening in the southern part of the state, will be made at a series of county-wide meetings…” With the declaration of further plans to fight the grasshoppers in Minnesota in 1938, it is clear that the call for the end of the grasshoppers in 1933 was premature, and the insect issue persisted to terrorize farmers in Minnesota throughout the Great Depression, threatening farmers’ opportunities to participate in government loan programs exchanging crops for funds.

With uncontrollable weather patterns, farmers in Minnesota were especially anxious concerning its affects on the plants in their fields. For this reason, newspapers throughout the state kept track of the weather and its often-detrimental affects on crops in Minnesota. Because of an early spring and too much precipitation, the *Mankato Free Press* declared, “Winter Wheat and Rye Crop is Short” in agricultural news for May 13, 1933. Estimated at levels lower than the 1932 harvest, the poor spring caused 16% of the wheat acres planted the previous fall to be abandoned. Following two years later, a late snowfall in May dealt a huge blow to farmers in Minnesota and agronomists declared, “…temperature much below the freezing point would be little short of disastrous.” Drought also persisted in gravely affecting the state, even resulting in the loss of up to 90% of the windbreaks surrounding farms. Throughout concerns with too little and too much precipitation, Minnesota was eventually taken “off the map” as a drought state in 1935. A federal crop reporter maintained, “Not for many years have crop prospects of
May 1 looked so promising.” Along with the return of adequate soil moisture in 1935, crop outlooks also gradually improved with hay estimated at 78% normal yield, only 3.6% of winter wheat was abandoned compared to 60% the previous year, and rye was calculated to be 89% of a typical harvest.

Because farms in Minnesota consisted of diversified crops on small acreage, Minnesota farmers could not find the money to purchase tractors during the Great Depression when other basic expenditures were reduced. A farmer’s wife from northwest Minnesota cited the familiar USDA statistic, “one machine for 300 acres.” Farmers first began to purchase tractors in the early 1920s, and an implement dealer, a merchant dealing solely with tractors and its accompanying machinery, “…traded in dozens and dozens of tractors and farm machinery for horses.” Common in rural areas, implement salesmen, tractor and machinery merchants, also lent horses to farmers for only their care, feeding, washing, and basic maintenance of the draft animals, while on the farm. By 1944, this particular dealer “Had three horses left, and I traded them,” leaving behind horsepower in favor of newly mechanized technologies.

Previously laboring through fields with horses, a farmer in northwest Minnesota leaped at the opportunity to purchase a tractor in 1940 for $475. Following World War II, a farm widow, and farmer in her own right, in southern Minnesota was able to profit from buying a tractor by 1945. Another farmer from northwest Minnesota expanded his assets to become a wholly mechanized operation by 1950. With little money to spare during the Great Depression, Minnesota farmers put off large purchases of machinery until demand increased together with agricultural prices, following World War II. Without machinery to cultivate the land, Minnesota farms remained small in size and continued to diversify due to the physical labor required to plant and harvest and the need to provide for the family through subsistence.
Through drought, poor prices, and foreclosures, the majority of farmers in Minnesota favored the New Deal agricultural programs. Newspaper articles entitled “Wallace Regards Acreage Cut Only Hope for Farmers” and “The Decline has Halted” reflect the confidence in government aid for rural areas after the passage of the Agricultural Adjustment Act in 1933. Visibly optimistic, the *Mankato Free Press* argued, “We are not about to ‘turn the corner.’ We have already turned it. The ‘new deal’ means higher prices, an expanding currency, renewed industrial activity and a pickup in employment.” Even with this proclaimed confidence in the AAA, other factions took some time to warm up, namely the Farmers’ Holiday Association of Minnesota. The Farmers’ Holiday Association originally organized a strike, to “stay at home, buy nothing, sell nothing,” for May 13, 1933, regardless of FDR’s enactment of the AAA the day before the planned strike. The group’s leader called for the new farm legislation to include in the law the illegality of farm foreclosures by banks, until agricultural commodity prices sufficiently increased to allow a decent standard of living for farm families. Responding to their demands, FDR made a statement and urged creditors to “…abstain from bringing foreclosure proceedings.” The statement made by FDR successfully persuaded the Farmers’ Holiday Association to postpone the strike in Minnesota “…until the request by the President is more fully understood and the effect of his farm relief program is more fully known.” As another Farmers’ Holiday strike failed to occur subsequent to the farm relief programs, leaders of the Farmers’ Holiday Association were apparently somewhat won over by the New Deal farm legislation.

As AAA officials worked to sort out the nitty gritty details of the programs for each of the seven surplus commodities, Minnesota farmers were eager for payment plans for acreage reduction to begin as soon as possible and provide them with an income to purchase seed,
fertilizer, and even groceries. For the 1933 calendar year, agency officials reasoned “No Acreage Reduction for This Year,” as no plan had been completely designed in time to limit production of winter wheat.\textsuperscript{175} Diligently waiting for government programs promised to be capable of providing income to farm families, farmers implored the AAA to “Make the Bill Apply to this Year’s Crops.”\textsuperscript{176} AAA officials and supporters tried to soothe fears of program setbacks and explained, “The farm bill plan as emergency legislation justifies renewed hope and courage…” In the same article, the \textit{Fergus Falls Journal} reiterates farmers’ anxieties with “Action is needed; delay has been costly.”\textsuperscript{177}

Although the Farmers’ Holiday Association split with more conservative farmers in their views of the long-term affects of the AAA, average farmers applauded the acreage payment program. By 1935, “$125,000,000 in Big Farm Bill” made front page news, with the announcement of a continued lowering of interest rates for farm loans from 4 1/2% to 3 1/2%.\textsuperscript{178} In the meantime, the \textit{Mankato Free Press} insisted, “Farm Income Gains are in Evidence” and portrayed a widespread picture of optimism throughout the nation’s countryside. The article referred to less disastrous effects of the drought on commodity yields, increases in hog prices, and the rise in payments from the AAA program as the cause of the overall boost of farm incomes by 12%, compared to the previous year of 1934.\textsuperscript{179} In addition to praise from newspapers in Minnesota, the New Deal, and specifically the AAA, received high acclaim from the farmers themselves as “3,000 Farmers in Capitol to Greet F.D.R., Applaud AAA.” A statement from the farmers’ spokesperson announced, “…We are farmers from the cotton belt and the wheat belt and the corn belt and that this trip is of our own planning.”\textsuperscript{180} Addressing the criticisms of the Farmers’ Holiday Association, who dubbed the demonstration a “publicity
stunt,” the farm leader also emphasized, “We left the plow handles to come here and are paying our own way and are not the pawns of high-powered lobbyists.”

For its previous glorification, the AAA eventually pressured farmers to partake in the program, as New Deal participation became necessary for farmers to retain their land and plant another year in the desperate circumstances of the Great Depression. After the Supreme Court ruled that the AAA’s processing tax was unconstitutional in 1938, a new AAA program was quickly ushered into legislation to appease farm groups. Eager to please their voters, program officials gave wheat farmers the final approval of the new program in “…the farmer’s one and only opportunity to show whether or not he wants the program.” However, by the commencement of the 1938 AAA program, officials more or less imposed participation on farmers, reflected in an article titled, “Here’s What Will Happen to Farmers Who Refuse to Adhere to New Program.” If a farmer chose not to comply with government agency policies, that particular farmer would “…lose the benefits of the program and subject themselves to stiff penalties besides.” That farmer would be denied any compensation from the soil conservation fund, receive a 15 cent tax per bushel of corn and wheat that exceeded the quota set by the government, and abstention from membership in a cooperation resulted in as much as 60% fewer loan prospects. With these new regulations coercing farm program involvement at a time with desperate need for income, FDR called the passage of the policies “the winning of one more battle for an underlying farm policy that will endure.”

Together with the AAA, Minnesota farmers also took advantage of the CCC, and the program offered Minnesota farmers the chance to break even and continue their farming operations. The loan program enabled farmers to purchase materials and construct elevators for grain storage “to take care of the surplus” in their cooperatives. Because of the agreement
between the government and participating farmers, “…the loan price, that the government set on
the grain for that year, got to be the ceiling price, too, because the government had so much in
storage…” When crop prices rose above the government level, the government sold the
commodity in surplus to return prices to the level stated in the loans to farmers, thereby
establishing a ceiling price. Because the government maintained the loan price, a farmer from
northwest Minnesota reasoned, “The program just didn’t work. It kept the price at the level that
the government set as the loan level, and there was no change…”184 The CCC branches were
made up of 12 regions, with a location in St. Paul, Minnesota, and included a new section to
“enable farmers through cooperative arrangements to make use of intermediate credit bank funds
for live stock and crop production.”185 Ultimately, a farm widow from southern Minnesota, who
paid $2,700 for $9,000 worth of land to the CCC, recounted, “But they gave so much money to
so many farmers around here and all that. Then, of course, got the four years and they got stuck
with those farms. They went bankrupt, you know.” By 1938, the CCC had granted $14 million
in loans to farmers in return for 28 million bushels of corn in surplus nationwide, and Minnesota
placed 2.6 million bushels of corn in CCC storage in return for low-interest loans made available
by the program. Comparatively, Iowa farmers traded 16 million bushels of corn into the hands
of the CCC for loans, and Wisconsin farmers only exchanged 2,000 bushels of corn for funds.186

Farmers initially feared the RA and worried that for all their hard work to remain on their
land, they could potentially lose it to a government program instead of foreclosure. Not as
popular as previous reforms like the AAA or CCC, the RA, later incorporated into the FSA,
confronted challenges from farmers with their constant dread regarding foreclosures of their
land. Newspapers countered farmers’ fears with articles like “No One Will Have to Move from
Farms,” seemingly exposing the fear that farmers and their families would be forcibly removed
from their homes in the government’s scheme to subtract non-arable land from production. The *Fergus Falls Journal* explained that the program “…will not attempt to move families against their will from poor land to more productive areas” and that “…no family is going to be coerced into moving.” The article persisted in its attempt to quell fears with testimonies of previous rural rehabilitation efforts as “…sufficient in most instances to persuade families to move” of their own accord. After initially easing the apprehension of farm communities, the *Fergus Falls Journal* later resumed its clarification of the RA’s goals as assistance for “thrifty tenants” to become landowners themselves. Additionally, the program set out to purchase “land unsuited for crops” and retire it from production. Funding for the project received $10 million in 1938 and planned to allocate $25 million for 1939 operations and $50 million thereafter.

The REA clearly bettered standards of living in rural areas; however with farmers in a Depression mindset, cutting nonessential expenses, electricity was still only used minimally in rural Minnesota. Immediately popular after its creation, the REA quickly became touted as “…one of the biggest things that ever happened to the farmer” and a “new life for them.” Unlike other New Deal programs, according to an attorney who represented Lake Region Cooperative Electrical Association in northwest Minnesota, “It had no political identity at all. They were just wanting electricity.” A farmer from the same region cleared the blame of the lack of electricity in the countryside from power companies, as they rejected rural offers to construct electrical lines with a sparse population, and he argued, “…they just didn’t have the money to go out and build lines in the rural areas.” Working with the REA, the attorney maintained, “…with the government financing behind us and with the public sitting practically in our lap and willing to give us services for nothing- it was a lot easier…” Although newspapers proclaimed, “10,000 Farms Get REA Power by Fall” in 1937, farmers had their doubts
concerning the completion of such a project.  A farmer who recruited for REA participation recalled, “…We went around… to get the farmers to… buy $2.00 in stock… well they’d buy it, but they doubted there’d ever be any electricity.” Effects of the financial depression reflected farmers’ reluctance to part with too much cash for an unguaranteed endeavor. When electricity did make its appearance on farms in Minnesota, a farmer narrated his families’ efforts to stay below the minimum payment of $3.40 by using only the lights, as the use of more electricity would have increased their bill and been too high of an expenditure. Electricity greatly improved farm life and physical labor demands, but farmers were better able to enjoy its benefits after the Great Depression. Even as an added expense, the farmer went on to assert electricity’s importance; “I don’t know of a single thing if it were cut off, that would hurt more than to have electricity cut off.” Speaking to the wonder of the benefits associated with electricity, the REA attorney pronounced, “…it was about the same as getting God there!”

Farmers’ need for aid and feelings of despondency had persisted for so long by the enactment of New Deal policies that most farmers believed the New Deal was “better than nothing,” and despite the debate surrounding the efficiency of the New Deal programs, farmers largely thought highly of the legislation in their time of desperate struggle. Whether the programs as entireties succeeded were insignificant to farmers, as one Minnesota farmer stated, “Well, it never really hurt us much.” Rural families viewed the New Deal as programs “set up for an absolute need,” and were indifferent to the conflicting motives of the federal government. Even if the agencies were created to genuinely aid besieged farmers during the Great Depression or to simply attempt to balance supply and demand in the agricultural sector of the economy, “…it had to be done…” Moreover, Minnesota farmers praised the New Deal for providing farmers with a means to earn, rather than merely accept, aid. Explaining her attitude towards
the New Deal a farm wife simply asserted, “Things were in such a terrible state at the time that you couldn’t see anything could get any worse.” The New Deal programs were necessary for the endurance of small farmers and provided them with the means to cope with and survive the financial and environmental disasters of the Great Depression.

In addition to aiding farmers, New Deal programs also stimulated rural economies and kept alive small town businesses. Because businesses in small, rural towns depended on their customers residing on farms, these businesses also suffered as agricultural prices declined and farmers lacked purchasing power and were unable to invest in the local economy. A hardware store owner from southern Minnesota explained, “…when the farmer makes money, everybody thrives. The farmer is one person that, if he’s got money, he’s going to spend it. That helps our business, too. If the farm economy goes down, well, then, everybody else suffers with it.” A tractor implement dealer from northwestern Minnesota echoed the same sentiment, “This is an agricultural area. So the business depended on farmers for business to stay alive.” Not only did the New Deal agricultural programs aid farmers and their families, but also the funds devoted to farmers subsequently stimulated rural economies.

The New Deal programs presented renewed hope in the agricultural market and granted farmer with long-sought government support, increasing the number of farms in Minnesota from 1930 to 1935. In between the two farm censuses, the New Deal began with the enactment of the AAA in 1933, and the number of farms in Minnesota increased from 185,000 in 1930 to 203,000 in 1935. Furthermore, average farm size increased parallel to the rise in the number of farms from 1930 to 1935: from approximately 160 acres in 1930 to 254 acres in 1935. This illustrates the consolidation trend amongst farmers, as more land was required to pay for tractors and machinery and farming became more competitive with farmers increasing their land.
holdings, often while evicting tenants and sharecroppers. By 1940, the sharp increase in the number of farms seen in the 1935 census became more balanced; the number of farms decreased from 1935 to 197,000 farms with an average of 259 acres. Later New Deal programs, like the RA and FSA, selected candidates for their relief programs for their potential and skills in agriculture, and the 1940 census shows that by this time, unskilled farmers had been edged out by more aggressive and progressive farmers in Minnesota as farming emerged as a competitive industry. The New Deal programs worked to increase agricultural prices and succeeded initially following the establishment of the program, decreasing surpluses, along with droughts, from 1933 to 1936. The passage of land to the next generation accounts for the continued increase in the number of farms and acreage by 1940; in one case in southern Minnesota, five sons established five new farms, while one son remained on the home site, adding five farms to the Minnesota census for just a single family. However, the extreme drought in 1936 and constant low prices stabilized the number of farms by 1940. Additionally, by the 1940 census, farmers were able to justify mechanization and the purchase of more farmland with the end of droughts and increase in demand prior to World War II.

XXX

Until recently, historians have neglected to include the voice of farmers in their works, instead choosing to focus on the reformers and legislators. The Great Depression era is included in works chronicling the evolution of agriculture in America at the turn of the century, and historians debate whether the farm aid established and continued from the Great Depression has become too much. Regional historians narrate the conditions of the Great Depression in the South, West, and Great Plains; arguing over failure of the New Deal for the sharecroppers in the South, the New Deal’s positive or negative affects on family farms in the West, and the critical
need of farmers in the Great Plains for the relief programs. In the Midwest, historians reason that the Great Depression paved the way for modern agribusiness, removing small farmers and tenants, as larger landholders consolidated land with payments acquired from New Deal programs. Studying Minnesota, historians claim overarching success of the New Deal programs, improving standards of living from cities to farms. However, the perspectives and experiences of the farmers themselves are missing from the examination of the Great Depression in the Midwest and Minnesota. From Minnesota farmers’ experiences, small farms in Minnesota survived economic and environmental hardship due to their small acreage and crop diversification, which allowed for a subsistence existence alongside a barter economy in rural towns. The New Deal granted farmers the ability to store their surplus grain and purchase the necessary materials to plant another year, without losing money. Because of this diversification, barter economy, and use of government programs, small farmers in Minnesota were able endure and pass their farms along to future generations.

The desperate circumstances in the agricultural sector required the intervention of the federal government, in the form of the New Deal programs in the 1930s, as farmers nationwide toiled to make ends meet. Experimentation in agriculture developed farming methods to increase efficiency in harvesting commodities to create higher yields. Hybrid corn and chemical fertilizer generated healthier and better-quality produce on already-existing acres. Once designed for row-crop farming, the tractor decreased the physical demands in cultivating and harvesting crops and allowed farmers to farm more land in the same amount of time. While surplus commodities after World War I resulted in the sharp decline of agricultural prices, the innovations increasing crop production only aggravated farm product prices and lowered them further. As prices took a nose-dive, farmers voiced their frustrations through attempts to raise awareness of the plight of
farmers, acting out in resistance orchestrated by the Farmers’ Holiday Association by withholding produce, dumping milk into ditches, and militantly opposing farm foreclosures.

The New Deal agricultural programs were established in response to the cry from farmers, sometimes violent in the case of the Farmers’ Holiday Association, for help. The AAA offered payments to farmers for merely reducing their acreage. In addition, the CCC provided low-interest loans specifically meant to exchange surplus commodities with much needed funds between farmers and the government, respectively. The RA, and eventually the FSA, rehabilitated poor farm families and removed exhausted and nutrient-depleted soil from cultivation. Finally, the REA lit up the countryside. Farmers in Minnesota urgently welcomed these New Deal programs as many worried over the loss of their land. Unable to purchase anything, farmers in Minnesota invested their own labor into their farms, bartered with cream and eggs for groceries in town, and used any resources on hand from the farm for subsistence. With foreclosure a constant, nagging fear for farmers during the Great Depression, Minnesota farmers participated in the later AAA program to receive benefits otherwise unavailable, like the acreage reduction payments and coinciding loan program. They took advantage of the CCC not only for surplus grain storage, but also to use the loans received from the surplus to pay for operational essentials; the loans financed seed and fertilizer needed to continue farming. As nonrecourse loans, farmers in Minnesota did not lose any money in the exchange and were able to plant another year and retain their land.

The Great Depression fostered the “waste not, want not” mindset of those who endured both the financial and environmental calamities. Farmers from that era practiced thrifty habits ranging from always cleaning your plate during a meal to postponing major purchases, especially tractors and even major electricity usage, until the economy improved. The New Deal programs
offered small farmers in Minnesota the acutely needed means to confront and survive the economic and weather-related catastrophes of the 1930s. Remembering the era, a businessman from southern Minnesota evoked the hope of the New Deal and stated, “During the Depression, they kept telling up that prosperity is around the corner and we were kind of looking around the corner always hoping it would come back.”  

Because of the programs, small farmers in Minnesota were given the tools to persist throughout the Great Depression and were able to overcome the desperate conditions of the agricultural industry to pass their land onto their children.

The government became involved in agriculture as an economic necessity during the Great Depression, and its unprecedented participation has left a lasting impact on the industry. The New Deal marked the first time the federal government became involved in agricultural markets, and without that intervention in the form of the New Deal programs, several more farmers would have lost their land and livelihoods than actually did. Minnesota farmers long awaited the programs of the New Deal and were able to retain their land through a barter economy, subsistence agriculture, and with aid from government loans. The impact of the New Deal is still felt, as the government continues to monitor and control agricultural markets. This allows Americans to spend only 10% of their incomes on food, the lowest percentage in the world. As the world population grows, American farmers will need to double their yields by developing even more efficient methods by 2050 to continue to feed the world.

In addition to illustrating the survival methods of Minnesota farmers in the Great Depression, this analysis reveals the feelings of farmers towards the land and importance of passing it onto the next generation of Minnesotans to cultivate as a family legacy. Farmers in the Great Depression were continuously anxious regarding the loss of their land; they cooperated
with New Deal programs and curtailed unnecessary expenditures in order to preserve the land for
the family. With almost 97% of the farms in the United States family owned and operated,
Minnesota farmers in the Great Depression embodied the lasting value of the land in rural
communities. Two of the interviews conducted for this paper were with my own family
members, my great uncle, who grew up during the Great Depression and took up the plow to
farm, and my father, another Phillips farmer who was able to provide family history illustrating,
not only the financial, but also the familial significance to the land. Having grown up on a farm
in southern Minnesota with these values present in my upbringing, most children memorized
normal sayings, like not to hit friends, while “We don’t sell the land” was burned into my
memory. Farmers in Minnesota exhausted all their resources so as to maintain the land and
continue farming during the Great Depression; it only takes a short drive out into contemporary
rural communities in Minnesota to witness the same value and respect for the land that feeds the
world still present. For naysayers of the current agricultural industry, President Dwight D.
Eisenhower spoke out, “Farming looks mighty easy when your plow is a pencil, and you’re a
thousand miles from the cornfield.”\textsuperscript{207}

Because farmers remain an underrepresented group in the historical record, it is worth
delving deeper into their experiences before and after the Great Depression. Specifically during
the Great Depression, more research is needed on the outliers of the farming community, those
who lost their land and were forced out. Additionally, research is also needed regarding women
in agriculture, now and in the past, to examine how women managed to scrape by and put food
on the table and clothe children in a time of want. Evidenced from the disasters of the Great
Depression, further study of community bonds in rural areas could also be undertaken.
6 Ibid., 171.
8 Gilbert C. Fite, American Farmers: The New Minority (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), 74.
10 Hurt, American Agriculture, 221.
12 Ibid., 42.
13 Ibid., 43.
15 Hurt, Problems of Plenty, 46.
16 Fite, American Farmers, 70.
17 Hurt, American Agriculture, 243.
18 Ibid.
19 Hurt, Problems of Plenty, 49.
20 Fite, American Farmers, 70.
21 Hurt, Problems of Plenty, 49.
22 Ibid., 48.
23 Hurt, American Agriculture, 252.
24 Fite, American Farmers, 74.
25 Hurt, Problems of Plenty, 50.
26 Danbom, Born in the Country, 196.
27 Hurt, Problems of Plenty, 46.
28 Danbom, Born in the Country, 196.
29 Hurt, American Agriculture, 252.
30 Hurt, Problems of Plenty, 252, 51.
31 Ibid.
32 Fite, American Farmers, 72.
33 Danbom, Born in the Country, 188.
34 Hurt, Problems of Plenty, 52.
35 Hurt, American Agriculture, 263.
36 Danbom, Born in the Country, 189.
37 Hurt, Problems of Plenty, 55.
38 Danbom, Born in the Country, 190.
39 Hurt, Problems of Plenty, 59.
40 Hurt, American Agriculture, 268.
41 Hurt, Problems of Plenty, 62.
42 Ibid., 264.
43 Ibid.
44 Ibid.
45 Ibid.
46 Danbom, Born in the Country, 187.
47 McElvaine, The Great Depression: America, 75.
48 Hurt, Problems of Plenty, 67.
49 McElvaine, The Great Depression, 142.
50 Ibid., 68.
51 Michael Johnston Grant, Down and Out on the Family Farm: Rural Rehabilitation in the Great Plains, 1929-1945 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press), 29.
53 Hurt, American Agriculture, 288.
54 Hurt, Problems of Plenty, 68-69.
55 Ibid., 78.
57 Ibid.
58 Hurt, American Agriculture, 288.
59 Ibid., 291.
60 Hurt, Problems of Plenty, 77.
61 Ibid.
62 Hurt, American Agriculture, 291.
63 Ibid.
64 Hurt, Problems of Plenty, 82.
66 Hurt, American Agriculture, 291.
67 Ibid.
68 Hurt, Problems of Plenty, 84.
69 Danbom, Born in the Country, 217.
70 Johnston Grant, Down and Out on the Family Farm, 87.
71 Hurt, American Agriculture, 292.
72 Hurt, Problems of Plenty, 87.
73 Ibid.
74 Danbom, Born in the Country, 219.
75 Ibid.
76 Ibid.
77 Ibid., 221.
78 Hurt, Problems of Plenty, 89.
79 Danbom, Born in the Country, 221.
80 Hurt, *Problems of Plenty*, 89.
81 Ibid.
82 Ibid.
84 Hurt, *Problems of Plenty*, 90.
89 Ibid., 66.
90 Ibid., 98.
92 Ibid., 307.
93 Ibid., 306.
94 Ibid., 307.
96 Ibid., 181.
97 Ibid., 185.
98 Johnston Grant, *Down and Out on the Family Farm*, 21.
99 Catherine McNicol Stock, *Main Street in Crisis: The Great Depression and the Old Middle Class on the Northern Plains* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press),
100 Danbom, *Born in the Country*, 223.
101 Johnston Grant, *Down and Out on the Family Farm*, 22.
103 Ibid., 24.
105 McNicol Stock, *Main Street in Crisis*, 27.
107 Ibid., 88, 90.
108 Ibid., 100-101.
109 Ibid., 91.
110 Ibid., 102.
111 Ibid., 103.
112 Ibid.
113 Ibid., 104.
114 Ibid., 106.
115 Ibid., 107.
116 Ibid., 108.
117 Ibid., 92.
118 Atkins, *Creating Minnesota*, 172.
120 Ibid., 23.
William Sprung was born in 1908 on a farm in Iowa, and Faith Evers Sprung was born on a farm in 1911 in Big Stone County, Minnesota. They married in 1936 and farmed near Moorhead, Minnesota.

Merle Allen was born on a farm in Clay County, Minnesota in 1908. Because of his father’s poor health, Allen actively helped out on the family farm until purchasing his own in 1933. His sons now continue to farm.

Ruth Storlie Rosten was born in Spring Grove, Minnesota in 1894. After her husband’s death in 1939, Rosten took over the farming operations until her son was able to purchase the family home site.

Rudy Phillips was born on a farm near Hartland, Minnesota in 1921. He was a member of the Civilian Conservation Corps during the Great Depression, and after the war, was able to purchase his own farm. His son now farms his land.

Harry Burau was born near Fergus Falls, Minnesota. As a farmer and an active member of the Farm Bureau, Burau participated in many of the New Deal programs.


Allen, “Minnesota Farm Economy Oral History Project.”

Phillips, Personal Interview.

Rosten, “Minnesota’s Greatest Generation Oral History Project.”

Allen, “Minnesota Farm Economy Oral History Project.”

Rosten, “Minnesota’s Greatest Generation Oral History Project.”


Allen, “Minnesota Farm Economy Oral History Project.”

Ibid.

Bloomquist, “Red River Valley Sugarbeet Industry Oral History Project.”

Rosten, “Minnesota’s Greatest Generation Oral History Project.”


Burau, “OTCHS 1930s Project.”


George Shervey was born near Barrett, Minnesota in 1904. He was a farm implement salesman during the Great Depression until he retired in 1972.


Bloomquist, “Red River Valley Sugarbeet Industry Oral History Project.”

Rosten, “Minnesota’s Greatest Generation Oral History Project.”

Leslie and Virginia Anderson and Lee Lykken, “Red River Valley Sugarbeet Industry Oral History Project.”


“Farm Holiday Leaders Call Off Strike.” *Fergus Falls Journal* 13 May 1933, 1.

“No Reduction in Acreage for This Year.” *Fergus Falls Journal* 15 May 1933, 1.

“Make the Bill Apply to This Year’s Crops.” *Fergus Falls Journal* 18 May 1933, 1.

“Farm Legislation to be Explained at Meeting Here.” *Fergus Falls Journal* 17 May 1933, 2.
“125,000,000 in Big Farm Bill.” *Fergus Falls Journal* 11 May 1935, 1.

“Farm Income Gains are in Evidence.” *Mankato Free Press* 13 May 1935, 3.

“3,000 Farmers in Capital to Greet F.D.R., Applaud AAA.” *Mankato Free Press* 14 May 1935, 1.


“Here’s What Will Happen to Farmers Who Refuse to Adhere to New Program.” *Mankato Free Press* 17 Feb 1938, 1.

Burau, “OTCHS 1930s Project.”

“All Farm Credit Agencies Will be United Hereafter.” *Mankato Free Press* 12 May 1933, 1, 4.

“Credit Corps Reports Further Large Loans.” *Mankato Free Press* 19 Feb 1938, 1.

“No One Will Have to Move From Farms.” *Fergus Falls Journal* 2 May 1935, 1.


Judge Chester Rosengren was in private practice during the Great Depression and represented Lake Region Cooperative Electrical Association shortly after the REA’s commencement.


Burau, “OTCHS 1930s Project.”

Rosengren, “OTCHS 1930s Project.”


Burau, “OTCHS 1930s Project.”

Rosengren, “OTCHS 1930s Project.”


William Ernst was born in Stevens County, Minnesota and farmed in that region.


Burau, “OTCHS 1930s Project.”

Ibid.


Herbert Richter was born near his family farm in Conger, Minnesota. After his father’s farm accident, the family established Richter Hardware Store, where Richter worked and eventually took over.


Dann Phillips was born in 1953 and grew up on his family farm near Hartland, Minnesota. He now farms his own operation also near Hartland, Minnesota.

Shervey, “Minnesota’s Greatest Generation Oral History Project.”


Ibid.
Rudy Phillips Interview
August 26, 2014

“As far as the way we were brought up, that’s a joke and a half. Can you imagine with no electricity, no running water, no bathroom. As a sign of today, it’s hard to believe the difference. And like the home place when there were ten kids and the folks; no bathroom, no running water. Brother! Can you imagine the mornings when somebody had to go to the bathroom or something, it’s hard to believe, say.

(To Dann Phillips) Well, your folks when they moved into that place at first, they didn’t live in the house. I think they took the grain bin and moved into it.

And everything was work. Everything was done the hard way. Today the way is mechanized, it’s amazing the way labor has cut down. Milk cows by hand and everything with a shovel.

(On the Homeplace). Yeah, I remember that. That was in 1932. I was 11 years old. Well, my dad he wanted something that was his own. We were living on a place where he was working on shares. He was giving half of it to the landlord. So, he bought this farm. I don’t know how my dad ever got the nerve to do that, what he did. He bought it at that time, it was a big farm. You see, way back, if you had 80 acres a family would make a living on that. Because they had such a big garden and they always had cows, pigs, their own meat, milk, chickens. And the garden would be just a humongous garden.

As far as buying any potatoes, it was all raised and stored in the basement. I remember when we had potatoes like from July from the year before. When the potatoes would get growths out of them, we would have to keep potatoes until the next July.

As far as going to the store and buying anything, well we didn’t have any money. But how my dad got the nerve to buy the farm. Because there were so many people in those days different from today; if they didn’t have the money they sold them out. They made them move and they sold the property for taxes. That was common. There were so many people that lived in a place for one year and they didn’t pay their rent right or their taxes and somebody else had moved in.

But my dad, oh, how that man worked. It’s all he did was work. Milk all those cows by hand; hard work. And your Grandpa Fred, he was the second oldest, and he got in on that work. He did all that work.

…

But Fred, he was a regular slave. And I’m the fourth one, and I was another one of those slaves.

(On New Deal) Oh yeah, I had the Civilian Conservation Corps. I got in there for 6 months. You could go in for six months, and it was Roosevelt. The Depression was so bad that you couldn’t get a job. I joined that and it was a good deal; thirty dollars a month plus your board
and room. I went to Winona and worked over there. I crossed the river every day into Wisconsin and worked on some kind of a spill-way between two big hills.

(On farm programs) Later on there was something, but I don’t remember as far as how that went.

(On wind generator) My dad, he bought one of those 32 volt outfit with one big blade that made electricity. And when the wind blew, that was pretty nice. There were a whole bunch of storage batteries, but they would maybe hold the power for one day, two days at most. Then it would get less and less. And we had the bulbs, so small, nothing like today. I think we had some bulbs, 15 watt. That was amazing for help as far as fire hazard in the barn. My dad would go up in the hayloft and pitch hay in the dark. And we had a wire up there with a bulb, and we’d turn that on. It was like a candle, but we would see. We had that for maybe two to four years.

As far as the bathroom, I will never forget that story. My sister, she was younger than me, Margaret, the next one. When she was going to high school, once in awhile she would stay at a friend’s house. And they would have a bathroom; we didn’t have no bathroom. Anyway, one of the girls wanted to stay overnight. She didn’t want that because we didn’t have a bathroom, but the girl kept pestering her, so she did. So now the next morning she gets up, and they don’t have no bathroom or nothing. And I remember my sister telling the folks off. She says about, “Are we the poorest people in the world, that we don’t have a bathroom?” It really was sad. I don’t know why we didn’t have one. So we put in a stool, there was no shower or anything.

What do you do in the morning when you get up and you don’t have no shower, no bathroom, or nothing? You wash your face in a pan or something and comb your hair a little, that’s it. As far as going potty, you went out to the outside toilet. And in the wintertime, boy, was that fun. But my mother and the two other girls had a bucket with a cover on it. I never seen them ever use it, but they could sit on that, you see… You talk about advancement, jeepers Christ.

(On digging potatoes) Oh! Fifteen cents an hour. Fifteen cents an hour! But he had the tractor started. He was already plowing. In the morning, I couldn’t go there until after we had the chores done at home. I probably wouldn’t get there til 9 o’clock. And I think the most I ever put in was six hours in one day. We’d plow from 9 until noon and then we’d have lunch. And then he started up again; I never started it, it was an antique. It was a new tractor, but back then, you know. He’d start it up and get me going again, and then I’d plow until 4 o’clock and then I’d have to get home and help with the chores again. I remember that 40 by Charlie’s, you know? We plowed on that. It was way late and the ground was just starting to freeze a little bit. I had that steel seat and I had this great big coat of my dad’s to sit on there. Sit on that tractor, you know. I don’t know how fast it went, but it was a two-bottom plow. It must’ve been the smallest thing they made. There was no plugging. The ground, there was nothing there so it didn’t plug up or nothing. Yeah, fifteen cents an hour. But it was a big honor to run that tractor because that was a big thing, you see. I must’ve been about 17 or 18, somewhere in there.

See, I didn’t go to high school. Up until the fall when I was 19, in like October, November, December, January, February, March, I went into the Civilian Conservation Corps. But up until
I was 19 and a half I stayed at home all the time and helped with all that work there. Oh my dad, I remember he just worked. Jeepers Christ.

(On CCC) At first, we helped put up this building. And after that was done, they put stoves in there to keep it from freezing because they were pouring cement. And they wanted volunteers for firemen because they had to keep it from freezing. They had three stoves; round-barreled stoves. Anyway, they wanted some volunteers and I volunteered for that. So then I was one of the firemen. The crew worked during the day and then when the truck went back to pick them up, we went with them and we stayed there and then the crew went back to Winona. I did that for must have been four months.

I will never forget that man. My memory is shot, but I will never forget him. Leester Smith- he couldn’t write his own name. I remember when we got paid, we got paid $30 a month, but they sent $15 home to the family. See this program was to help the family, too. So they sent $15 home, and then they’d put $7 in a savings account at the base. So every week, we’d get $2 to spend. And I remember when him and I would come from that firing thing and sometimes we’d have to get our $2 and he had to sign. Boy, what a project that was before he made that X! Leester Smith.

He’s the guy that started me smoking, dangoneit. We got a sack of buldurham for 5 cents and we got the tobacco and the papers on the side. And I’d take it and say I’d roll one for you, and he said, “Why don’t you smoke it yourself?” And that’s how I got started, yeah. Five cents.

It was a kind of a terrible ravine project. Instead of washing it any deeper, where it held the water back so far, it went and broke over this thing here. They poured concrete in the wintertime. This building was over this whole project, you see. (Concrete spillway)

(On farming on his own). After the war, in ’47. I went to that government school. I went four years to that. They treated us real good in WW2 when we got out. That first one I got out in ’46, if you didn’t have any job, a veteran, you could get $20 a month. They called it… oh anyway. You could get that for a year, $20 a year. I took advantage of that program. Well then when I started farming, I went to this ag school in Freeborn and I went there four years. The most you could go was four years if you had four years in the service. If you was only one year in the service, one year, two years… They went according to what they served. I remember Marvin Christensen, he wasn’t in two years. He went to the school about a year and a half and they cut him off. And there was different ones. I was one of the few of them that had four years. That was as long as you could go, but I went the full four years and I got a check every month. $105, boy, that was a big check back then. If you had the nerve to do it, the government really treated us good then. When I bought that 72 acres, I got a government loan. And it was 3% interest. I can’t remember how much a year I had to pay off. There’s where I made an awful mistake. I never did understand the maximum that you could borrow. But all I borrowed was enough to pay for that farm. It was, well, $125 an acre on 72 acres.

When I was going to that school, I bought a small John Deere B. Must’ve been about ’48 or ’49. And I milked cows.
The old house, you know we moved in that place, and this old couple didn’t have no bathroom, no running water, no nothing. Very nice people. She’d carry water in and have it by the cookstove. Everything was as clean as could be. I don’t know if they had any kids or what, never any around there. She kept the place nice. I ate with them different times there. Really nice, nice people. He sold the farm and he went to Hartland and he built a house. You know where the greenhouse is? That house next to there.

I remember when we moved up there. This was in ’47, Verlene’s birthday, November 17th.

Then we lived in that thing for a year. No running water, no bathroom no nothing. That second year, I dug from a well to the house so we had water in the basement. It was a dirt floor basement, but you didn’t have to go outside to get water. You could go down to the basement if you needed water. But no bathroom or anything, you see.

(To Dann Phillips) But your folks, I don’t remember how long it was before they had water in the house. But I know they didn’t have it any better, see.

Probably had water in the barn before the house. Well that’s where they made the money, milking the cows. And I don’t know how your mother did it when she taught school at first, you know, there. You know how that is, when you get cleaned up. It was the same for 95% of them out in the country that didn’t have a bathroom. So we weren’t alone, you know. I didn’t know of anybody that had a bathroom out in the country. Right in Hartland, that was really different.

(On shoes) I don’t remember ever getting shoes. We went barefoot all the time. I don’t remember getting shoes. I know when it come to the overalls, I never got a new pair of overalls because there were three brothers older than me. My mother, she did more sewing, putting patches, fixing, fixing. You see, mother, she had some education as far as being a seamstress. You see, they used to make their own clothes. If somebody wanted new clothes, she’d move into their house and stay with them and make their clothes. Like in Germany, they didn’t call it high school, it was something else. Well she went through that and then she took this special course for, I call it dressmaking, but anyway’s that what it amounted to. Anyways, when she came to this country, that’s what she did. There was a big demand for especially the ladies, instead of buying or making it yourself and hire somebody. They’d buy the material and then she’d make it. Yeah, she did a lot of sewing.

I never forget that. Every time when you come back from church, I can still hear it, it still hits my mind today, “Get them clothes off.” And then put the old junk back on. I don’t know how good they was when we went to church with, but it was something anyways. I can still hear her say, “Get them good clothes off.” It wasn’t anything special about them.

When I went to school, we used to trap along the ditch for muskrats and skunks. I was never smart enough to catch a mink. They were worth quite a bit. If you had them skinned and the
hide stretched on a shingle, you got either $1 or $1.25. If you just took the muskrat there, you’d get 75 cents. And that was good money then. Anyway, we’d go along that ditch, and one time I got a skunk. And I don’t know what in the hell I did, but once I got to school, the teacher sent me home. Yeah, I stunk so bad.

She was a good teacher, Miss Leethold. One time, this other guy, we was about the same age. I missed so much school it was terrible, but anyway. When we had recess, we’d always get in a wrestling match or something. Anyway he was sitting up ahead of me probably from here to the stove or a little further, and she was up on the blackboard doing something. And I made a spitball… I’m gonna nail him in the back of the neck, he’s only that far away, you know. I had it stretched, and by God if I didn’t miss him. It landed right by the teacher. And boy, as soon as I seen I missed it, I’m back to my work. And she turned around, and I’m peeking, here she’s coming. And she comes right next to me and she had a foot ruler in her hand. “Put your hand on the desk.” And she took that damn ruler, and she hit me this way, not flat. And god damnit, that smarted. And I pulled my hand back, she said “Get your hand back there.” But the next time I pulled my hand away. It hit the desk. Now she takes the damn thing, and she hit me against the head with it. Godammit, that really hurt, too. Well she was satisfied then.

We started in September, and then hell, it was in May. I think maybe the 1st of June we stopped.

(On missing school) Stay home and take care of those cows, work. I missed so damn much when I was 13 or 14 that I remember the 7th grade I didn’t pass. So the next year I’m in the damn same class. Anyway, the next year I passed. The next year I’m in the eighth grade and I don’t pass. But a lot of times we only went one or two days a week. Whatever they had in the class, I didn’t know what the hell was going on. Anyway, finally, when I was 16, I passed the eighth grade. I was 16 years old, but from 14 to 16, I stayed home so much in the fall of the year. Sometimes I’d go one day, maybe two days at most.

Work, work, take care of all those cows. Cows, horses, chickens. We had a double deck chicken house. Woah, what a lot of work was involved in that. And then a bunch of pigs. And some sheep, but it wasn’t much work with the sheep. I remember my dad did a terrific job with pigs. He had what they called a cooker, and he put water in it with some mixture of ground oats and some kind of meat scraps and then we’d put the skim milk in there. And boy, the pigs they was crazy for it and we raised some good pigs. But he’d have maybe 30 of them at one bunch at two troughs where he dumped it in and it went under the vent and then you know. That was a lot of work.

You just can’t imagine the work, besides milking all the cows, then run the separator, separate that milk and get the cream out, then they sold all the cream, you see, and then the skim milk went to pigs. All it was was work. And I got in on the godamned crap, you know.

Back in them days, I’d say about 70% of it was oats, and then there was hay and then corn. I don’t know if they ever had over 60 or 80 acres of corn. You plant with a team of horses. That’s another thing how he used to work with that. You can’t imagine the work that they did in them days. One time they had me, and I was only about maybe 16, and I used to drive 3 horses with
no problem. But it come to plowing, we had a two bottom plow and three horses had a hell of a
time. So then they’d take two horses in the lead, so there’d be five horses. The two in the front
had a log chain that went way through along the tongue and that team of horses was trained real
good. Anyway, here he had between Fred and him they got me lined up driving the horses
through the field. They never drove the five through the gates; three went and then somebody
drove the team of horses when they got to the field. And they’d put the team in front and then
hook it up. And I plowed with them five horses. You’d make one round, and then you’d let
them rest. You talk about a lot of work to get those horses all hitched up, get the harnesses on
them.

Fred and I were cultivating. And Fred ran three horses with a two-row cultivator. And I had two
horses with a single row. Anyways, we were cultivating and it started raining. So we had a wide
lane, we trotted the horses coming home it was raining; now we have to unhook the horses so
they can get in the barn. Well I got mine unhooked all right. And you know how you hook up
one of the tongues, must’ve been my fault. When you let the horse go then, you take the bridle
off so the horse can to the trough and drink some water. And here we took the bridle off, and the
tongue I don’t know how that was, and he stepped over the tongue. The tongue was still hooked
and it hit him. And my God. When it hit the horse, you know, in the legs he took off and the
cultivator went like that. Two tongues. Yeah, it was two tongues because it broke both them off.
And then it broke the tug on the harness. It’s raining like hell and the horse runs off a ways away
from the building site and stood there. It was a big horse, I remember we called him Big Shot.
He didn’t know what was going on, it was raining like hell.

He had some nice horses. These five that we used, they were all gentle. You didn’t have to
worry about getting kicked or anything or bit. They had them two, you know, and some of them
wanted to bite you. The bastards, different story before he got them trained. There were some
mean horses, too. We never had to do that. My dad would always take that kind of stuff.
Whenever I monkeyed with horses, I always got the good ones, the gentle ones, the ones that was
trained good, you see.

But that Big Shot, he was standing out there and it was raining like hell. And I think Fred went
over there and talked to him, and he just stood there and brought him back.

Oh! And in between time, when he’s pulling this cultivator, it went next to the feeding floor
where the pigs were. And it hit the feeding floor and broke a bunch of boards off and it’s raining
like hell and now the pigs are getting out, running around the yard. And we can’t let the pigs get
out. We were soaked like a couple of rats. We got the fence fixed so the pigs could get back in,
in this rain, you know. Boy, that’s the good days, whew. Fred, he knows about that. We used to
talk about that sometimes. And then when it come to that cultivator, to make those two tongues
again, that was a big job fixing all that stuff. But my dad never said nothing to me, and I don’t
know if he just went ahead and take it apart and fix it.

But when it come to those, like when you milk cows, you know, the first young heifers when you
milk them they don’t just stand there. A lot of times they’d wind up kicking, and if you had a
bucket, they’d knock that over. Then you’d have a hell of a mess. And my dad he always
trained to milk the cows. Like the first year, a lot of times, it hard to train to stand, you know. He’d always take the tough ones, he’d do that. And we’d have like three or four, all of us had the same ones that was gentle.

Oh, that time I got stepped on! That was a big deal. Barefooted. Boy, that really messed my foot up. So I go to the house, and my mother, between a little cow manure and what not on it, she cleaned it up. And she got a pan, a dish pan or whatever you call it, and she put warm water in there and then I put my foot in there. I don’t know what she put in there with it, Epsom salt or something disinfecting. And now she’s got the tea kettle on the cook stove and she’s getting the water hot. She kept dumping the water on my foot. The water was hot as could be. I sat there with my foot like that for I don’t know how long. When she finally gets me out of there, and she puts on this Watkins salve and Raleigh salve. Boy, that was the cure. Now she rubs a bunch of that on it, and pulls the skin back where it was pulled over. And now you never used anything new. Some old diaper, wrap that around my foot so I couldn’t get any dirt on it. Now I’m walking around barefooted with that thing. I think it must’ve been, I don’t know how many days, I’d sit there and she’d go through this whole project with the water. And I’d sit there and she’d put that Epsom salt in there and then I’d get that Watkins salve on it and another rag around there. Boy, my foot was in bad shape. I didn’t do anything for milking cows, I don’t know how long. I think I must’ve missed three or four days. Yeah, that was a bad one. As far as stepping on stuff barefoot, hell, we did that many times. And she’d put that salve on that sore spot.

…

You know, I remember I heard that a couple times. You can’t imagine. I remember this because when I was home those three to four years, when I was fifteen to nineteen. I’ll never forget how my dad worked. You know, he was so afraid. Because back in those days there was so many of them that said, “He’s gonna lose the farm.” There was so damn many of them, they didn’t make enough to pay the tax and they’d move out. And he was so worried about it.

You didn’t get nothing for anything you know. The price on stuff. Where they got it was milking all those cows, see the cream check. Did you know one time corn was ten cents a bushel? One time we put just a small load of corn in the basement. See some of this wood didn’t make very much heat, and coal it wasn’t too expensive, but anyways. It was cheaper, the corn was. And they put a load in the basement, that’s one of these boxes we’re talking 35 to 36 bushels in burnt corn. But it was just one time. And I remember the folks talking about it, they didn’t think it was right. People were going hungry and we were burning corn. So we didn’t put any more in. But you know what happened? Those goddarned rats moved in the house. We had rats in the house! Mice, we always had mice in that house. It wasn’t that bad. But when you see a goddamn big rat, but we got rid of them.

I remember when I moved on that place up there. It was in November, see. Anyway, somehow right across the road he had corn planted on that, I don’t know how many acres it was. He was going to let me have $50 an acres, for five acres of corn. And my dad had an ideal picker, but you’d never seen anything like it. When it was dry, you’d call it a corn sheller. The ends of the
ears would be that much shelled off, you know. I remember your dad and me, we were picking that corn. And there was so much shelled off, it was only five acres. And he had corn left and he could use the picker. But he said no, he’s not going to pick it like that, leaving too much in the field. You know what he did? He picked it by hand. He picked it by hand. And that winter, see that’s when he was milking cows by hand, and he’d milk the cows. He started using a manure spreader. Back in those days, them old manure spreaders used to freeze up all the time. You had to battle with them all the time. So they’d take the manure and throw it on a flat wagon. You know, with the straw and what not. I think he was milking about eight or ten cows. When he’d get done with that, he’d get that unloaded and spread in the field someplace. He hitched a team of horses on the wagon, and he’d go and pick one row of corn. And I remember the damn snow was that deep, and back in those days, there was so much corn that was on the ground. The stalk was down on the ground, and you had to pull the ear up out of the snow. That’s why today they all want to farm. You sit in an air condition tractor. You can run a tractor! You wouldn’t even have to get dirty!

…

I picked corn, see. One year it was Johnny Chicos and me. That was when I got out of the CC camp that fall. Down by Twin Lakes. And we went to the unemployment office to get a job. And they said some farmer needed someone to pick his corn, told us where to go. We went out there. Yeah, he needed help. He had two wagons and two teams of horses. And we got five cents a bushel. It was Johnny Chicos and I. And we stayed right in the place, and they fed us. We was the same speed. We unloaded three times in one day because those boxes held 36 bushels. If you had a scoop board, it held an extra bushel, it was 37. And he had scoop boards on both of them… Every year there was not an ear left on the ground. It would have to be put in that crib. But we would unload three times a day and it would be 36 bushels. In the morning, we’d get up in the dark and then we’d go to the barn and try to do our job. They didn’t have no bathroom either. The old man, he’d already fed the horses and put the harnesses on. They were still in their stalls in the barn. I don’t know when that old man got up. But they’d already eaten. And we’d hitch up the team and have them hitched on the wagon. Now they got a hitching rail where you can tie them up. It was the same way with the whole team of horses, you know. Then we’d go in and have breakfast. Oh, she fed us. Talk about eating! We ate like pigs. You talk about eating. I remember when we got out in the field, there was still frost on the stalks and it was just getting daylight. By about ten o’clock, each one of us would have made a round and we’d have the box full. Now, we’d scoop it off. Then we’d start it again. I don’t remember how far we got at noon, and we took half an hour off or so and ate. And we didn’t have it full. And then we’d finish it, and then we’d scoop the second one off. Then the third one we got done when it was dark. We’d pull up on the side of the crib, each one of us would unhook the horses. The old man took the harness off and fed them and what not. And then we ate. And then when we got done eating, we go back out there and scoop that thirty-some bushels off again. Five cents a bushel. And one day, each one of us picked 106 bushels one day. So we made $5.30. But that was the exception. Most of the time, it was between 90 or something like that. I don’t know how many acres he had, but we were there for ten days or two weeks.
Then we heard about over by Alden, I don’t know who that was. But we picked corn over there. It wasn’t near as good of corn and we got five and a half cents a bushel. It was an old widow, her husband died through the summer. There was a couple of neighbors, four or five wagons, everyone picking by hand. We didn’t do very good there. I doubt if we got 80 bushels. It was small ears and drought so bad. But anyway, we wound up picking all that. But you know, at home, I think we had more like 70 to 75 acres was all we had. By the time you filled the silo, and then he chopped a bunch of it and we stacked it in bushels, and there wasn’t too much to pick by hand, you see.”
Fred Phillips (standing), my grandfather, who survived the Great Depression and the farm crisis of the 1980s to continue farming, works on a barn near his Hartland, MN farm, c. 1940.
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