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CONTINUITY AND CHANGE ON THE TWENTIETH-CENTURY FARM:
THE GISTS OF SOUTH DAKOTA, 1921-71

JAMES MARTEN

When Gladys Leffler Gist remarked in her reminiscences that she and her husband Ray had witnessed "considerable 'for better and for worse'" during their forty years together, she could just as well have been describing the "marriage" between farmers and the agricultural economy during the same period. Depression and drought, of course, challenged those people making their livings from the land and in many ways dominated their impressions of those years. Of more long-term importance, however, were the "vast and fundamental changes" that, according to Gilbert Fite, stemmed from the "application of new technology, chemistry, and plant and animal sciences" to agriculture. By the 1940s and 1950s, posits Fite, "the evolutionary changes of former years . . . became of such fundamental importance as to be called revolutionary." In a concurrent transformation, the Gists became members of a "new minority," as farm families declined from a quarter of the population in 1935 to just over 6 percent in 1965.1

Even though change may have been the prevailing characteristic of agriculture in the first two thirds of the twentieth century, many elements of farm life showed remarkable persistence. Inevitably the seasons still governed planting and harvesting, shaping the rhythms of lives bound to the land as they had shaped the lives of farmers for millennia. Daily patterns revolved around milking cows, separating cream, and collecting eggs. Although the Gists were tenant farmers throughout their agricultural careers, they still attached themselves to the land and to the communities in which they lived. The communal events and activities in which the Gists participated with their neighbors varied over time, but the sense of belonging and mutual responsibility that typified rural communities did not. As a result, despite astonishing alterations in the technology and demography of agriculture, in many ways the lives led by farmers at the family and community level resisted change.2

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The survival of a number of family documents makes possible the reconstruction of this era through the eyes of Ray and Gladys Gist. Gladys's yearly chronicle of events from the years 1921 through 1975, which she began writing in the early 1960s, provides a comprehensive narrative of the Gists' story. Like the diaries of nineteenth-century western women studied by Lillian Schlissel, Gladys’s one hundred and fifty page manuscript was a “souvenir meant to be shared like a Bible, handed down through generations, to be viewed not as an individual's story but as the history of a family's growth and course through time.” And, as in the women's narratives edited by Joanna Stratton, the years that passed between the events she described and the time she wrote about them served “to deepen [her] insight and heighten [her] perspective.” Perhaps more important, the farm account books kept by Gladys the first of every month from 1928 to 1964 furnish intricate details about farm operations and the family's standard of living. Taken together, these documents reveal how one family saw the tremendous changes and subtle continuities of the twentieth century. The Gists' entirely unremarkable yet instructive experiences put a human face on great trends; like the farmers' diaries about which Rodney C. Loehr wrote fifty years ago, they “convey to the reader . . . the atmosphere of farm life, an appreciation of its struggles, hopes, and defeats.”

The Dutch, English, Bavarian, and Scotch-Irish ancestors of Gladys Leffler and Ray Gist came to America between the seventeenth and early nineteenth centuries. Over the years they migrated into the Ohio Valley, the Upper South, and the Ozarks. Along the way, they participated in large and small ways in many of the most important events in American history. They were frontier surveyors and slave overseers, farmers and railroad engineers, and, above all, westward-looking pioneers. They worshipped in the great frontier sects as Methodists and Baptists (with a sprinkling of Presbyterians), fought Indians, Englishmen, and, during the American Civil War, each other. A Gist served as guide and friend to George Washington during the 1750s, while ancestors of Ray's mother followed Daniel Boone into Kentucky and militia Captain Abraham Lincoln into the Black Hawk War. Lefflers homesteaded for a time in Texas and witnessed the chaotic opening of the Cherokee Strip in Oklahoma.

Gladys and Ray were born in southwest Missouri in 1898 and 1893, respectively. Gladys's father, Frank Leffler, moved his family from Wheatland, Missouri, to Texas, back to Missouri, to Oklahoma, and on to Iowa. By 1913 they were back in Wheatland, but army worms ruined their crops and in 1915 they returned for good to Inwood, in far northwestern Iowa, where Frank hauled cream, operated a shoe store, and farmed. Gladys attended high school there, singing in the chorus and serving as senior class president. After her graduation in 1916, she taught country school for five years and kept books at the creamery that employed her father.

If Gladys's adolescence resembled something out of The Music Man, Ray's was much closer to an Ozarks version of a Faulkner novel. He was one of nine children—two of whom died in childhood accidents—most of whose uncles fought in the Civil War as Union soldiers or Confederate conscripts. His father, Burgess, made a meager living as a barber in Wheatland, Missouri. His harsh discipline punctuated the family's hardscrabble existence; the children began working as soon as they could earn a quarter or a half dollar for a day's work, and upon reaching adulthood, most moved away, some as far as California. Ray left school after the sixth grade, and by the early 1910s he and his younger brother John had landed in northwest Iowa, where, from time to time, Ray worked as a farm hand for Frank Leffler. Ray fought in France during the First World War, where he was gassed during the Allied offensives of 1918.

Two years after he returned to Iowa, Ray married Gladys Leffler. The Inwood Herald praised the “Popular Newlyweds” in its report of their wedding. Gladys, said the paper, had worked locally as a teacher and as a clerk at the Inwood Creamery, and had contributed to the Methodist Church by teaching Sunday School.
and as a member of the young adults’ Epworth League. “Without any special commotion,” declared the Herald, Gladys “has been a quiet and positive force in all these things.” Since Ray’s arrival “some years ago,” the article continued, he “has won for himself the respect and confidence of . . . the community,” which has “always considered [him] a good man and reliable.”

During the forty-six years after this hopeful beginning, the Gists endured three major dislocations and lived on nine different farms. After five happy years near Inwood, they relocated in 1926 to Lyman County, in the relative wilderness west of the Missouri River in South Dakota, where the Great Depression and clouds of dust and grasshoppers buffeted them for ten years. In 1937, the family moved east to a farm in Lincoln County, near Canton, just across the South Dakota border from Inwood, and three years later they moved to Lake County, South Dakota, where they made their home for the rest of their lives. They moved to their last farm home, a half section northeast of Madison, in 1945, where they would live for nineteen years before buying a house in town. Beset by ill health for much of the last two decades of his life, Ray died in 1967. Gladys lived alone for another twenty years, until she made her final move into a nursing home in Madison, where she died late in 1988 after a Christmas Eve stroke.

COMMUNITY ACTIVITIES

As tenant farmers—the Gists lost the only land they ever owned, a quarter section in Lyon County, during the depression—the Gists were frequently on the road late in February, the customary moving period for rural tenants. Despite this apparently transient existence, the family became firmly rooted in the communities in which they lived in Iowa and in South Dakota. Perhaps this is not surprising, since fluidity in rural communities had become common by the mid-1930s; between 1900 and 1935 farm tenancy in South Dakota soared from 21.8 percent to nearly half of all farmers. When Gladys and Ray moved in 1945, three other “new farm families” also joined the neighborhood, and Gladys recalled that “the old timers had a big welcoming party for us . . . so we were not long getting acquainted.” She went on to say that “we have always had wonderful neighbors, but these proved superior to any.” Just as, for the Gists at least, tenancy did not become an economic dead end—nor, for that matter, a step-ladder to land ownership—it did not prevent their full participation in community activities and friendships.

Rural communities functioned in formal and informal ways, through organizations and individuals, and in times of celebration and crisis. As newlyweds in northwest Iowa, Gladys and Ray joined more than a dozen other couples in the Lyon Township Agricultural Club (LTAC), which met on a monthly basis to discuss agricultural methods and to enjoy one another’s
company. When members married, their friends held a chivaree in their honor and gave them a rocking chair. The relationships developed in the club lasted for many years. As the aging membership scattered, monthly meetings ended, but annual and then biennial reunions were held. As late as 1946, twenty years after they left Lyon Township, Ray and Gladys attended an LTAC reunion in Inwood and received a gift of $25 for their twenty-fifth anniversary. Gladys also joined the local Home Extension Club in Iowa, which was administered by the county’s Home Extension agent and provided rural women with hints on nutrition, recreation, and sewing, and the children all participated in 4H projects. In addition, Ray and Gladys attended meetings and pot luck dinners sponsored by a World War I veterans’ association, which Gladys continued to attend as a widow.

One of the first priorities for the Gists whenever they moved to a new area was to find a church—usually Methodist—that provided communal as well as spiritual support through the Epworth League and the Ladies’ Aid (later called the Women’s Society for Christian Service and still later United Methodist Women). Ray served as Sunday school superintendent in Lyman County and Gladys frequently accepted leadership roles in the Madison church. Their son Rodney, now a retired Methodist minister, recalled that when the family came to the farm in Lincoln County late in the 1930s, they began attending services in Canton, where their threadbare clothes made them uncomfortable among the relatively prosperous town folk. They soon affiliated themselves with a Congregational church in nearby Worthing, where they seemed to fit in better. Ironically, Rodney served the Methodist church in Canton during the last eight years of his pastoral career.

Gladys and Ray also interacted with their rural neighbors outside of local organizations. They shared work at harvest time, did chores for one another, and brought farm trucks and strong arms to help at moving time. Gladys joined dozens of other war mothers during the Second World War in rolling bandages for the Red Cross. More happily, the Gists, who were devoted to music (Gladys and Ruth played piano, Kent clarinet, and Rodney violin) formed an “orchestra” with one family of Madison neighbors, the Stonebacks, and occasionally played eccentrically arranged renditions of popular songs. Holidays provided other excuses for celebrating with neighbors. The Gists hosted the 1963 “local club Christmas party” during their final winter in the country. Gladys and one of her neighbors decorated the house and everyone brought food. The seven couples who attended “made merry,” according to Gladys, until after midnight, when the guests departed into the teeth of “a real South Dakota blizzard.” The concerned revelers “kept the telephones ringing until everybody got home.” Somewhat wistfully Gladys wrote, “that was our last stormy night party.”

Community spirit became even more important in times of need. When Ray, the pregnant Gladys, and the toddler Kent arrived in Lyman County in 1926, their nearest neighbors, the Comps, took them in for a few days until they had their own house organized. The Comps let them care for eight milk cows, whose cream provided the only real income the Gists had for the next couple of years. A year later the Gists’ house burned down with virtually all of their possessions—including Gladys’s piano, shiny new cookstove, diamond ring, and most of the household goods they had bought with Gladys’s savings from her five years as a country school teacher. The Methodist church in Inwood sent fifty dollars and a box of clothing and household goods, the LTAC mailed “a kitchen shower,” and Presho merchants contributed $150 to the Gists’ recovery. From the late 1940s through the early 1960s, as Ray suffered increasingly from emphysema and arthritis, neighbors would pitch in with the farm work whenever necessary. When Ray was laid up in 1959, for instance, friends completed most of the corn picking and were rewarded with a turkey dinner at a local diner. After Gladys and Ray were both seriously injured in an automobile accident in 1961, the “neighbor women” prepared and delivered dinner and supper to the farm every day for two weeks. Finally, when Ray’s ill health
forced them to move into a house in Madison in March 1964, "our wonderful neighbors came with their pick up trucks and moved us to our new home." The next day they prepared the Gists' farm machinery and some household goods for the auction sale, since Gladys was busy with the move and Ray was too ill to leave the warmth of a car.

**EXTENDED FAMILY**

The special relationships among farm families in the rural communities in which the Gists' lived extended into their own families as well. In fact for the first five years of their marriage, Ray's brother John, his partner on the farm, lived with the newlyweds. Ray and Gladys also welcomed into their home several nephews, Ray's father and brother, and Gladys's mother for periods of time ranging from a few months to more than a decade. Family demands frequently arose when the Gists could ill afford feeding another mouth; sometimes, as when Gladys's mother lived with them for much of the 1940s and when John Gist came back from a California mental institution to stay with Gladys and Ray for nearly a year in the early 1950s, the illness that brought these guests into the household prevented them from contributing much to the family's work or economic needs, although Rhodemia Leffler paid a few dollars a month for her room and board. The Gists and their neighbors frequently took responsibility for the well-being of their family and friends, and in so doing played out a stereotypical but often accurate image of generous rural folk.

**THE LAND AND ANIMALS**

Another element of the continuity that characterized the Gists' lives during the twentieth century was their attachment to the land. Although the family never owned their own farm and moved fairly often, a certain unsentimental affection and respect for the land and for the farm animals with which they shared it emerges from the family documents. The account books reveal the names, plain and whimsical, of horses and milk cows. In 1928, the seven horses that worked the land were Queen, Eagle, Croppy, Bill, Topsy, Bird, and Daisy. All died from glanders that year, and Gladys remarked on her husband's deep sadness when he was forced to put down and burn these treasured animals. The money from a state government payment for the destroyed horses helped Ray replace them with Pet, Jim, Dolly, and Fronzie. The milk cows in 1931 featured names like Blacky, Iowa, Rose, Star, Brockel, Janell, Jean, Susie, Dakota, and Sal. In addition to these necessary animals, the family enjoyed the company of Comet and Dolly, the Shetland ponies that carried Kent and Rodney to country schools in Lyman and Lincoln counties, as well as a dog named Jack, pet lambs and goats, and an unruly coyote puppy.

![Fig. 2. Kent and Rodney Gist play on the farm near Presho, 1929. Photograph courtesy of the Gist family.](image)
In her reminiscences, Gladys occasionally recorded revealing comments about the land. She found a spare beauty in the wilderness that was Lyman County in 1926, comparing it to the rugged landscape of Harvey Dunn’s painting “The Prairie Is My Garden.” In 1929, the Gists moved to a site along Skunk Creek, which was “a beautiful location” with trees for fuel. Soon after their arrival west of the Missouri, Gladys wrote, she became “content and happy and learned to love the beauty of the prairie around me.”

Harvest, the end of the farm cycle, was a time of celebration and in good years a time of thanks; in 1941 Gladys reported that two of Ray’s brothers and one of his uncles, along with other assorted relatives, “visited us during threshing time. There were 13 of us and we all found a place to sleep under our big roof for a week. Also much food and fun.” Despite the difficulties the land had caused the Gists during the 1930s—the poor crops, dust storms, and an uncertain standard of living—these farmers and descendants of farmers remained close to the land. In 1946 when Kent found himself at loose ends after serving in the army, Ray gave him responsibility for a quarter section of the farm. Gladys declared years later, in writing about Kent’s lack of direction after coming home from the war, “there is healing in the good earth and its natural beauty. A man gets time to think.” Of course it gave women time to think, too, and Gladys, a no-nonsense, practical woman,

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reflected, when she had time, on the benefits of her farm life. By 1971, after inheriting the income from a quarter section of the last farm on which she and Ray had lived, she took great joy in recording in her diary for the next several years visits to “my farm [emphasis hers].”

None of these continuities were unique to the Gists’ lives, of course. They may seem obvious and trivial and not particularly significant, at least historically. Yet amid the great changes through which the Gists and other farm families lived in the twentieth century, they provided an anchor, a connection with a past that the transformations witnessed by the Gists threatened to eclipse.

**Technology**

No American generation before the Gists’ had experienced so many profound changes as those that swept the United States after 1920. Technology, both on the farm and in the home, sparked perhaps the most impressive transformation in the Gists’ lives. Ray and Gladys began their marriage on a half-section farm in northwest Iowa, where they did all the farm work by hand labor and horse power and often drove a horse-drawn buggy rather than Ray’s Model T (in fact, they did not even buy a license for the finicky Ford in 1922). Mechanization came slowly to the Gist farming operation. Although Ray and his brother purchased a secondhand gas-powered Waterloo tractor in 1924, the clumsy vehicle also proved hard to handle—John once broke his arm trying to crank it into action—and they rarely used it. In Gladys’s annual machinery inventory in the 1930 accounts, all of the farm equipment was powered by hand or by horse. (See Table 1.) Ten years later, the inventory had not changed much; Ray did not buy his next tractor until 1941, when he purchased a used Farmall for $250. By then, over

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**FIG. 3.** Threshing in Lincoln County in the late 1930s. Ray stands on the grain wagon at the far left. Photograph courtesy of the Gist family.
half of all farmers in the plains states owned tractors and South Dakota ranked third in the nation in the number of tractors on farms.9

Like many other small farmers, Ray had benefited to a limited degree from mechanization by hiring threshing crews or by sharing machines with neighbors, but men and horses performed most of the farm work. Gladys breathed a sigh of relief in her reminiscences for 1941 when she wrote that they were now “finally able to begin mechanized farming,” which “surely made field work easier and faster.” Ray bought another tractor in 1950, and in 1954 finally traded in the old Farmall for a newer Allis Chalmers. The yearly inventories reflect the operation’s greater mechanization, as Ray added a combine, a corn picker, an augur, an elevator, and other gas-powered machines between the mid-1940s and the 1950s. Symbolically, the last two work horses, Molly and Fronzie, were traded for a feed grinder in the spring of 1948.10 Gladys announced in her reminiscences for that year that “our farming was completely motorized.”

The mechanization of the Gist farm, of course, increased operating expenses, as the maintenance and operation of tractors cost the Gists nearly $600 in 1945, more than $900 in 1950, and $578 in 1960, when their farming operation was winding down.

The Gists also took advantage of the post-World War II boom in the use of chemicals. In 1927, their first full year in Lyman County, Ray had struggled against an army of weeds. Crops that year were poor; the Gists produced enough wheat for seed, but “the rest of the crops were mostly cockel burrs.” Gladys reported that “Ray fought them in every way that he could but the infestation of the land was overwhelming.” The first effective, relatively safe herbicide, 2,4-D, did not reach the market until 1944.11 Ray could not afford to purchase a weed sprayer just for his small operation, but in 1949 he joined two neighbors in buying a sprayer so they could take advantage of this latest advance in agriculture.

Another change on the Gist farm was the conversion from milk cows to beef cattle, a process that occurred all over the state during this period, as the number of milk cows in South Dakota dropped from 600,000 in 1933 to 323,000 in 1951 to only 248,000 in 1960. One byproduct of this shift was the elimination of one of the last home-produced sources of the family’s day-to-day subsistence; Gladys wrote in her reminiscences that by 1959 they bought all of their milk in the store. Gladys’s garden also yielded less food; by 1958, she reported that it contained “more flowers than vegetables.” Although Ray came to rely on the sale of beef cattle for a large share of his income, his earnings from hogs and cattle rarely dominated his gross income as livestock did for the average South Dakota farmer. Overall, livestock accounted for between 63.3 percent and 84.1 percent of South Dakota farmers’ total income between 1926 and 1959. Ray’s livestock income came to two thirds of his gross in 1940, 54.8 percent in 1950, and just 41 percent in 1960.12

Technology changed the non-agricultural aspects of the Gists’ lives, too. Although cities and towns had enjoyed the benefits of electricity since the late nineteenth century, South Dakotans in general and rural South Dakotans in particular waited longer than most Americans for their link to electrical power. The Rural Electrification Administration (REA) was created in 1935, but North and South Dakota were the last two states to organize state programs, and only three thousand South Dakota families had electricity by the beginning of World War II. Political and economic problems hindered progress after the war, and as late as 1950, only 40 percent of the state’s residents had electricity. In that year, however, a number of local REAs formed the East River Electric Cooperative, and by 1954, electrical power had been extended to most South Dakotans east of the Missouri. Membership in a cooperative cost five dollars, which Ray had paid in 1950, although his farm was not wired for electricity until early 1951.13

Through the years the family had used, like farm families all over the United States, lanterns for light, elbow grease for cleaning, and muscles for hauling water. Underground “caves” kept perishable food cool; Rodney remembered that the cave at one of their Lyman County
homes resembled the cellar to which Dorothy's family fled without her in *The Wizard of Oz*. Even before electricity, however, Gladys had enjoyed an increasing level of mechanization. In 1927, she wrote, “I hung up my washtub” and bought a new, gas-powered Maytag washing machine that lasted for twenty-five years. She also used a gas-powered iron, which was somewhat superior to old-fashioned oven-heated flat irons, “but . . . never held enough gas for all the shirts.” The Gists purchased their second radio in 1940—the first, “a Crosley with a horn for the loud speaker,” had been lost in the disastrous house fire of 1927—but had to keep it supplied with batteries. Gladys saw her first kerosene-powered refrigerator in 1937 but did not have one of her own until twelve years later, when she bought a used bottle-gas-operated mechanical model. Nearly a decade went by before she owned a new electric refrigerator. Finally, electricity allowed the Gists to purchase a television in 1955, a year in which only 42 percent of all farm families owned their own sets.

Other technological changes in the Gist home included a gradually improving heating system, exposure to expanding communication networks, and modern plumbing. Except for a brief stay in a rented house with a furnace, Gladys and Ray did not enjoy central heat until they moved into Madison in 1964, when a delighted Gladys commented that “with the warm insulated house and automatic gas heat we had to look outside to know that it was winter.”

The Gists generally had a telephone throughout their married life, although not always. In fact, telephone use declined during the depression; in 1934, the proportion of South Dakotans in three representative counties who used telephones was only 32.3 percent, down from 42.9 percent in 1930. In 1937, for instance, during their first year near Canton, a neighbor who happened to have a phone had to deliver the news that Ray's father had died in Missouri. Modern advances in communication became evident to the family in May 1946, however, when Rodney called home from Manila, where he was stationed in the army. Gladys called it “a great thrill, talking half way around the world.” In a letter to his parents dated 14 May 1946, Rodney described the call from his point of view, remarking that he thought it was amusing that his younger sister Ruth asked the only question when she wondered what time it was in the Philippines. The call cost him twenty dollars, but he believed that it was well worth it. He also agreed with Kent's comment that “I'll bet the party line was really busy with rubber necks.”

In 1955, for the first time in her married life, Gladys did not have to carry water from the pump into and out of the house. In that year she had hot and cold running water installed in her kitchen—“the greatest convenience I ever had.” Four years later, when well under two thirds of all American homes had complete plumbing facilities, the Gists put an indoor bathroom in the pantry where the cream separator had been stored, and they could finally enjoy “all the conveniences of city life.”

The Gists only gradually benefited from another city “convenience”—widely available medical facilities and personnel. Like most rural women in the first four decades of the twentieth century, Gladys delivered all of her children at home. When Kent was born in 1922, the doctor brought along a neighbor woman as a nurse; Rodney arrived before the doctor four years later, and Ray's sister-in-law Mathilde, a Norwegian immigrant, helped with the delivery; the doctor showed up for Ruth's entrance into the world in 1931, but Ray had to help administer the anesthesia. The growth of medical knowledge and its application may have been one of the most dramatic changes the Gists witnessed. When they lived in west-river South Dakota, there were no hospitals, one dentist, and only four doctors to serve the entire county. By the time Gladys's reminiscences end in the 1970s, medical attention was available to nearly every South Dakotan, in cities and in rural areas alike.

Technological change also altered the face of transportation after the 1920s. Throughout their lives the Gists traveled at least once a year to see members of Ray's family in Missouri or Illinois, or Gladys's in northwest Iowa. In 1924
they, in their Model T, and Gladys's sister and brother-in-law, in their Willys Overland, undertook the four-hundred mile trek to Wheatland, Missouri. It took them nearly three days over dirt and gravel roads. Near Council Bluffs, Iowa, Gladys remembered, "the road was about 4 inches thick with dust and sometimes visibility was nil. We swallowed and coughed and the men smoked to clear their lungs but Ethel & the kids and I relied on nature's good old remedy—spit." The first night out they camped along the road in a tent, while the second night they found a Kansas City park in which they could cook a hot meal over a gas stove (the gas cost a nickel) and sleep surrounded by dozens of other travelers. The Gists continued traveling to Missouri occasionally until very late in their lives; by the early 1960s, unless they stopped to visit relatives or friends along the way, they could make the trip in an easy day's drive. Ray apparently never flew on an airplane, although he and Gladys enjoyed several long train rides to the Pacific Northwest. In 1958, according to Gladys, their journey on a Union Pacific train was their "first train travel in years... I felt real elegant eating in a diner." They "explored the dome car and other train facilities that had [been improved] in the last forty years," which included diesel-powered engines that reached speeds of sixty-five miles per hour, air conditioning, and club cars decorated in regional or historic motifs.18 After Ray's death, Gladys, with some trepidation, but without incident, flew to California to visit relatives.

**Farm Economics**

As the Gists' "quality of life" improved over the years, certain assumptions about their lives also changed; they became more and more reliant on hired labor and increasingly involved in federal programs. Although Ray had usually hired a threshing crew to harvest his crops, the increasing mechanization and commercialization of agriculture, combined with his own frequent illnesses, forced Ray either to buy machinery, which he often did, or to hire even more labor. Hired individuals or crews harvested crops, put up hay, shelled corn, and completed a number of other jobs around the Gist farm. Paid laborers, custom work, and hauling cost Ray $206 in 1930, and only $65 in 1940, but by 1950 those costs had risen to $764 and in 1960 to $1003.75.

More significantly, the experiences of the Gists reflected the federal government's growing involvement in the agricultural economy and in the lives of all Americans. Beginning in the 1930s, Ray and Gladys benefited from a number of federal programs: Congress's payment of "bonuses" to World War I veterans (in the form of two installments of paid-up life insurance); federal seed and feed loans in the early years of the 1930s drought (which the Gists would not finish repaying until after World War II); relief work; Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA) payments; conservation programs; and, much later, the new Social Security system, begun, like many of the agricultural agencies, during President Franklin D. Roosevelt's "New Deal." Many of these new sources of income helped keep the Gists afloat during bad times, as they did many other South Dakotans. At the depth of the depression, for example, 80 percent of the population of one county in central South Dakota was on relief, while half of the entire state's farmers received some form of government aid. Working primarily on local roads and dams, Ray earned $274.80 in 1934 from the Civil Works Administration and $222.40 in 1936 from the Work Projects Administration. The wheat and corn-hog reduction programs under the auspices of the AAA added more than $250 to the Gists' income from 1934 to 1936, and additional AAA payments in the early fifties brought in between $30 and $80 a year. In addition, the Gists collected soil conservation payments ($145.77 in 1939 alone), gas tax refunds, and interest on government bonds. Their experiences clearly demonstrate the extraordinary increase in contacts between Americans and their federal government after the 1930s.19

Finally, in perhaps the most dramatic change of all, the Gists' economic fortunes, like those of the entire nation, rose markedly between
1920 and 1960. After five relatively good years near Inwood, the Gists hoped to improve their lot by buying cheap land in south-central South Dakota, in an area that had been opened to settlement only a few years earlier. Of course the bottom soon dropped out of the agricultural economy and the Gists endured about a decade and a half of hard luck and hard times. Precipitous declines in the prices of the agricultural commodities produced by the Gists—corn fell from $.69 a bushel in 1928 to $.27 in 1932, while beef fell from $10.31 per hundredweight to $4.19 and eggs from $.24 a dozen to a dime—meant that a decent living could not be gleaned from crops, even if they could be harvested.

And a harvest was doubtful, as dust storms swept out of the northwest to scrape away topsoil and intrude into every aspect of people's lives, and as swarms of grasshoppers consumed any green thing that happened to survive the blowing dirt. In midsummer of 1934, wrote Gladys many years later, "the farms were a barren desert. Each day at sunrise the wind came up and the air was filled with blowing cutting soil." A thick layer of dust had to be wiped off the dishes and tables every morning before breakfast; visibility was so poor that drivers had to turn on their car lights as they made their way between fence rows drifted high with dirt. The 'hoppers munched on starched clothing hanging on lines, ladies' hose (while being worn), and window shades. One even took a bite out of the infant Ruth's head. Gladys grimly kept track of the dwindling accounts, occasionally revealing in them her frustration. In 1932, for instance, she wrote that, due to the grasshopper infestation, she had harvested only "about a bushel [of potatoes] the size of marbles. No garden. Not one meal of anything." The corn had been cultivated only once, and now the "land lies bare as a floor." A year later, she recorded "no harvest expense," explaining that "grasshoppers destroyed [the eighty-acre corn] crop as fast as it came up." In 1934 she reported the "Greatest drouth in recent history[,] no crop—Young grain all killed by dust storms." Something of a respite came in 1935, but in 1936, once again, Gladys could report no crop income after Ray mowed all of the stunted oats and wheat for hay. The economic distress caused land values in Lyman County to plummet from an average of thirty-six dollars an acre in 1920 to seventeen in 1930 and only five in 1940—far below the thirty-three dollars per acre that Ray had paid for his quarter section in 1926. Sometime during this period, the Gists lost the only land they ever owned, and in June 1930, their cash on hand amounted to only thirty cents.

The Gists nevertheless scraped by, living as much as possible on food grown on the farm, earning money from federal programs, and picking up odd bits of income here and there, all of which Gladys dutifully recorded in her account books. She took in $111.40 as a census taker in 1930, while Ray worked on county roads, trapped rabbits and skunks, and cut neighbors' grain for a total of just over a hundred dollars. Threshers boarded in their cramped house one season and paid them $27.50. The harsh times inspired thrift; in 1934, the family spent $4.38 on Christmas, and in one year "entertainment" expenses amounted to a dollar and a half.

In 1937 the Gists cut their losses and moved closer to home in southeast South Dakota. According to Kent, a teenager by that time, the Lincoln County sheriff welcomed them by "inform[ing] Dad that they did not need anyone else on relief in Lincoln County." Ray ushered the lawman off the farm, and the family received only sixty-three dollars of government aid in 1937, the last year they accepted any sort of relief. Although the crops were good in their first year back east of the river—the corn "looked like yellow gold to us who had endured so many years of crop failure and drouth," wrote Gladys—the family was unhappy in southeastern South Dakota and moved to Lake County on the eve of the Second World War.

When the United States entered the war in late 1941, everything changed for the Gists. Both boys entered the army and served without harm in the Pacific. And the Gists finally achieved a prosperity undreamed of just a few years before, as the demand spawned by the war
raised prices and profits. Between 1940 and 1945, according to Gilbert Fite, net cash income for farmers jumped from $2.3 billion to $9.2 billion a year, while annual farm income per worker soared from $457 to $1350. South Dakota farmers earned $675,310,000 in 1951, nearly eleven times more than in 1932. The Gists paid off the last of their debts in 1952—"What a comfortable sense of well being," wrote Gladys—completed the mechanization of their operation, and began building for the future. As tenants, they were able to sustain their prosperity through the relatively low prices of the 1950s at least partly because their cash was not tied up in land purchased at inflated wartime and post-war prices.22

In fact, their status as tenants may have been the key to the Gists' middle-aged prosperity. As South Dakota farms grew larger—while their numbers declined—after 1935, land values steadily increased. In Lake County, for instance, the average price per acre of farm land rose from $37 dollars in 1940 to $132 in 1959.23 The Gists' investment in their land—the cash rent for pasture and the two-fifths share of the crops that went to the landlord—remained stable through most of their working lives. Rent comprised 24 percent of their gross income and 33.7 percent of their farm expenses in Lyman County in 1928; nearly thirty years later, in 1956, living on more fertile land and in more prosperous times, their rent remained at 26.3 percent of income and 34 percent of expenses. Farm tenancy may actually have given the Gists an advantage over land ownership. Although cash rent for pasture land ($145) made up 46.8 percent of the 1928 total rent bill and an even higher percentage during the depths of the depression, the cash portion of the 1956 rent—when cattle prices were much higher—was virtually the same dollar amount ($140) but only 4.5 percent of the total rent. In other words, most of the Gists' out-of-pocket expenses for rent reflected not the price of the land they farmed, but the value of the bounty they harvested from that land. If market prices declined, so did the bulk of their rent and a major portion of their expenses. Farm owners, buying land in an increasingly expensive market, could not expect their mortgage payments to match so exactly the rather unpredictable income produced by their farms.

Another advantage more specific to the Gists' experience was their relationship with their Madison landlords. Although their Lyman County landlord, Mr. Hulsether, who lived in Washington state, had been very kind and supportive of them during the dusty west-river days, two other people from whom they rented had sold the farms on which the Gists lived. They lost their second farm in Lake County, where they had lived for two years, when the landlord forced them off of it in 1945 so his son could work the land and, perhaps, escape the World War II draft. Without a doubt, however, their next landlords, the Spanholtzes—"two bachelor [sic] brothers" and "a maid sister" who lived...
in town—were the best landlords the Gists ever had. According to Gladys, the Spanholtz siblings "were fine folks to do business with and Ray could manage the farm in any way he wished." Ray cleaned up the weed-infested half section and dealt honestly with the brothers, who occasionally dropped in for lunch; when the last remaining Spanholtz died in 1971, he bequeathed the income of a quarter section of that land to Gladys, the widow of his trusted tenant.

As a result of larger economic trends and a favorable tenant-landlord relationship, the Gists prospered during the 1950s. A simple look at Gladys's yearly "Assets" and "Liabilities" summaries explains her 1947 remark that "farming became easier and more profitable." In 1937, the year the Gists gave up on Lyman County, their assets amounted to $2160 and their liabilities were $650. Those numbers remained stable until midway through the war, when in 1943 they counted $5900 in assets and $1100 in liabilities. After the war, the numbers took a huge leap. By 1951 their assets reached $21,294 and their liabilities remained at $2050. Nearly a decade later, even though they had begun cutting back their farming operation, they could still list nearly $21,000 in assets and no liabilities. Their new-found prosperity meant that the Gists could take advantage of the sophisticated technological changes mentioned earlier. They could also help their daughter Ruth pay her tuition at General Beadle College in Madison; afford the first set of "new upholstered furniture we ever had" and the "luxury" of a wool rug for the living room in 1960; purchase a silver service at the sheriff's auction of a local jewelry store; and enjoy trips to Yellowstone National Park, to the Black Hills, and to see their grandchildren in Oregon and Idaho.

CONCLUSION

Gladys relished these improvements in her and her children's standards of living, but she also, at times, perceived the perils of prosperity. She seemed to sense that the greatest personal change that she had experienced—her family's growing, if modest, affluence—threatened in some ways the traditions and values she had cherished all her life. Toward the end of her reminiscences, she reflected on contemporary society and wrote, not altogether approvingly, of two-income families and "a generation on the run." Everyone seemed to be "working for more education, more entertainment, more of everything." "Chasing Rainbows" she called it; "People have been like that ever since Adam and Eve," she admitted. "We just have more ways to run now and more rainbows to chase."

Despite her infrequent doubts, Gladys appreciated that, after many years of struggle, the Gists had finally become financially secure. Their hard work and patience contributed to their prosperity, to be sure, but they also benefited from much larger economic and agricultural trends. The experiences of the Gists—the
continuities they enjoyed and the changes they witnessed—can be multiplied countless times throughout the agricultural United States. They reveal the importance of the extended family in rural America, they show how small farmers were able to share work and expenses to take advantage of improving technology, they demonstrate the potential profitability of modern-day tenant farming, and they exemplify the constancy of community life even during times of tremendous change. The Gists never owned a "family farm" to pass down to the next generation, but aside from this, they seemed to have fared at least as well as farm operators who did own their own land. After twenty years of struggle, they carved middle-class lives for themselves out of the too often thirsty and frequently windblown soil of South Dakota. In the final analysis, the importance of the Gists' story is not that it is unique but that it represents the experiences of those thousands of other families clinging to the soil of the American heartland. 24

NOTES


3. Lillian Schlissel, Women's Diaries of the Westward Journey (New York: Schocken Books, 1982), p. 11; Joanna L. Stratton, Pioneer Women: Voices From the Kansas Frontier (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1981), pp. 25-26; Rodney C. Loehr, "Farmers' Diaries: Their Interest and Value as Historical Sources," Agricultural History 12 (October 1938): 313-25. For a brief discussion of the potential benefits and limitations of farm account books, see Winifred B. Rothenberg, "Farm Account Books: Problems and Possibilities," Agricultural History 58 (April 1984): 106-12. Ray and Gladys Gist were the paternal grandparents of the author's wife, Linda Gist Marten. Unless other citations are provided, information in this article comes from the reminiscences, the account books, the family genealogies compiled by Gladys, brief daily entries in the dozen or so diaries Gladys kept on and off from the mid-1960s through the early 1980s, or from interviews and correspondence with the Rev. Rodney Gist, Ruth Gist Spencer, or Kent Gist. Since Ray and Gladys's children retain possession of these documents, I have not included traditional citations, but have included in the text the years in which evidence from the reminiscences or account books can be found.


5. In addition to family sources, information on Gladys's adolescence also came from the 1915 and 1916 editions of The Spectator, the Inwood High School yearbook, provided by Mrs. Lucille Leivestad of Inwood.


8. My July 1989 interview with Kenneth E. Helder, a former beau of Gladys and an early member of the LTAC, provided background material for this paragraph. See also Dorothy Schwieder, "Education and Change in the Lives of Iowa Farm Women, 1900-1940," Agricultural History 60 (Spring 1986): 200-215.


10. South Dakota farmers still owned 221,000 horses and mules in 1948, but ten years later they owned only 67,000. Annual Report of the South Dakota Department of Agriculture, 1958 (Pierre: State of South Dakota, 1958), p. 120.

11. United States Department of Agriculture, After


15. The proportion of South Dakotans in three representative counties who used telephones in 1934 was 32.3 percent, down from 42.9 percent in 1930. Paul H. Landis, “Rural Relief in South Dakota” (Brookings: Agricultural Experiment Station, South Dakota State College, 1934), p. 49. Throughout his eighteen months in the service, Rodney wrote weekly letters home, most of which Gladys saved and passed on to Rodney at her death.

16. By the early 1920s, perhaps six thousand municipal campgrounds—usually located in public parks—had sprung up all over an America increasingly alert to the opportunities for cheap travel provided by the automobile. Ten to twelve million people took advantage of these usually free accommodations each year (Warren James Belasco, Americans on the Road: From Autocamp to Motel, 1910-1945 [Cambridge: MIT Press, 1979], pp. 30, 71-74; Merle Armitage, The Railroads of America ([Boston: Little, Brown, 1952], pp. 68-72).


20. Fite, American Farmers (note 1 above), pp. 87, 117; 50 Years of Progress (note 12 above), pp. 64-65.

21. The number of farms in South Dakota dwindled from 83,303 in 1935 to only about 56,000 a quarter century later. Many of the farmers leaving the land were apparently renters; the percentage of tenants in the state's farm population fell from 33 percent in 1940 to only 26.1 percent in 1959 (Bureau of the Census, Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1950 [Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1950], pp. 363, 572; Bureau of the