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Review of Agricultural Distress in the Midwest, Past and Present

James Lowenberg-DeBore
Purdue University

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Agricultural Distress in the Midwest, Past and Present. Edited by Lawrence E. Gelfand and Robert J. Neymeyer. Iowa City: Center for the Study of the Recent History of the United States, 1987. Figures, tables, notes. ix + 111 pp. \$9.95.

As Gelfand states in his foreword, the purpose of the four papers in this book is to examine the farm problems in the Midwest from the late nineteenth century through the present, comparing reasons for agricultural distress and responses to the problems. Part of that objective is achieved. The first two papers present reasonable overviews of farm problems through the 1930s, with some insights from recent research. The book's plan falters in description of events after 1940 and lacks almost entirely comparisons between past and present.

"American Farmers and the Market Economy, 1880-1920" by Walter T. K. Nugent of Notre Dame starts with an impressionistic picture of farming in the Midwest in the mid-1890s, a picture of auction bills, suicides, and well intentioned government programs that become part of the problem. This picture forms a context for his retelling of the populist story, which he approaches as the tale of the U. S. farm sector's beginning the process of adapting to an urbanized society.

The next paper, "From New Era to New Deal: American Farm Policy Between the Wars," David Hamilton, University of Kentucky, explores the beginnings of active government intervention in U. S. agriculture. His review of recent research reevaluating changes

in the farm sector in the 1920s and 1930s is a useful entry point for a body of work that challenges the stereotype of U. S. agriculture in the 1920s and 1930s as being totally in the grip of depression. Instead this research shows a sector rapidly adapting to its new role, mechanizing and becoming more specialized, in spite of the human cost. Hamilton reviews the tentative government programs of the 1920s and the massive intervention in the 1930s, along with the programs' supporters and opponents, but does little to compare these government efforts to today's programs.

From the 1930s the book jumps to 1985 with the paper, "Midwest Agriculture and the Food Security Act of 1985," by Stanley Johnson, Iowa State University. Johnson reviews price and income changes in the 1960s and 1970s and describes some simulation studies of the impact of the 1985 act. His paper does little to achieve the book's stated objective.

The final paper, "The Current Crisis in Global Perspective," by Norman E. Borlaug is a reminiscence by a great scientist about his early work. It has little to say about Midwestern farm problems and how they fit into the bigger picture.

JAMES LOWENBERG-DEBOER
Department of Agricultural Economics
Purdue University