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Fall 2007

Review of *From Prairie Farmer to Entrepreneur: The Transformation of Midwestern Agriculture* By Dennis S. Nordin and Roy V. Scott

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Porter, Kimberly, "Review of *From Prairie Farmer to Entrepreneur: The Transformation of Midwestern Agriculture* By Dennis S. Nordin and Roy V. Scott" (2007). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 1446.
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From Prairie Farmer to Entrepreneur: The Transformation of Midwestern Agriculture. By Dennis S. Nordin and Roy V. Scott. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005. xvi + 356 pp. Tables, notes, bibliography, index. \$65.00.

Students of agricultural history should be familiar with the works of Roy Scott (railroads,

extension) and Dennis Nordin (the Grange). Similarly, students of agricultural history will find no immediate challenges to the familiar narrative of twentieth-century American agriculture in *From Prairie Farmer to Entrepreneur*. Indeed, chapters devoted to the story of the Great Depression and the rise of agricultural technology provide few if any challenges to the traditional canon.

No reader should lay this book aside, however, before arriving at its conclusion. For, according to Nordin and Scott, "Painful as the tragedies of failure were for individuals, their net effect was the Midwest agricultural miracle, a blessing that continues to provide an ever-growing population of consumers with abundant food at low prices." Not quite so daring is their assertion that "the past should no more be forgotten than it should be distorted. The good old days of agriculture were not so good."

Those farmers who did survive through the difficult years of the nation's agricultural past (the crisis of the 1920s, the Great Depression and drought, the financially difficult 1980s) were no ordinary men according to Nordin and Scott. By their reckoning, those farmers who were successful could be recognized by their "knowing when and how to invest in land and equipment," while "adopting new and better ways to farm."

And while they pay scarce heed to those who failed, they do note that the experience of "the mostly forced involuntary displacements and migrations" was "sorrowful." Those discomforts, however, have made it possible for skillful, entrepreneurial, business-oriented farmers to take their places with modern technology and seeds, along with the finest livestock in the world.

The impact of involuntary displacements on homes and families is not delved into, nor are the damages to humanity: suicides, murders, severe emotional depression. Also left out of the picture, for the most part, are women, not only as helpmeets, but also as farmers in their own right. Also missing from Nordin and Scott's endeavor is the impact of the entrepreneurial farmer upon the natural environment.

The burden of overabundant animal waste on water tables, phosphorous balances in the soil, soil-compacting heavy-weight tractors, and the loss of so many arable acres to shopping malls and housing developments, among other issues, are disturbing and unaccounted for in Nordin and Scott's text.

While it is inappropriate to fault authors for preparing their own works rather than those one would prefer to read, it does seem that they might have populated their text with human examples of displacement and success, skipping some of the nearly sixty tables.

Criticisms notwithstanding, *From Prairie Farmer to Entrepreneur* is a volume every scholar of agriculture should add to her bookshelf. It challenges our notions of the received wisdom of the good old days, presents governmental involvement in agriculture in a variant light, and forces consideration of the value of large-scale farmers to our current standard of living.

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