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Review of *Harvesting the High Plains: John Kriss and the Business of Wheat Farming, 1920-1950* By Craig Miner

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Harvesting the High Plains: John Kriss and the Business of Wheat Farming, 1920-1950. By Craig Miner. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998. Photographs, preface, introduction, notes, bibliography, index. xi + 225 pp. \$29.95.

Craig Miner uses the life and career of Coby, Kansas-based megafarmer John Kriss to make two points. He argues first that, far from being the forbidding desert suggested by the Dust Bowl experience, the High Plains is an area where productive dry-farming of wheat can be undertaken profitably by intelligent and alert producers. And second, he contends that farming is a business to which planning, efficiency, and economies of scale can and should be applied, regardless of romantic notions about the mythic "family farm."

Kriss is the right sort of farmer to illustrate these points. Starting out as a farm laborer in the 1920s, he caught the attention of Ray Garvey, a large absentee farmer looking for an intelligent junior partner to manage his domain. Kriss and Garvey survived the thirties, largely because both were hard-headed businessmen who focused on the bottom line. The forties, when rain and high prices returned, rewarded their patience, making Kriss rich and Garvey richer. Their postwar expansion into eastern Colorado, at a time when moisture was abundant and land was cheap, was especially fortuitous. By the time their partnership was dissolved in 1947, Kriss was a substantial agribusinessman in his own right and Garvey a walking conglomerate.

Unfortunately, Miner goes far toward spoiling a good story by relying too heavily on Kriss's sources and accepting his opinions too uncritically. For example, Miner's unapologetic admiration of Kriss leads him to recount as fact Kriss's opinion that New Deal farm programs helped small producers and harmed large ones, a notion agricultural historians would agree is wrongheaded at best and bizarre at worst. Further on he approvingly quotes Kriss's cranky denunciations of

income and estate taxes; self-pity is not an attractive quality generally, but when demonstrated by the rich it is downright repulsive.

The book is also marred by non sequiturs, confusions, and factual errors. Most are rather trivial, but shouldn't a Kansas historian know better than to suggest that Alf Landon carried the state in 1936? Jim Farley famously remarked, "As Maine goes, so goes Vermont." Kansas went for Roosevelt.

Miner's main points are well taken, and some readers, this reviewer included, will agree with him. Unfortunately, a book with the flavor of an "as-told-to" biography is unlikely to convince those who are not already members of the choir.

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