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Review of *Custom Combining on the Great Plains: A History* By Thomas D. Isern

Thomas R. Wessel
Montana State University

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Custom Combining on the Great Plains: A History. By Thomas D. Isern. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1981. Maps, illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. vx + 248 pp. \$14.95.

Probably one of the most often observed but least known institutions on the Great Plains is custom harvesting. Although the practice probably dates from the first itinerate laborer who bought a grain craddle, Thomas Isern's book is about the men who traveled from Texas to Canada seeking employment for their expensive combining machines. For the most part, Isern's custom harvesters entered the business during World War II and survived the long period of low prices and high costs that characterized American agriculture in the 1950s and 1960s.

Custom harvesting reached maturity during World War II, when farmers received high prices for their grain but were not able to acquire the machinery to harvest it. Small-grain harvesting is such a timely operation that farmers probably would have turned to custom workers even in the absence of wartime shortages of equipment and labor. Private industry and the federal government joined to make custom harvesting a Great Plains institution. Through the Federal Extension Service and state employment agencies, custom harvesters were

directed toward those areas where they were most needed. In 1944, with the blessings of the American and Canadian governments, Massey-Ferguson secured materials to produce extra combines and organized a series of "harvest brigades" to ensure that wheat and other small grains were secured for the war effort. Isern notes that, with the end of the war, agencies designed to aid farmers did not continue to serve the needs of custom harvesters. Indeed, state license requirements tended to inhibit the movement of custom harvesters across state lines. But the farmers' dependence on custom harvesting during the war years undoubtedly conditioned them to rely on such services after the war was over. Certainly, custom harvesters were well established by the postwar period, cutting as much as 50 percent of the crop in some states.

Most of the custom harvesters in Isern's study were farmers from the central and southern plains who moved south during the early harvest, returned home to cut their own grain, and then continued north to harvest in the spring wheat belt. Advances in combine design, particularly the development of the self-propelled combine, were often stimulated by the experience of the custom harvesters. By the 1960s combines became such a major investment that most purchasers had to find work for their machines beyond their own needs. At the same time many farmers simply could not afford the investment.

In an otherwise thorough and well-written study, Isern leaves some questions unanswered. He never quite explains why some custom harvesters survived through lean years while others abandoned the business. His allusion to a certain "romantic" character of the custom harvesters is inadequate. He notes that "amateurs" came and went in the business but seems to distinguish amateurs from professionals only by their longevity. Isern points out that his subjects are primarily southern-based farmers. What comparisons could be made with custom harvesters from northern states? For example, a quick review of custom harvesters from Montana suggests that most do not engage in farm-

ing for themselves. Is that a general regional characteristic? Aside from these minor criticisms, Isern's study is a welcome addition to the literature of plains farming.

THOMAS R. WESSEL

Department of History and Philosophy
Montana State University