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## Social Scientists And Farm Poverty On The North American Plains, 1933-1940

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# SOCIAL SCIENTISTS AND FARM POVERTY ON THE NORTH AMERICAN PLAINS, 1933-1940

HARRY C. McDEAN

Chronic farm poverty in the Great Plains during the Great Depression of the 1930s provoked sharply differing responses from the governments of the United States and Canada. Among the many features of American and Canadian life that helped shape those different responses, the most significant was the status of the social sciences in agriculture. In nearly every category one might employ to assess their comparative status, from funding to publication record to political influence, social scientists in the United States enjoyed an impressive advantage over those in Canada by 1930. A historical appraisal of one element in this disparity—the research and the political influence of social scientists who worked in the field of chronic farm poverty—will help explain, at least in part, why the two countries pursued different strategies toward chronic farm poverty in the Great Plains.

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## ORIGINS OF THE TWO POLICIES

To a great extent, the policies of the United States in the thirties flowed from federal bureaus staffed by politically influential social scientists who had done extensive research during the preceding decade in the Great Plains and in other agricultural regions where there was a high incidence of impoverished farmers. In Canada, on the other hand, the social scientists in agriculture were not nearly as influential, and when they did wield some political clout, their recommendations stemmed from research conducted during the depression itself and not from research during the far more prosperous period of the 1920s, as was the case with the American social scientists.

In other words, those Canadian social scientists who could influence policies studied a different group of impoverished Great Plains farmers. When the Americans probed the sources of chronic farm poverty during the boom times of the 1920s, they were dealing with a population that appeared incapable of adjustment to an economy undergoing the normal stresses that were assumed to be part of the processes of agricultural and industrial

modernization. On the other hand, the Canadians, carrying out their research during the Great Depression, viewed all impoverished farmers as victims of the depression and the drought and therefore could not identify those farmers who were incapable of adjusting to a modernizing economy, if indeed they even thought of that possibility.

The impoverished group of Canadian Great Plains farmers presented their social scientists with some special problems. For example, the Canadian group contained many more recent migrants with rural European backgrounds.<sup>1</sup> This first-generation immigrant group may have misled the Canadian social scientists, who concluded that they were not "Canadian" and were accustomed to a different, peasant style of life—even preferred it. Thus, the argument ran, they should be allowed to follow their preferences until they or their progeny expressed a desire to assimilate and become "Canadian."<sup>2</sup> The American social scientists, by contrast, faced in America's southern plains an impoverished group, the "Okies," 98 percent of whom were white, Anglo-saxon, Protestant, and native-born. American social scientists could not therefore dub them foreigners whose background bred a preference for a lower-class lifestyle. Instead, they had to deal squarely with features of their lives that resulted in chronic impoverishment.<sup>3</sup>

Even though the "Okies" and the European immigrants in Canada suggested different research avenues, the approach of the social scientists was affected to a much greater extent by the general conditions of the times in which they conducted their research. The twenties were a period of incredible largess for the American agricultural social scientists who had pioneered the field in the years before World War I. Suddenly they found themselves in charge of heavily funded private research institutions and directing major federal and state bureaus for agricultural research. Of the private groups, probably the most significant was the American Farm Economics Association. Of the public bureaus, the most important was the Bureau of Agricultural Economics (BAE) in

the United States Department of Agriculture. During the twenties, it was common for the leadership in the former to be identical with the directors of the latter.

#### U.S. SOCIAL SCIENTISTS

During the early twenties the most influential founder of the Farm Economics Association, Dr. Henry C. Taylor of the University of Wisconsin, was also the chief of the BAE. Taylor and these agencies deeply influenced the course of social science research on impoverished farmers in the American Great Plains.

Taylor's farm background, his university training, and his professional research instilled in him a strong bias against those who were chronic failures at farming. He believed these people represented the "degenerative" element in the American amalgam—a group whose inferiorities retarded the march of the modern reforms that he and other social scientists envisioned for rural America. Indeed, Taylor and many of his colleagues feared that without the careful planning they intended to provide for the modern American farmer, the American countryside might turn into a "dumping ground" for degenerative Americans.<sup>4</sup>

Taylor's bias might not have been important were it not that his publications, carrying this message, were widely read by social scientists who did research in the Great Plains. Then too, Taylor's writings dominated university classrooms, and he personally trained many graduate students who researched the plains in the twenties and became architects of New Deal agricultural policies in the thirties.<sup>5</sup> They include M. L. Wilson, who headed various federal and state research teams in the plains during the twenties and went on to become Secretary Henry A. Wallace's chief architect of USDA policy in the Great Plains during the 1930s; Lewis C. Gray, perhaps the most notable of the nation's land economists in the twenties and a major consultant to every New Deal agency operating in the plains during the thirties; John D. Black and Howard R. Tolley, whose research in the twenties directly influenced all phases

of New Deal planning in the plains during the thirties; Oliver E. Baker, O. C. Stine, Charles Galpin, and other social scientists whose research bore heavily on Great Plains policy during the thirties.

While there can be little doubt that the prevailing climate of racism and xenophobia in America during the twenties affected the views of these social scientists, Taylor himself was a strong influence during the formative period of their careers.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, each was employed by Taylor during the twenties when he headed the BAE. It was during this period that the BAE initiated the nation's first in-depth examination of chronic rural farm poverty carried out by teams of professionally trained social scientists.

In 1924 the BAE formally launched this research under the direction of M. L. Wilson. Chairman of the Department of Agricultural Economics at Montana State College in Bozeman, Wilson was brought into the BAE to head its Division of Farm Management. Taylor hand-picked Wilson partly because he had been one of his top graduate students but also because Wilson had directed social science research teams that had investigated the causes of farm success and failure on Montana's plains. Wilson's research in the northern plains confirmed Taylor's views.

In essence, Wilson's work provided a set of character profiles of farmers who settled in the plains of Montana. These profiles were exhaustive in volume and detail, and can only be summarized here. According to Wilson, there were many "shotgun farmers" who rushed onto Montana's plains in the prewar years. Comprising perhaps one-half of the settlers, most abandoned their farms with the drought that came during the war or when grain prices fell sharply after 1920. The majority were townspeople in the grasp of a speculative mood that led them to believe they could make fast money farming the northern plains. Ignorant of modern dry-farming techniques, they quickly abandoned their properties when their soils became less productive. Left behind were thousands of farmers of considerable experience



FIG. 1. *M. L. Wilson in a stand of Montana wheat, 1915. M. L. Wilson Collection, Montana State University Archives, Bozeman, Mont.*

who now had to contend with such problems as soil blowing and thistle infestations caused by the "shotgun farmers." Wilson found that some experienced farmers contended with these problems better than others, and he made an effort to distinguish these farmers from one another by developing a system to measure their level of success. Employing graphics to distinguish these levels—pictures of the homes, modern conveniences, machinery, buildings, farm journals, and the like—Wilson attempted to delineate distinctive classes of farmers.<sup>7</sup>

Wilson's own upbringing no doubt persuaded him to employ material possessions as signs of farming success. Born and raised on a middle-class farm in Iowa, he was convinced that success in farming brought with it many of the material benefits and conveniences that might be found in the home of a similarly successful town resident. The large home he grew up in contained accouterments indicative of his family's alertness to innovation and change, for his parents subscribed to many farm journals



FIG. 2. *Huge wheat harvesting machinery in use in Montana in 1938. Such technological developments demonstrated that a decreasing number of farmers were needed on the Great Plains. M. L. Wilson Collection, Montana State University Archives, Bozeman, Mont.*

and magazines that reported new techniques in farm practice and recent developments in agricultural science and technology.<sup>8</sup>

Wilson's research identified only a small percentage of plains farmers in Montana whose residences matched the standards of success he envisioned. In a huge area of Montana, nearly three-quarters fell below the middle-class standard that Wilson employed. Yet some of the farmers in this group showed signs that they were alert to innovation and to change in agriculture: they subscribed to modern farm journals; they knew of recent developments in farm management, technology, and science; and many attended Montana State College's extension courses. Clearly, they could be called "progressive farmers," even though they fell below middle-class standards.<sup>9</sup>

Wilson concluded that these progressive farmers would be unable to take advantage of their abilities until substantial reforms were enacted in the plains economy. Included among these needed changes was the exit from Montana's agriculture of those poor farmers who did not exhibit the alertness required for successful farming in the plains. The most obviously necessary reforms were the consolidation of small farm units and the mechanization of

operations on these larger units. Wilson argued that careful research by farm management experts was needed to determine the sizes of farms requisite for successful farming in each area, but it was clear that until farm expansion, consolidation, and mechanization were carried forward, only a small percentage of Montana's farmers could expect to rise to a level of living envisioned by Wilson as "standard."<sup>10</sup>

These conclusions recommended Wilson to Taylor because, by 1924, Taylor was concerned that even the alert, progressive farmer might vanish from the countryside without considerable reforms. Taylor asked Wilson to head a nationwide study of "pathological farming areas"—an ostensibly clinical term adopted by Taylor's social scientists for its evocation of concepts of disease and abnormality.<sup>11</sup>

The studies that Wilson's division began in 1924 were carried out in cooperation with social scientists employed by the experiment stations, extension services, and agricultural colleges. Taylor and Wilson identified regions in the Southwest, the Red River Valley, and the Great Plains that they labeled "pathological farming areas." Then they reached cooperative research agreements with state agricultural research institutions in these regions. The



BAE agreed to fund social scientists whose research projects would (1) provide a profile of the progressive farmer in their area; (2) examine the economic status of the progressive farmer, taking pains to compare his material possessions with those of progressive farmers who resided outside of the "pathological farming area"; (3) provide a profile of the unprogressive farmer in the pathological area, paying particular attention to his current farm practices and, especially, to his awareness of and receptivity to modern information systems in farm management and agricultural technology.<sup>12</sup>

This research program of the BAE heavily influenced the formation of American farm policy during the New Deal period. Its greatest impact was on New Deal policy in the Great Plains. In this region, most of the bulletins, circulars, pamphlets, journal articles, and books that resulted from the research project could be distilled into a simple message: a heavy out-migration of the poor, unprogressive farmers was the foundation upon which to build any sensible federal policy for agriculture on the plains.<sup>13</sup>

The need for this out-migration was simple enough to understand. Researchers showed that regardless of a farmer's individual abilities, if he worked a farm that was "submarginal" in the pathological farming area, he was bound to live in poverty. The definition of a "submarginal farm" varied greatly even within small areas of the plains. But the social scientists utilized a set of related conditions, such as climate, soil type, fertility, farm size, comparative capitalization costs, and the farm's suitability for raising commodities that could be produced at costs competitive with those grown in other regions, in order to determine for each particular area what could be an above-marginal operation. Such a composite picture of supermarginal farming operations provided the basis for the reform policies that these social scientists advocated in the Great Plains.

Their research also indicated that there were farmers with a progressive profile who nonetheless lived on submarginal farms. These poor farmers were attentive to information systems

of the social scientists, but they could not fully exploit that information to uplift themselves because large numbers of submarginal, unprogressive farmers checked their advance. In Oklahoma, for example, the researchers found that unprogressive farmers moved about annually from one submarginal farm to another. This horizontal class movement tended to perpetuate the submarginal farming system in the plains regions of that state. It prevented the progressive farmers from enlarging their own operations and also exhausted the soil. Should this trend continue, it would overwhelm any efforts to establish above-marginal operations in these pathological farming areas.<sup>14</sup>

Indeed, subsequent research revealed that many of the difficulties in the southern plains stemmed from the problem of itinerant workers who used their submarginal farms as way stations in their endless search for nonagricultural work.<sup>15</sup> Although this trend was not apparent to the researchers in the twenties, they did pinpoint the detrimental role played by the unprogressive farmer in the pathological farming regions of the Great Plains.

#### NEW DEAL PLAINS POLICY

This research and the conclusions it suggested bore heavily on the thoughts of the social scientists who found themselves in a position to shape federal farm policy in the Great Plains during the New Deal period, from 1933 to 1940. Social scientists who had led research teams in the Great Plains during the twenties, such as M. L. Wilson, Howard R. Tolley, and Lewis C. Gray, were thrust into national prominence during the New Deal period and were entrusted with formulating USDA policy in the plains. They responded by creating the Northern and Southern Great Plains councils. They charged the two plains councils with the task of sponsoring programs that aimed to define "areas which should remain in cultivation but where changes in cultural treatment and farming systems should be put into effect; areas where increases in the size of farms are needed; areas that should be used primarily

for grazing with some farming in combination; areas which should be used only for grazing, forests, wildlife, recreation, or a combination of these." Once this was accomplished, the committees should establish "cultural practices and systems of farming which should be followed . . . in each problem area which is to be retained in cultivation, and to analyze existing and possible new state legislation with respect to conservancy districts, rural zoning, cooperative grazing associations, assessment of taxation practices, state aids to local taxing jurisdictions . . . in order to determine their relation to the achievement of the results desired from a unified program." Finally, the New Dealers asked the committees to structure their programs politically so they would bring all state and federal agricultural programs under one bureaucratic umbrella.<sup>16</sup>

These instructions were designed to achieve the specific goals that the planners had had in mind for nearly a decade. Such a plan, they believed, would remove soil-exhausted areas of the plains from cultivation, to be revitalized by soil-building grasses. Lands that were fertile would be zoned for the production of agricultural commodities that would be soil-conserving and suited to the region's farm economy. Small farms would be phased out by government programs that would encourage their sale to farmers and to cattlemen who needed additional acreage to make operations profitable and soil-conserving.

The achievement of this goal would profoundly alter the farm economy in some areas in the plains, while others that already had initiated suitable reforms would be affected less directly by the program. In the high plains of eastern Colorado, for example, more than half of the fertile farms would have to increase in size to at least 1,180 acres; while in southwestern Nebraska, where most farms already averaged 400 acres, few would need enlargement to be profitable. To encourage the creation of larger farms and to remove eroded soils from cultivation, the government would need to purchase an estimated 31 million acres of farm land in the plains, mostly in the southern

region. Of this acreage, 24 million acres would be retired permanently from cultivation; the remainder would be sold to farmers needing to expand operations.<sup>17</sup>

This program of land retirement and farm adjustment would displace an estimated fifty thousand farm families still resident in the plains, who would require relocation and, preferably, different occupations. The number who would be displaced varied by region, depending on the agricultural adjustments that already had been made. In some sections of North Dakota, where a large number of farms would have to be increased to an average size of 800 acres, about one-fifth of the farm population would need to find different work. By contrast, where suitably sized farms generally had been established, as in the plains of north-eastern Montana and southwestern Nebraska, as little as 7 percent of the farm population would be affected.<sup>18</sup>

#### THE U.S. RESETTLEMENT PROGRAM

The Department of Agriculture's social scientists devised several plans to resettle the chronically poor plains farmers. They were convinced that these farmers were by definition unprogressive, lacking the managerial talents necessary for success in modern farming. Thus, the central objective in each scheme was to divert them into occupational situations that did not require such talents.

Although the social scientists recognized that this objective was critical to their plans, they encountered severe problems that prevented them from achieving it. They contrived several schemes that sought to shift chronically poor farmers into situations that might permit them to earn decent incomes as wage workers. The first was the Subsistence Homesteads Program, which operated from 1933 to 1934. The second was the Resettlement Administration, which functioned from 1935 until it was absorbed by yet a third program, the Farm Security Administration, which served through the early years of World War II.

The Subsistence Homesteads Program was



FIG. 3. *A typical homestead house built by the USDA Division of Subsistence Homesteads, headed by M. L. Wilson. From the private collection of Harry C. McDean.*

the product of social scientists such as M. L. Wilson, Howard Tolley, and L. C. Gray. Concerned that a heavy migration from the Great Plains would deplete the region of the population base it needed for the development of modern community services, these men proposed a plan designed to transform dislodged poor farmers into pools of readily available workers for the factories that would be encouraged to move into the Great Plains. This would be accomplished by moving the displaced farmers into new rural towns that the federal government would build in strategic locations in the Great Plains. The social scientists calculated that industries would move into these new towns in order to take advantage of the lower overhead operating costs that such rural settings afforded them.<sup>19</sup>

In the fall of 1933, the Division of Subsistence Homesteads, headed by M. L. Wilson, began to select sites for these new federal communities. Because his division had an initial appropriation from the Congress of only \$25 million, Wilson was convinced that the first communities would have to be few in number

and therefore could act only as models for future developments in the plains. By early 1934, Wilson had selected fourteen rural community sites in the Great Plains, and the construction of facilities and the selection of settlers were under way by midyear.<sup>20</sup> Wilson soon found, however, that his appeal for industries to decentralize into these locales fell on deaf ears. Although Ford Motor Company, B. F. Goodrich, and Studebaker each had expressed an interest in decentralization to Wilson during the twenties, they demonstrated no interest during depressed economic times.<sup>21</sup>

The result was that when completion of the construction and settlement of the communities was reached in 1934 and 1935, not one industry had agreed to relocate. Wilson's entire division thus came under heavy attack and he was forced to resign. His division was abolished and the newly created Resettlement Administration pursued a different plan.

This new administration was headed by Rexford Tugwell, a nationally recognized economist from Columbia University. Tugwell shared the views of Wilson and other plains social scientists



on the character defects of chronically poor farmers. He, too, believed that they must be resettled with the opportunity to become factory workers, but he doubted that industries were likely to decentralize into rural areas, especially in the plains regions that were far from established industrial and urban centers. He therefore urged that the poor, dispossessed plains farmers be moved great distances to existing centers of trade and commerce where it was realistic to expect that they might find work. Such was the program of the Resettlement Administration.<sup>22</sup>

Hoping to provide such displaced farmers with federally constructed housing, Tugwell began to develop several suburban communities. Once housed in these suburbs, the new residents, Tugwell believed, could successfully locate jobs in nearby urban factories.

Tugwell's plans were short-lived. In 1936 his administration was severely criticized for lavish spending in the construction of the suburbs. In fact, the costs of individual homes in the new suburbs ran so high that some of Tugwell's critics claimed that anyone who purchased them would need an executive's salary in order to make the necessary payments.<sup>23</sup> In any event, Tugwell was forced out of office and his administration was replaced by the Farm Security Administration in 1937.

The FSA never developed a permanent plan to resettle the chronically poor plains farmers; its plans were of a more temporary nature. Recognizing that any long-term plans to help displaced, chronically poor farmers were dependent upon industrial recovery in America, the FSA intended to soften the impact of problems faced by the dispossessed plains farmers until jobs became available for them in the industrial economy. Thus, the FSA organized migratory labor camps to provide way stations for the tens of thousands of "Okies" and "Arkies" who migrated from the plains to both urban and rural areas of the Far West. It also founded "communal farms," where some of these chronically poor displaced farmers could be resettled as agricultural laborers under the direction of skilled FSA farm management

supervisors.<sup>24</sup> Even so, these plans were not viewed as either fundamental or long-term. The main energies of the social scientists were directed toward achieving broad policies that would inspire industrial recovery and open great numbers of factory jobs to the emigrants from areas of chronic farm poverty.<sup>25</sup>

#### CANADIAN SOCIAL SCIENTISTS

While American social scientists worked during the Great Depression to transform chronically poor plains farmers into factory workers, their Canadian counterparts planned to keep all of their poor plains farmers in the agricultural economy. Their research in plains farm poverty during the Great Depression led them to view all poor plains farmers as a group that was impoverished by unusual conditions of depression and of drought. They never sought to identify in this group a class of unprogressive or chronically poor farmers.

This distinction grew out of the comparatively elementary status of the agricultural social sciences in Canada. Whereas the social sciences in American agriculture grew up during the Progressive Era, in Canada their growth followed World War I. In the University of Saskatchewan, for example, the Department of Farm Management was not organized until 1926, and farm economics as a field of agricultural specialization was not institutionalized in that university until the 1930s.<sup>26</sup>

At this early stage in the development of the agricultural social sciences in the Canadian plains, it was difficult for social scientists to obtain funds for their research projects. Thus, their research programs were minuscule when compared with their counterparts in the United States. Nearly the entire body of agricultural social science research in Saskatchewan during the twenties was in the field of production costs. Yet not one of that province's research projects had a range of inquiry broad enough to explain how the comparative managerial abilities of different farmers affected their production costs and profits.<sup>27</sup> This narrow focus may have come from the research interests

of Professor William Allen, who pioneered production cost studies in the plains and was chairman of the Department of Farm Management in the University of Saskatchewan.<sup>28</sup> But Allen's special interests provide only a partial explanation for the narrowness of social science research in the Canadian plains.

During the twenties, Canada did not have a dominion bureau of agricultural economics. The institutionalization of this bureau in Canada's dominion government followed that in the United States by more than a decade, and thus, in the twenties, there was no dominion bureau staffed by professional farm economists with broad backgrounds that might have widened the range of research projects. Moreover, for want of such a bureau, no dominion funds were available to researchers who might have wished to expand the range of social science research in the plains.

Not until the Great Depression did funds from outside the provinces flow into the Canadian plains to promote research in the agricultural social sciences. Even then, most of the funding came not from Canadian sources but from either American or international research foundations. The most important research in the Canadian plains during the depression was a five-year project funded by the American Geographical Society and the Social Science Research Council.<sup>29</sup>

Although the extensive publications from such projects helped create long-term farm adjustments in the Canadian plains, they were too late to be of much use during the Great Depression. Moreover, the social scientist authors achieved professional acclaim too late for them to obtain positions of political influence comparable with those enjoyed by their counterparts in the United States during the depression. Not until the end of the depression did Canadian social scientists such as W. A. Mackintosh and G. E. Britnell win dominion-wide acclaim for their penetrating research into Canadian plains agriculture.<sup>30</sup> In Saskatchewan the Royal Commission on Immigration and Settlement had only one member who was a social scientist; the other members included a

court reporter, a lawyer, an insurance agent, and a farmer.<sup>31</sup>

#### POLICY OF CANADIAN SOCIAL SCIENTISTS

When Canadian social scientists did help formulate plains policy, their approach to farm poverty differed substantially from that of the Americans. This was because the Canadians were dealing with the problems of a large group of plains farmers who appeared to be victims of drought and depression. The major research programs in Canadian plains agriculture in the thirties produced two classic studies: G. E. Britnell's *The Wheat Economy* and a multivolume study Charles Mackintosh edited, *Canadian Frontiers of Settlement*. These probed the causes of drought and of depression in the Canadian plains and offered judicious accounts of the economic and the geographic forces that left destitute a large percentage of the farmers of that region.<sup>32</sup> Unlike their American counterparts who had examined farm poverty in the plains during a period of prosperity, Canada's social scientists encountered conditions of drought and of depression that led them away from classifying their farmers according to ability. Since they did not try to arrange farmers into classes, they never considered plans designed to relocate farmers who had become chronically impoverished because they were incapable of adopting management techniques essential to success in a modern agricultural economy.

Canadian social scientists therefore never recommended programs designed to remove a substantial portion of impoverished farmers permanently from agriculture. Yet in many other respects, Canadian social scientists sought agricultural reforms in the plains that were similar to those proposed by American researchers. For example, the Canadian Prairies Rehabilitation Act was designed to accomplish the major conservation measures sought in the USDA's directives to the American Northern and Southern Great Plains councils.<sup>33</sup>

## CANADIAN RESETTLEMENT PROGRAM

The Canadian social scientists, unlike the Americans, believed that poor farmers who left the plains could be resettled as farmers elsewhere in Canada. Thus they never sought to develop programs like the Subsistence Homesteads Program, the Resettlement Administration, and the Farm Security Administration, all of which assumed that many contemporary farmers were misfits in modern agriculture and needed to be shifted into wage-earning occupations where they could be closely supervised.

Canadian policy in the plains included resettlement programs that evolved from the belief that anyone with a background in farming had the potential to succeed in farming if given a fair chance. Commonly called the "Land Settlement Scheme," the Canadian plan included a variety of provincial and dominion loans and subsidies designed to help resettle plains farm families in Canadian areas generally north of the plains regions. These were newly defined settlement districts such as Loon Lake, Meadow Lake, Shand Creek, Carrot River Valley, and Shellbrook-Meath Park. Unofficial estimates reveal that by 1935 perhaps forty-five thousand Canadians were resettled in such districts in northern Saskatchewan alone.<sup>34</sup>

In these districts, the settlers faced new problems that often overwhelmed them. Their farm animals died of a variety of diseases; their soil was too rocky and perennially wet; they were unable to adapt scientific techniques quickly enough to remain solvent; and even when such conditions were not present, their land holdings were far too small to produce a decent income. Hence in 1935 Saskatchewan established the Northern Settler's Re-establishment Branch to provide settlers with more subsidies, with farm consultants, and often with repeated resettlement.<sup>35</sup>

No doubt these Canadian resettlement programs succeeded in helping poor Canadian plains farmers to relocate in regions where pioneer agricultural skills could be employed. Even so, such skills brought only poverty to those who practiced them. Surveys made toward

the end of the thirties showed that most plains farmers who were resettled lived at or below levels they had experienced when they had farmed in the plains.<sup>36</sup>

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF  
THESE SOCIAL SCIENTISTS

The surveys suggest that Canadian policy toward the chronically poor plains farmer was less sagacious than that of the social scientists in the United States. Subsequent experience seemed to confirm the assumptions of the American social scientists that most chronically poor farmers would have to become urban workers in order to improve their condition. Still, the resettlement programs of America's social scientists could claim only limited success in helping the chronically poor plains farmers make this transition, for less than 10 percent actually profited from their programs.

If the success rate of the American policy was not truly significant, what, then, is the lasting importance of the social scientists who produced it? It is that their efforts encouraged the federal government to recognize that a respectable level of living in modern American agriculture was likely to be earned only by skilled and often professionally trained farm managers. The social scientists therefore helped shatter one of the most politically powerful myths in America. Their efforts made it difficult for America's government ever again to pursue policies that are based on the belief that anyone can move to a farm and live happily ever after.

## NOTES

1. See, for example, W. B. Hurd, *Ethnic Origins and Nativity of the Canadian People*, 1941 Census Monograph (Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1965); W. E. Kalbach, *The Impact of Immigration on Canada's Populations*, 1961 Census Monograph (Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1970); and Dominion Bureau of Statistics, *1961 Census of Canada, General Review: Native and Foreign Born Populations*, Bulletin

no. 7 (Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1965), pp. 1-7.

2. Robert England, *The Central European Immigrant in Canada* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1929); Robert England, *The Colonization of Western Canada: A Study of Contemporary Land Settlement* (London: Macmillan, 1936); and W. A. Mackintosh and W. L. G. Joerg, eds., *Canadian Frontiers of Settlement*, 9 vols. (Toronto: Macmillan, 1934-40), especially vol. 7, C. A. Dawson, *Group Settlement: Ethnic Communities in Western Canada*.

3. See Harry C. McDean, "The 'Okie' Migration as a Socio-Economic Necessity in Oklahoma," *Red River Valley Historical Review* 3 (Winter 1978): 77-92.

4. "Committee called for consideration and discussion of the subject of Farm Life Studies . . .," report to Honorable D. F. Houston, 3 May 1919, in the U.S. National Archives, Record Group (hereafter cited as NA RG) 83. Members of this committee who shared this fear with Taylor included leading farm economists and rural sociologists such as T. N. Carver, A. C. True, Dwight Sanderson, O. E. Baker, A. M. Loomis, C. J. Galpin, and Dradford Knapp.

5. "Report of Teaching Committee of the American Farm Economic Association," *Journal of Farm Economics* 5 (July 1923): 168-76; W. F. Handschin, "Research in Farm Economics and Farm Management," *Journal of Farm Economics* 4 (January 1922): 1-12.

6. For full evidence of this influence, see the oral history of each of the aforementioned social scientists. These may be found in the Columbia University Oral History Collection, Columbia University, New York.

7. Milburn Lincoln Wilson, *Dry Farming in the North Central Montana "Triangle,"* Montana Extension Service Bulletin no. 66 (June 1923), pp. 1-8; M. L. Wilson, Report of Farm Management Demonstration Work, Montana, 1923, in the Papers of M. L. Wilson, Montana State University Library, Bozeman, Montana (hereafter cited as WP). Wilson took far more photographs than ever found their way into print. See his photo collection in WP.

8. Author's interview with M. L. Wilson, 17 January 1968.

9. Report of Farm Success Survey, 15 to 27 May 1922, WP; "Dry Farm Success in the 'Tri-

angle'," typescript, in WP; M. L. Wilson to G. B. Greenfield, 19 January 1923, WP. Also, see note 7.

10. "Outline of Fairway Farms Projects," WP; Wilson to N. C. Donaldson, 19 May 1923, Wilson to Walsh Harness Co., 3 May 1923, WP; M. L. Wilson, *Reducing Wheat Harvesting Costs on Montana Dry Lands*, Montana Extension Service Bulletin no. 71 (June 1924), pp. 1-53.

11. Wilson to Henry C. Taylor, 1 December 1923, 14 December 1923, WP; Wilson to Howard R. Tolley, 21 October 1924, NA RG 83; Wilson to F. C. Krieg, 8 July 1924, Wilson to H. L. Lantz, 5 December 1924, Fairway Farms Papers, Montana State University Library, Bozeman, Montana (hereafter cited as FFP).

12. Wilson to Howard R. Tolley, 23 July 1926, 17 June 1926, Wilson to F. B. Linfield, 18 May 1926, Howard R. Tolley to Andrew Boss, 19 August 1926, WP; Wilson to Henry C. Taylor, 28 February 1926, 18 May 1926, FFP; Chris L. Christensen to Wilson, 4 September 1925, E. W. Liets to Wilson, 9 October 1925, Wilson to H. R. Tolley, 20 June 1925, NA RG 16; "Tentative Outline for a Cooperative Study of the Relation of Social and Economic Factors in Rural Progress," typescript, WP. This study was complemented by one pursued in the Division of Farm Population and Rural Life, BAE, under E. L. Kirkpatrick, which climaxed in the publication by that author of *The Farmer's Standard of Living: A Socio-Economic Study of 2,886 White Farm Families of Selected Localities in 11 States*, U.S. Department of Agriculture Bulletin no. 1466 (Washington, D.C., 1926).

13. For a complete assessment of this subject, see Harry C. McDean, "Federal Farm Policy and the Dust Bowl: The Half-Right Solution," *North Dakota History: Journal of the Northern Plains* 47 (Summer 1980): 21-31. Because modern historical research emphasizes the work accomplished by social scientists during the New Deal period, it often fails to trace major New Deal policies back to their early stages of development in the period from 1900 to 1929. The result is that significant insights into the intentions of the planners is lost. For example, compare the assessment presented here with that of Richard Kirkendall,

*Social Scientists and Farm Politics* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1966) and Sydney Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics: The Rise and Decline of the Farm Security Administration* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1968). For further citations, see my *Preliminary Guide to Agricultural References on the New Deal Period* (Davis: University of California Press, 1969).

14. J. T. Sanders, "Amount and Function of Farm Tenancy in Oklahoma," in *Solving Oklahoma Farm Problems*, Report of the Oklahoma A. & M. College Agricultural Experiment Station (1930-32), pp. 190-98; Otis D. Duncan and Jesse T. Sanders, *A Study of Certain Economic Factors in Relation to Social Life among Oklahoma Cotton Farmers*, Oklahoma Agricultural Experiment Station Bulletin no. 211 (April 1933).

15. Robert T. McMillan, *Migration and Status of Open-Country Families in Oklahoma*, Oklahoma Agricultural Experiment Station Technical Bulletin T-19 (September 1943); Robert T. McMillan, "The Relationship of Selected Social Backgroup Factors to Farm Tenure Status," *Southwestern Social Science Quarterly* 23 (March 1943): 33-39.

16. "Work on Land Use Program Starts in the Great Plains," USDA press release, Washington, D.C., 24 November 1937, NA RG 83; "Department Moves to Coordinate Farm Programs in Southern Great Plains," USDA press release, 2 June 1937, NA RG 83; Wilson memorandum, 9 April 1937, NA RG 83.

17. "Report of the Eighteenth Conference of the Regional Advisory Committee On Land Use Practices in the Southern Great Plains Area," Agricultural College, Stillwater, Oklahoma, 21-22 October 1938, NA RG 83.

18. "Confidential report of the committee set up to develop . . . a unified program for the Southern Great Plains," 9 April 1937, NA RG 83. Also, see notes 16 and 17.

19. M. L. Wilson, "Decentralization In Industry and Agriculture," n.d., typescript in WP; Wilson to J. C. Leukhardt, 10 February 1932, WP; M. L. Wilson, "Planning Agriculture in Relation to Industry," Proceedings of the Seventeenth Country Life Conference, National Planning and Rural Life (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1934), pp. 39-45; M. L.

Wilson, "Decentralization of Industry in the New Deal Program," n.d., typescript of speech, NA RG 16; M. L. Wilson, "The Place of Subsistence Homesteads in Our National Economy," *Journal of Farm Economics* 16 (January 1934): 73-84.

20. M. L. Wilson, "Memorandum Outline Regarding Suggested Plans in Connection with Subsistence Homestead Section, Economic Recovery Act," NA RG 48; memorandum to Harold Ickes from M. L. Wilson, 18 August 1933, NA RG 48; "Resettlement Program: Projects Tables," FSA Report, 31 October 1937, NA RG 96.

21. Louis A. Dumond, "Will Industry Decentralize?" *Illinois Journal of Commerce* 16 (October 1934): 1-2; M. L. Wilson, memoranda to Harold Ickes, 19 March 1934, 22 March 1934, 5 April 1934, 11 April 1934, 14 April 1934, NA RG 48.

22. Rexford Tugwell, "The Place of Government in a National Land Program" (Address before a joint meeting of the American Economics Association, American Statistical Association, and the Farm Economic Association, 29 December 1933), U.S. Department of Agriculture Library, Washington, D.C. See also the Tugwell Diary 15 December 1934, in the Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, N.Y.

23. Rexford Tugwell to John Owen Gross, 23 July 1935, NA RG 96; Rexford Tugwell, "Some Aspects of New Deal Farm Policy: The Resettlement Idea," *Agricultural History* 33 (October 1959): 159-63; C. B. Beebe, "The Cost of Mr. Tugwell," *New York Herald Tribune*, 14 October 1936.

24. A. M. Hauke, "A Comparison of Individual and Group Types of Farming by Resettlement Clients," April 1936, NA RG 96; Will Alexander to Paul V. Maris, "Comments on a Proposed Bill Entitled 'Farmers' Home Act'," 22 April 1936, NA RG 96; "Meeting the Needs of the Lowest Third American Farm Families," May 1937, NA RG 16.

25. M. L. Wilson to Lester Cole, 17 December 1937, NA RG 16; Henry A. Wallace to Franklin D. Roosevelt, 26 June 1940, Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, N.Y.

26. W. P. Thompson, *The University of Saskatchewan* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1970), especially pp. 63, 82-85, 123, 148.

27. See University of Saskatchewan, College



of Agriculture Bulletin nos. 1-68 (Saskatoon, 1922-36).

28. See William Allen, *Studies of Farm Indebtedness and Financial Progress of Saskatchewan Farmers*, contained in series cited above. For a survey of the research projects themselves, see William Allen, E. C. Hope, and F. C. Hitchcock, *Studies of Probable Net Farm Revenues for the Principal Soil Types of Saskatchewan on the Basis of Their Past Production*, University of Saskatchewan, College of Agriculture Bulletin no. 64 (Saskatoon, 1935).

29. This was a nine-volume study edited by W. A. Mackintosh and W. L. G. Joerge, *Canadian Frontiers of Settlement* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1934-40).

30. Ibid.; G. E. Britnell, *The Wheat Economy* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1939).

31. Report of the Royal Commission on Immigration and Settlement, Saskatchewan (Regina: R. S. Garrett, Kings Printer, 1930).

32. See note 30.

33. See E. S. Archibald, "Prairie Farm Rehabilitation," *Canadian Society of Technical Agriculturalists Review* 18 (March 1938): 359-70.

34. For a survey of this program, see T. J. D. Powell, "Northern Settlement, 1929-1935," *Saskatchewan History* 30 (Autumn 1977): 81-98.

35. A full assessment of these conditions is provided by Denis Patrick Fitzgerald, "Pioneer Settlement in Northern Saskatchewan" (Ph.D. diss., University of Minnesota, 1965).

36. Ibid.