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David Nesheim

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

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A Community of Coercion and Compliance: Scientific Agriculture at Lake Andes, South Dakota, in the 1920s

David Nesheim

University of Nebraska–Lincoln

Abstract

Riding the crest of a wave that peaked in the 1920s, governmental officials in and around Lake Andes, South Dakota, sought to reorder its cultural and physical landscape. Lake Andes, like so many other communities on the Great Plains, straddled two realities, as it fell within the boundaries of the Yankton Sioux Reservation and, after 1905, was home to a privately developed town. Despite following a relatively uniform impulse, officials from the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) and the South Dakota Department of Agriculture, in conjunction with commercial and educational interests, implemented distinct programs.

Using reports from the BIA farm agent at Lake Andes and newspaper articles chronicling efforts to implement scientific agricultural technologies, this paper argues that the shared vision of scientific agriculture resulted in a narrow conception of permissible behaviors. For Yanktons, these goals required a reordering of both their social and cultural practices and the nonhuman biotic landscape. For white farmers, the transformation demanded adherence to a program of scientifically selected crops and elimination of competitors in the form of chinch bugs and native grasses. Some individuals chose to follow these dictates, while others resisted the plan. Agricultural communities do not arise from simple interactions among soil, water, flora and fauna, but result from a complex exchange among human cultures and nonhuman organisms.



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Introduction

In September 1926, Peter Picotte received an unusual request for several ears of his Padanai corn from Yankton Reservation Superintendent Robert Daniels. The request was in marked contrast to the demands of the Bureau of Indian Affairs' five-year plan for Yankton agriculture, implemented three years earlier. The five-year plan established quotas and guidelines for the crops and livestock that the ideal Yankton farmer should tend. Because there had been little room for Indian agriculture in the government's five-year plan, the sudden interest in his corn must have surprised Picotte. However contradictory they may seem, the five-year plan and the interest in traditional agriculture sprang from the same urge for scientific and systematic control of agriculture, an orientation that reached its maximum heights in the late 1920s for Lake Andes and, for that matter, all of the United States.¹

This paper argues that the shared vision of scientific agriculture resulted in a narrow conception of permissible behaviors at Lake Andes, South Dakota. For Yanktons, these goals required a reordering of both their social and cultural practices and the nonhuman biotic landscape. For white farmers, the transformation demanded adherence to a program of scientifically selected crops and elimination of competitors in the form of chinch bugs and native grasses. Agricultural communities do not arise from simple interactions among soil, water, flora and fauna, but result from a complex exchange among human cultures and nonhuman organisms.

Engineering hubris, with its urge to rationalize and systematize all aspects of daily life, was not limited to agriculturalists. The most well known applications appeared in business and industry, with Frederick W. Taylor's scientific management studies of time and motion and Henry Ford's assembly-line production systems the most obvious examples. Agricultural engineers shared the same desire to standardize the performance and production of basic tasks. Science held great promise to improve the conditions on the farm, and educators at land-grant colleges, county extension agents, members of grassroots organizations and farm implement dealers all played a part

in spreading the gospel of what Historian Deborah Fitzgerald has termed “industrial agriculture.”² Following Fitzgerald, I use the term “scientific agriculture” to describe the efforts focused on Yanktons.

The Department of Agriculture’s Bureau of Plant Industry desired Picotte’s Indian corn as part of its general research project. When C.N. Collins contacted Superintendent Daniels, he specifically advised that specimens should be gathered regardless of their agricultural merits, as the plants’ real value lay with archeologists and historians. Collins did allow that some aspects of the corn might have potential when combined with commercial corn varieties.³ Picotte’s corn succinctly encapsulated the prevailing view of Yankton culture, an interesting relic only salvageable when cross-pollinated with the dominant strain.

Although nominally focused on agricultural pursuits, the five-year plan necessitated pervasive cultural changes for Yanktons. The Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) first organized a five-year plan in 1922 under the leadership of Commissioner Charles Burke, who as a dutiful administrator called for more work with no additional funding. As he outlined in Circular Number 1819, Burke called for each reservation superintendent to submit a definite and “practical program covering all the activities on their respective reservations for the next five years.”⁴

Superintendent Harvey Meyer left no doubt he understood the scope of the “Indian problem,” which he considered making Yanktons into “members of their communities with all the rights, privileges, obligations and responsibilities of any other citizens.” His plan specified programs in four broad topics labeled industrial activities, law and order, schools and health. Officially labeled an “industrial program,” the five-year plan invaded Yankton homes in order to influence an “improvement in moral and social conditions.” Lack of formal marriage practices, peyote use, gambling, dances and celebrations each received special enumeration as obstacles to Yankton progress. But for all the antipathy he displayed toward Yankton customs, Meyer found more encouraging signs for introducing scientific farming. With several Yanktons already well established farmers, his plan targeted young Yankton men with acreage available to farm,

ideally with funds in their individual accounts, and equipped them with a team and the necessary implements to put their land under the plow.⁵

The exchange between governmental bureaus suggests the multiple networks that intersected around agriculture in the 1920s, often coalescing for Yanktons in the roles performed by the farm agent. Before the Bureau of Indian Affairs decided to turn them into agriculturalists, Yanktons had farmed for centuries, their ancestors for millennia. To be fair, Superintendent Daniels frequently mentioned in his annual reports that Yanktons already knew how to farm; the challenge, in his opinion, consisted in altering their practices. Yet traditional Yankton agriculture looked very different from the brand then in vogue throughout America – the pursuit of scientific agriculture.⁶

As my paper draws from a larger project, today I would like to offer the three examples of how this story played out in the 1920s. We will discuss the duties of Fergus Cron, the Lake Andes BIA farm agent; a 1923 locally-organized campaign to eliminate chinch bugs; and the 1927 Alfalfa & Sweet Clover special.

Farm Agent

The job of actually implementing the BIA five-year plan fell to farm agents, visiting individual Yanktons in their homes. The job description given by Fergus F. Cron, farm agent for the Lake Andes district included serving as a constable, counselor and overseer. With concerns running far beyond cultivation and harvest, farm agents served as one arm of federal control.⁷ Fergus Cron left a detailed record of his duties over that year and a half, coincidentally the last days of a farm agent for the Lake Andes district on the Yankton Sioux reservation.⁸ As farm agent, Cron spent over half his days serving as a desk-bound bureaucrat, making visits to Yankton homes and allotments and other related inquiries only forty-nine percent of the time. He divided his administrative duties between the farm station on the southern shore of Lake Andes and Yankton Agency headquarters in Greenwood. He frequently made at least one trip

to Agency headquarters a week, and he held regular office hours at the farm station on Fridays. His field visits followed a seasonal pattern, with school related duties peaking in the autumn and lease related inquiries in the winter months. Cron's agricultural concerns increased in frequency over the spring and summer. Law and order and medical inquiries occupied a smaller proportion of his time, but remained constant throughout the year.

Cron was a regular visitor at several Yankton homes, but the great majority of Yanktons residing within the Lake Andes district might only encounter him once or twice. Cron visited over 170 Yanktons between May of 1929 and January of 1931, but just under three quarters saw him three times or less. Of these, the greatest majority were to individuals who leased their land but did not farm, with Cron stopping by to get leases signed, appraise the allotments, or to deliver checks. The leading five Yankton farmers averaged 144 acres of crops but only six visits from Cron.⁹ These are many cases that could be discussed, but in the interests of time we will limit ourselves to Alex Horned Eagle, the individual visited most frequently by Cron.

Alex Horned Eagle held a 160-acre L-shaped tract on the west side of Lake Andes. He farmed a small amount of his land and also leased some. In 1924 he planted sixteen acres of corn and a large garden, kept thirty chickens and six horses. Two years later he planted only 3 acres of corn and three acres of alfalfa, with three horses, ten chickens and three hogs. Yet of all the Yanktons in the Lake Andes district, Cron visited him the most, nearly twenty times over a year and a half.

Cron made regular visits in May, June, and July each year, checking on planting and the progress of the crops. He also brought leases to be signed in the fall or winter of each year. The other visits included inquiries about the health and financial condition of the Horned Eagle family, conducting a general "Clean Up" campaign, and getting a signature for a land sale application for the Rosebud Reservation. It seems likely that Horned Eagle and Cron enjoyed a cordial relationship, or perhaps it was a matter of proximity to the farm station and Horned Eagle's location on a section road that kept the two in such frequent contact.¹⁰

By 1930 Horned Eagle planted just four acres of corn and an acre garden plot. His animal husbandry had flourished, however. He owned nine horses and 260 chickens. Six years earlier Horned Eagle cared for a more modest barnyard of six horses and thirty chickens. Falling agricultural prices surely influenced his farm inventory in 1926, reducing his horses to three and chickens to ten, while adding three hogs that year. It is also possible that some carry over from the five-year plans is evident as well. In 1924, Horned Eagle sowed sixteen acres of corn and a small garden. For 1926, his corn planting fell to three acres, but he also planted three acres of alfalfa. Employing a system of subsistence production was a keynote of the five-year plan, and Horned Eagle's story is typical of Yanktons who chose to adopt limited aspects of the BIA's vision.¹¹

Chinch Bugs

When faced with issues larger than any individual could combat, non-Yankton farmers and their wives formed organizations to carry out improvements or lobby for policy changes. Some formed on an ad hoc basis, as when residents of town and country banded together to "burn out" chinch bugs in 1923.¹² Chinch bugs have long plagued wheat farms, first entering the annals of American agriculture in 1785. That year the insect made its first noticeable infestation in North Carolina wheat fields. Chinch bugs maintained the upper hand against farmers for the next decade, and then retreated for a time as a major menace. By 1840, chinch bugs spread along with American agriculture to the Midwest and ten years later topped many lists as the number one insect threat to American crops.¹³

At key moments in the crop cycle, farmers were able to use chinch bugs' migratory behavior to target control efforts. In the winter, chinch bugs hibernate in clump grasses, like those found on the edges of roadways and fields especially in the moist prairies of the Midwest and eastern Plains. They live on and near the ground, drawing nutrients from the sap in stems and roots. In the spring, the adult females lay up to 500 eggs that hatch into small bugs that join with the adults and move to wheat fields. After wrecking havoc on wheat

fields, they migrate to corn and sorghum fields in the summer, once again attacking the stems and roots of the plants. In the fall the bugs return to their grassy refuge to begin again the next year. The juvenile bugs were especially vulnerable when moving from the grasses to the wheat, as they had not yet developed the ability to fly.¹⁴

Knowledge of chinch bug life cycles came only after decades of scientific investigation, however. The first entomologists to study the issue worked during the 1840s and 1850s in Illinois and neighboring states. It was not until 1875 that Charles V. Riley unlocked the beginning, terrestrial period of the annual migration, setting the stage for more effective control. One solution was placing barriers on the edges of fields, including wooden fences coated with tar and kerosene and ditches filled with water. Entomologists also realized correlations between chinch bug surges during dry weather and retreats during wet seasons. Scientists hoped that farmers would heed their warnings and alter plantings accordingly. By 1923, the forecast called for an outbreak, but the control method proposed for South Dakota farmers applied a more direct approach.¹⁵

A.J. Sprecht, a Lake Andes farmer, took steps in January of 1923 to protect his and his neighbors' crops. In consultation with the State Entomologist at Brookings (home of SDSC), Sprecht arranged for A.L. Ford, a state extension worker, to speak at the Charles Mix County Courthouse in an evening meeting. Ford had earlier addressed farmers in nearby Bon Homme County, and Sprecht ensured good attendance by announcing the talk via repeated telephone calls to his neighbors. Ford proposed burning the roadsides and fencerows to attack the brood before it could spread to the valuable fields. The farmers and townsfolk assembled agreed, appointing a committee to organize local efforts and choosing Sprecht as chairman.¹⁶

Two weeks later, the Central Chinch Bug Committee announced good progress. In the areas surrounding the towns of Lake Andes, Ravinia and Wagner, proactive burning occurred along the majority of fencerows. The committee reported other more diffuse instances of burning, "but by no means enough for best results." Employing a homespun yet modern admonition, the committee told farmers in Charles Mix County they were "equipped with a selfstarter (sic). Use it."¹⁷

Alfalfa Special

The full complement of forces with a vested interest in scientific agriculture occasionally worked in unison, as occurred with the Alfalfa and Sweet Clover Special of 1927, a special train running on the North Western and Milwaukee lines in South Dakota during January and February. The exhibition came from a meeting between the top management and the ownership of the *Dakota Farmer*, an agricultural newspaper published in the state. John T.E. Dinwoodie, editor, along with manager Walter J. Allen and publisher William C. Allen concocted a scheme to spread the good word about legumes utilizing the combined resources of business and university research, while attempting to appear free of “commercial and college contamination in the eyes of the farmers.” Dinwoodie feared that “farmers generally were tired of ‘advise’ from commercial interests and professional agriculturalists.”¹⁸

Regardless of the possible negative reaction, the special could not function without the presence of two obvious and powerful commercial interests – railroads and farm machinery manufacturers. International Harvester Company agreed to extensive involvement, outfitting the third and final car of the train with alfalfa planting, cultivating and harvesting exhibits. The Northwestern and Milwaukee each donated a stripped passenger car, which contained multiple exhibits constructed by specialists from SDSC. A.L. Ford, familiar to some Lake Andes residents as the extension agent who spoke about chinch bugs, worked alongside Ralph Johnston showcasing planting and cultivation in one car and using alfalfa as livestock feed in the other. The final car displaying the necessary equipment and significant capital outlay hinted at a commercial aspect to the whole affair.¹⁹

On Dinwoodie’s request, the South Dakota Crop Improvement Association agreed to “front the campaign,” as they were “a purely farmer organization.” The veneration of grassroots folksiness did not penetrate too deep, nor could it have covered up the stunning coalition behind the special. South Dakota State College President Charles W. Pugsley committed his institution and its extension agents to a multi-year effort at increasing alfalfa cultivation east of the Missouri

River. Support from state officials included Governor Carl Gunderson and Secretary of Agriculture Louis N. Grill. Further backing came from organizations including several municipal chamber of commences and the South Dakota Farm Bureau, although they were not prominent in the advertising.²⁰

Well over 300 attended the Lake Andes stop of the Alfalfa Special, which concluded with an evening meeting. The train arrived at one o'clock, and Mayor A. O. Steensland opened the event, handing off emcee duties to A.E. Anderson, director of the State College Extension Service. After short remarks from all of the major players, John Haney of International Harvester gave the keynote. Interestingly, in a surviving newspaper account Haney is described as simply a farmer from I-H-C farms of Aberdeen and Grand Forks; perhaps those letters were self-explanatory (like IBM today), or perhaps the organizers were trying to emphasize their agricultural credentials. Haney himself told the assembled crowd "one problem with us today is we know how to spend money better than we know how to make it." His solution, not surprisingly, revolved around growing alfalfa, presumably with the expensive machines his company manufactured.²¹

Conclusion

Standing in the middle of a Lake Andes cornfield in the 1920s, it would be very difficult to tell if a Yankton or another farmer tended it. Scientific agriculture amounted to a universal standard, applicable to any soil and any farmer. Yet scientific agriculture consisted of a far more radical campaign than improving crop yields.

From the scorched earth campaigns inflicted on chinch bugs to the pure seed drives focused on alfalfa, scientific agriculture left little room for organisms that existed outside of commodity production. Yanktons who chose to not engage in scientific agriculture also found themselves *personae non gratae*. The logic was simple and pervasive. As the Alfalfa Special reveals, the interests of the state, education, science and business world all aligned behind agricultural production. The initiative was vertically integrated as well, garnering sup-

port from officials in the highest offices down to individual farmers and townspeople. And given the near unanimous support it enjoyed, the drive for scientific cultivation may not appear coercive at all.

Without alternate visions of how to structure the landscape, the world of row crops and pest control appeared quite reasonable. Humans need food to survive, and scientific agriculture offered the most efficient methods to generate adequate stocks. The resistance to their programs experienced by Farm Agent Cron and *Dakota Farmer* Editor Dinwoodie had origins in very different sources, but both speak to the existence of other possibilities for ordering the countryside. An agricultural community may appear as an inevitable and “natural” association. We should remember that whether viewed from the stalks of bunch grasses, the interior of a promotional railroad car, or from the rationalizing gaze of a federal bureaucrat thousands of miles away, farming systems are populated by individuals and organisms. These communities reflect the priorities and prejudices of their members, and frequently signal a very specific approach to human and nonhuman culture employing features of coercion and compliance and in turn.

Notes

- 1 Padanai, or Ree, Corn description, 12 October 1926, Record Group 75, Box 14, FF 31.1, National Archives and Record Administration, Central Region, Kansas City, MO (hereafter NARA-CR).
- 2 Deborah Fitzgerald, *Every Farm a Factory: The Industrial Ideal in American Agriculture* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2003), 10-11.
- 3 C. N. Collins to Robert E. L. Daniels, 30 August 1926, RG 75, Box 14, FF 31.1, NARA-CR.
- 4 Charles H. Burke, “Circular Number 1819,” 10 October 1922, RG75, Box 16, FF 052.2, NARA-CR.
- 5 Harvey K. Meyer to Charles H. Burke, 13 December 1922, RG75, Box 16, FF 052.5, NARA-CR.

- 6 Alan R. Woolworth, *Sioux Indians III: Ethnohistorical Report on the Yankton Sioux* (New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1974), 203-06.
- 7 F.F. Cron, Survey of Indian Affairs Personnel Questionnaire, Farmer, no date, likely 1927, RG 75, Box 16, FF 052, NARA-CR.
- 8 What follows is an analysis of farmer's weekly reports submitted between May 1929 and January 1931. The record is fairly complete, but there are some gaps of a week or two here and there and November 1930 has no records. What follows may under represent some visits, but it still gives a good impression of the daily activities of the farm agent.
- 9 F.F. Cron, Farmer's Condensed Reports, 1924, 1926, 1930, RG 75, Box 17, FF 052.2, NARA-CR.
- 10 F. F. Cron, Farmer's Weekly Reports, 11 May 1929, 29 May 1929, 22 June 1929, 6 July 1929, 20 July 1929, 19 October 1929, 15 March 1930, 5 April 1930, 24 May 1930, 14 June 1930, 12 July 1930, 2 August 1930, 27 September 1930, 13 December 1930, 10 January 1931, 17 January 1931, 24 January 1931, RG 75, Box 17, FF 052.2, NARA-CR.
- 11 F.F. Cron, Farmer's Condensed Reports, 1924, 1926, 1930, RG 75, Box 17, FF 052.2, NARA-CR.
- 12 "Farmers Meet to Discuss Chinch Bugs," *Charles Mix County Courier*, 11 January 1923, 1.
- 13 Conner Sorensen, "Uses of Weather Data by American Entomologists 1830-1880," *Agricultural History* 63(Spring 1989): 162-173.
- 14 Ibid.; Thomas D. Isern, "How to Kill a Chinch Bug: The Folk Technology of the North American Plains," *The Journal of the West*, 31(4): 45-50, 48.
- 15 Sorensen, "Using Weather Data," 168; Isern, "Kill a Cinch Bug," 49.
- 16 "Farmers Meet to Discuss Chinch Bugs," *Charles Mix County Courier*, 11 January 1923, 1.
- 17 "Chinch Bug Progress," *Charles Mix County Courier*, 25 January 1923, 1.
- 18 Rex C. Meyers, "Cultivating South Dakota's Farmers: The 1927 Alfalfa and Sweet Clover Special," *South Dakota History* 22(2):136-155, 142-43.
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 Ibid.
- 21 "Alfalfa Special Draws Good Crowd," *Lake Andes Courier*, 27 January 1927, 1.