

# MINNESOTA HISTORY

VOLUME 23 • PUBLISHED IN JUNE 1942 • NUMBER 2

## The Middle Western Farm Novel

*John T. Flanagan*

THE MIDDLE WESTERN farm novel, like the American farm novel in general, has been slow to develop. And this delay is the more inexplicable when one realizes that the Middle West has been and is largely rural and agrarian. But American novelists have been strangely loath to use farm backgrounds and themes in their stories. For most of its existence the United States has been a predominantly agricultural country, yet it was not until the rise of industrialism that writers began to choose rural settings for their novels. One can call the roll of the major American novelists of the nineteenth century: Irving, Cooper, Hawthorne, Melville, Twain, Howells, James; not one ventured to give with any completeness the agricultural background from which the infant nation derived its strength. The Revolution, the frontier, legends of Dutch and Puritans, the forest, the Mississippi River, the ocean, the activities of cosmopolitans and expatriates — all these seemed more vivid, more consequential, than the labor and struggles and mores of the farmer. Even Edward Eggleston, the first novelist to exploit the backwoods and its natives, devoted himself to circuit riders, land speculators, and rural pedagogues rather than to farmers. As late as 1900 only a handful of genuine farm novels had appeared.<sup>1</sup>

Moreover, those writers who did see in the farmer a suitable protagonist rarely viewed him realistically. Agriculture in the pages of

<sup>1</sup> A selective bibliography of Middle Western farm novels appears in the "Notes and Documents" section, *post*, p. 156-158.

the average nineteenth-century novel had a curious musical-comedy air about it. Tillers of the soil were romantic creatures, singularly far removed from actualities like manure and chilblains; barn dances and sewing bees and husking frolics were the order of the day, and almost every evening milkmaids sang around the old oaken bucket to welcome the returning laborers. Thus Bayard Taylor in his valuable and interesting novel, *The Story of Kennett* (1866), managed to give falsely romantic impressions of rural life in the Brandywine Valley. Helen Hunt Jackson in her famous *Ramona* (1884) mingled with her poignant picture of a persecuted race scenes which presented the grain farmer as a heroic figure. And Opie Read in *The Jucklins* (1895) began his tale with convincing sketches of life in the North Carolina plantation country, but soon plunged the reader into a melodramatic courtship.<sup>2</sup>

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, however, a few novels appeared which not only presented the farmer in sharp focus but also treated him with a salient and intimate realism refreshingly different from earlier glorification. And it is significant that the best of these productions came from the Middle West.<sup>3</sup> In 1883 E. W. Howe published his *Story of a Country Town*, a book which sketched the wheat farmers of the Kansas plains with bitter clarity and which revealed the drabness and futility of their life no less sharply than the morbid, hysterical religion in which they sought relief. The book deals as much with the village virus as with the life of the farmer, yet its characters are essentially rural, and Howe depicted their bare, cankered existence with memorable fidelity.

Four years later Joseph Kirkland published *Zury: The Meanest Man in Spring County*, a chronicle of central Illinois admittedly modeled on Hardy's Wessex tales. Kirkland had been reared on the Michigan frontier, where he was early exposed to the crudity of speech and roughness of manners indigenous to primitive commu-

<sup>2</sup> A brief general treatment of the subject which omits significant novels is Caroline B. Sherman's article on the "Development of American Rural Fiction," in *Agricultural History*, 12:67-76 (January, 1938).

<sup>3</sup> In *Seth's Brother's Wife* (New York, 1886), Harold Frederic wrote an incisive picture of farm life in upper New York state.

nities. Later he removed to Illinois and engaged in coal mining ventures near Danville, an enterprise cut short by the Civil War. He served honorably as infantry officer and aide-de-camp until the battle of Antietam, then left the army to devote himself to law and journalism. But his experiences in field and camp had sharpened his observational powers, and his novel is too teeming with details of life and speech to deserve the obscurity into which it has fallen. Zury, the parsimonious, avaricious, cunning farmer who builds up a fortune, is a brilliant portrait done with humor and insight. By indefatigable industry and the exercise of native shrewdness Zury makes himself the dominant figure in the county, feared but respected. To build his chronicle, Kirkland drew copiously from his knowledge of frontier farming and moreover transcribed the dialect of his characters with such phonetic exactness that he found it necessary to help his readers by supplying a glossary. *Zury* remains one of the most important fictional treatments of the American farmer.<sup>4</sup>

Finally in the 1890's came the work of Hamlin Garland, the most publicized if not the most gifted of farm chroniclers. In such volumes as *Main Travelled Roads* (1891), *Prairie Folks* (1893), *Rose of Dutcher's Coolly* (1895), and *Jason Edwards* (1897), Garland convincingly demonstrated his doctrine of veritism, the creed that a man should write accurately and truthfully about what he knows. Not for nothing was he called the first dirt farmer in American literature. For Garland had been brought up in a small valley in southwestern Wisconsin, where erosion washed the soil and cut deep gullies in the hillsides. He had followed his family into Iowa, constantly seeking more fertile land, and he had pre-empted a claim in Dakota Territory and had lived in a soddy while he wrestled with the prairie loam. Garland knew farmers who lived "under the lion's paw" in mortal fear of mortgage sharks; he had seen his own family struggling against debt and climate. The scenes he drew were unprecedented in the pages of American fiction.

After the turn of the century Garland shifted over to romantic

<sup>4</sup> For an account of Kirkland's life and work, see John T. Flanagan, "Joseph Kirkland, Pioneer Realist," in *American Literature*, 11:273-284 (November, 1939).

fiction until *A Son of the Middle Border* (1917) brought him back to the realism of his youth, but his earlier books revealed the sharpness of his perceptions. A half century has passed since his gaunt farm wives and work-harried farmers first appeared in fiction, but they have not been forgotten. No one before Garland drew with such bitter truth the hopeless struggles of the coulee dwellers or the efforts of men on the Dakota prairies to raise wheat in the face of wind and drought. His books have influenced every subsequent novelist of the farm.

In one sense, however, Garland's picture was distorted. His eviscerated farmers had only one objective: to escape from the farm. They were either fugitives from a way of life they could not dominate, or they hated their environment with a vindictive if futile bitterness. Conditions were such that only flight promised relief. Yet even in the days of railroad rate wars, Populist protests, and anti-imperialist juntas there were farmers who had faith in the land and who wrested a living from it despite the obstacles of climate, depressed markets, and predatory bankers. Such figures do not appear in *Main Travelled Roads*. It remained for later writers to present a more balanced picture of the farm.

In the first years of the present century, despite the rise of literary naturalism, attempts were made to continue the early romantic treatment of rural themes. Arthur Stringer in such books as *The Prairie Wife* (1915) and its sequels used the vivid colors and broad canvas of the Canadian Northwest. More particularly Willa Cather in her Nebraska novels, *O Pioneers!* (1913) and *My Ántonia* (1918), glorified farming and the farm wife. She not only touched on the racial stratification of the Middle West, but she drew characters who believed in the land and who were able to realize their convictions by persistence, industry, and a little good fortune. Thus Alexandra Bergson, by buying when land values are depreciating and by gambling on the perennial demand for wheat, succeeds magnificently. And Ántonia Shimerda develops into the perfect farm woman, energetic, calm, fecund. The farm novel in Miss Cather's hands reached a lucidity and a beauty of style which it did not have previ-

ously and which it has rarely attained since.<sup>5</sup> But unfortunately her characters are more than a little romanticized and as a consequence somewhat unconvincing. Her feminine protagonists especially have the cards conveniently stacked in their favor.

The farm novel is such a commonplace today that there are few corners of the Middle West untouched by the storyteller, but the romantic tradition has been greatly modified. At times the writer has combined history with fiction. Thus Louis Bromfield's *The Farm* (1933) deals with several generations of an Ohio family and shows how as the country gradually became settled, and as industry developed, the ancestral farm shrank in size and decreased in importance. In the century since the arrival of Colonel MacDougal in 1815 many changes took place, not the least of which — as the author asserts in his preface — was the decay of integrity and idealism. Almost a complementary study is Harold Sinclair's *American Years* (1938), which traces the evolution of a typical Illinois town from a crossroads community to which professional men of various kinds eventually gravitated. On the other hand, Sterling North's *Plowing on Sunday* (1934) depicts a southern Wisconsin community in which the characters are complacent in their isolation from national and world affairs but happy because of their success in breeding prize stock and in growing bonanza crops. In all these stories the backgrounds are real, the occupations and customs are accurately described, and the characters are neither caricatures nor rebels against the farm.

The 1920's brought a spate of farm novels of the Middle West, most of them competent and many of them interesting. Mr. and Mrs. Haldeman-Julius produced in *Dust* (1921) a dreary picture of the destitution of the Kansas plains. G. D. Eaton's *Backfarrow* (1925) applied the same treatment to the interior of Michigan. John T. Frederick in *Druida* (1923) utilized the Red River Valley as a salient background for his interpretation of wheat farmers and the vapidities of a provincial normal school. Somewhat more dramatic is Cornelia Cannon's *Red Rust* (1928), which deals with life in

<sup>5</sup> Among the few farm novels of genuine literary distinction, Ellen Glasgow's study of rural Virginia, *Barren Ground* (New York, 1925), is conspicuous.

northern Minnesota and the attempt of a gifted farm youth to develop a rust-resisting wheat. Interwoven with this theme is the struggle of a group of Swedish immigrants not only to hew homesteads out of the wilderness but also to maintain their own cultural ideals. The characters are insufficiently vitalized, but the setting is honest and rich. The most skillful of these novels is Martha Ostenso's *Wild Geese* (1925), a story set among the Finns and Icelanders of northwestern Minnesota and southern Manitoba in which the dominant figure, Caleb Gare, is a combination of domestic tyrant and Yankee slave driver. The story is extremely vivid. One sees school board meetings, families stuffing themselves at dreary meals, toilers in stubble and woods. And Miss Ostenso has filled her book with a dramatic narrative which only a garish melodrama weakens. Although *Wild Geese* is still one of the most satisfying of American farm novels, when the author returned to the subject in subsequent books she was less effective. *The Mad Carews* (1927), for example, fails because of a lack of concentration on the rural background and the absence of such striking characters as Caleb Gare and his rebellious daughter Judith.

About the time that Miss Ostenso turned her attention to the Red River Valley, Herbert Quick was producing his novels of frontier Iowa, *Vandemark's Folly* (1922), *The Hawkeye* (1923), and *The Invisible Woman* (1924). These books are inconsistent and often too highly colored, yet they contain remarkable pictures of the immigrant farmers who developed the prairie state. Young Jake Vandemark, "a buttermilk-eyed, tow-headed Dutch boy with a face covered with down like a month-old gosling," is an interesting and useful protagonist.<sup>6</sup> He helps to expel a claim jumper by the tried process of tarring and feathering, he serves in the Civil War and is wounded at Shiloh, he survives a prairie fire and a blizzard, and by dint of shrewd trading and hard work he builds up a prosperous stock farm. Into this novel and its sequels Quick poured a flood of detail, which is emphasized by his colloquial but idiomatic style. In *The Hawkeye* desperadoes and rustlers play a needlessly large role,

<sup>6</sup> Quick, *Vandemark's Folly*, 212 (Indianapolis, 1922).

but the narrative remains authentic. Later Iowa writers like Ruth Suckow, Phil Stong, and Paul Corey have brought the story down to date, but Herbert Quick's books are invaluable documents in the social history of the state. Whether he writes of the corruption of county government, the rise of the Grangers, the crudities of rustic education, or necessary processes such as threshing and cornhusking and plowing, his scenes are vivid and real. And nowhere will one find a more beautiful description of the Iowa prairie as it was in the 1870's than in the pages of *The Hawkeye*.<sup>7</sup>

Nevertheless, O. E. Rølvaag's *Giants in the Earth* (1927) is the one Middle Western novel of the period which, while accurate and graphic in particulars, succeeds in transcending its milieu and develops into an epic chapter of man's struggle against the elements. Written originally in Norwegian and then translated into English, it tells the saga of Per Hansa and Beret, immigrants to the Dakota prairies, who discover that the climate and *Weltansicht* of the West require a fortitude, a perseverance, an adaptation of habit and method which they had scarcely dreamed of. Per Hansa is on the road to successful adjustment when he meets his fate in a blizzard. With intelligence and Norwegian tenacity he had learned to break and till the prairie mold, to endure the northern winters, and even to enjoy little intervals of companionship with other voyagers from the homeland. But to Beret the immense loneliness of the new land, the lack of trees, the howling winds, the vast emptiness of the sky were all but insupportable. Beret represents a whole group of pioneer mothers and wives who found the independence of the West an inequitable substitute for the spiritual security of their homes. Their bodies endured silently, but their souls and sometimes their minds seemed lost.

Published on the eve of the depression, *Giants in the Earth* is written with such skill and covers such an enormous canvas that it dwarfs other attempts to treat the same theme. Per Hansa and Beret are both individuals and types, heroic when judged by human stand-

<sup>7</sup> Quick, *The Hawkeye*, 152 (Indianapolis, 1923). Readers interested in regionalism and local color should also observe Quick's reiterated plea for the use of Iowa material for literary purposes, in the same work, p. 476.

ards, pygmies when seen against the infinite space of the West. Rølvaag builds up the background with consummate art in a style which, even in translation, shows brilliance. In other ways, too, *Giants in the Earth* is significant. It put an end to the jejune romantic treatments of the farm by serious novelists, and it likewise halted the depiction of the farmer as a creature happy only if and when he escaped from his environment. There are moments of triumph and moments of defeat in the novel, exactly as there are in life, and sometimes the emotions are mixed. But above all, Rølvaag's Norwegian immigrants are convincing. The land they have chosen will yield them a living, but ultimate prosperity will entail, as it always must, both poverty and pain.

In the last ten years the farm novel, no longer a novelty, has become a firmly established subspecies of American fiction, but it still seems largely indigenous to the Middle West.<sup>8</sup> Besides becoming popular, it has also assumed various forms. Occasionally it becomes a modified success story; more frequently it shows the farmer battling the twin evils of financial depression and drought. But unlike the Joad family, the farmers commonly stay with the land; they do not emulate the wandering hen. Possibly conditions abroad offer small inducement for migration; more probably the farmers feel that the one thing permanent in an age of social convulsions is the land, and that the land must produce as it always has produced the staples of human existence.

One of the most successful recent exponents of the rural Middle Westerner is Ruth Suckow. In such books as *Country People* (1924), *Iowa Interiors* (1926), and *The Folks* (1934), she has portrayed the Iowa farmer, the renter, the old folks who retire and move into the county seat to spend their declining years, the hired girl, and the distant relative who has made a success in the city and who returns home to flaunt his prosperity and his sophistication. In her calm and

<sup>8</sup> Among interesting farm novels of the 1930's with a locale outside the Middle West one might mention Gladys Hasty Carroll's stories of Maine, — *As the Earth Turns* (1933), for example, — and particularly Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings' perceptive and finely wrought tales of the Florida scrub, *South Moon Under* (1933) and *The Yearling* (1938). In her charming autobiography, *Cross Creek* (1942), Miss Rawlings continues her vivid pictures of the southern backwoods.



occasionally dull style she paints a complete picture, revealing not only the daily routine, but the complacency and the imperviousness of her people to outside ideas. Her characters do not read and rarely travel, unless like so many good Iowans they end their days in southern California. Their life is completely domestic and rural. Thus, although Miss Suckow's books lack conscious satire, in their presentation of a drab and spiritless existence they draw up an indictment of provinciality almost as scathing as Sinclair Lewis' in his more outspoken *Main Street*.

But Ruth Suckow is by no means the only articulate Iowan in the field of the novel. Paul Corey has recently published a trilogy dealing with the widow Mantz and her four children and their persistent struggle to free their farm from debt. *Three Miles Square* (1939) narrates the successful fight of the oldest son, Andrew Mantz. With intelligent tenacity he improves the farm, makes necessary improvements, increases the stock, and wins the respect of his neighbors. Although members of the Mantz family are the protagonists, Corey, by means of what might be called a lateral technique, introduces various other characters through whom the reader perceives the central figures. Covering the half-dozen years before America entered the first World War, *Three Miles Square* gives an interesting panoramic view of the Iowa countryside at a time when the farmer was becoming excited over Henry Ford's new method of locomotion and when it was necessary to join a meat ring to be assured of fresh meat during the summer. In *The Road Returns* (1940), Corey follows the fortunes of the Mantz children, emphasizing in various ways the desire of each to escape from the farm, one through professional training in architecture, one through an aptitude for machinery, and one through a college education and a white-collar job. The significance of *County Seat* (1941) lies chiefly in the fact that the depression has convinced the youngest boy, Otto, that his place is not behind a desk but on the seat of a plow. Corey's style is simple and accurate, his realism earthy, and if neither his plot nor his characterization is brilliant, the reader nevertheless feels the honesty and forthrightness of the treatment. As a reviewer in the *New York*

*Times* remarked of *County Seat*, "The novel achieves distinction through virtue of its accent on mediocrity."<sup>9</sup>

Phil Stong has also used the Iowa background, the best-known of his several stories probably being *State Fair* (1932). His decision to present with enthusiasm so characteristic a Middle Western institution as a state fair and to choose for his hero a prize-winning hog was gratifyingly successful, and his book is obviously free from the obsessions and neuroses which warp many a farm novel. The same spirit is detectable in Paul Engle's *Always the Land* (1941), which expresses faith in human beings and in modern scientific farming. Engle, better known as a poet than as a novelist, delineates a family interested in breeding fine horses and sketches with vigor and deftness the place of the county fair in the farmer's life.

Other Middle Western states have likewise produced farm novels of competence. Herbert Krause's *Wind without Rain* (1939) treats of a German community in western Minnesota and of a family resembling somewhat the Gares of *Wild Geese*, bred to hard work, deprived of relaxations and independence, tyrannized over by an obdurate father. The result too is similar: the children rebel. Krause's book is somber and overwritten, but many of the scenes are remarkably effective. The author himself grew up in Otter Tail County in a locality blind to the impingement of the outside world, so that the mores and social life of the foreign settlers lingered with a corrosive effect. The hatred of the younger generation for the farm, Krause clearly attributes to the deprivations endured in youth.

Since Hamlin Garland introduced the Dakota prairies to fiction, several writers have chosen that locale. Rose Wilder Lane in two novels has striven to present the combined rancher-farmer battling to make a living on marginal land. In *Let the Hurricane Roar* (1933) and *Free Land* (1938), she reveals sympathetically the struggle to exist on semiarid soil in a country harried by wind and drought and cyclonic storms. *Free Land* centers on the attempt of a young couple to homestead north of Yankton. They only half succeed. As David Beaton remarks to his father, "I've been on this

<sup>9</sup> Rose Feld, in the *New York Times Book Review*, September 7, 1941, p. 7.

claim five years come August, and today it's not worth a hoot in Hades. I started with as good as fifteen hundred dollars and I put five years work on top of that and sunk it. I couldn't sell out today, every jot and tittle I own, and pay over half what I owe. But it's a good country. I'll be right here, father, when this farm's worth something."<sup>10</sup> The significant thing is that Beaton remains. Various afflictions have not crushed him. *Free Land*, superficial and badly written as it is, is almost a history of the work facing every pioneer Westerner: breaking the land, building a soddy, digging a well, caring for horses and a cow (and occasionally for oxen), reaping and harrowing and threshing. The characters are incompletely realized, but the background is authentic.

In another story of Dakota, Horace Kramer's *Marginal Land* (1939), the protagonist is equally certain that life can succeed despite adversity and ill fortune. Stephen Randall, facing death in Chicago from consumption, returns to his father's ranch and begins anew as a stockman. For a time he is tempted to convert his ranch into a wheat field, but successive droughts persuade him that nature never intended marginal land to grow grain. The story ends with Randall a prosperous breeder of stock selling horses to the Allies. *Marginal Land* is not merely a chronicle of slow achievement. There are ample details of western life: battles against drought and blizzards and prairie fires, the replacement of sod houses with frame dwellings, attempts to raise flax and beans and raspberries, visits to the market town, social gatherings such as a Fourth of July celebration or a barn dance. In most of this activity, Randall is central. But his physical struggle is the complement of his spiritual struggle against the environment, a struggle complicated by his Chicago-bred wife's utter refusal to co-operate or indeed to live with him in his ranch home. In this novel the author with considerable less effect dealt with the same theme which Rølvaag handled so brilliantly in *Giants in the Earth*. The motives in settling on the prairies are different, but the problems are similar.

An equally interesting treatment of the cattle country is Mari

<sup>10</sup> Rose Wilder Lane, *Free Land*, 330 (New York, 1938).

Sandoz' *Slogum House* (1937), a strongly flavored novel of the Nebraska range in which the attention focuses on stock raising rather than on agriculture. The Slogum family is vicious and is led by a memorable fury, Gulla Slogum, victor in many a cattle feud by unscrupulous methods. Miss Sandoz' intention in this rather unrestrained story was apparently to give a dramatic account of the range before law and order were completely established. Her intimate knowledge of irrigation, dry-land farming, riparian rights, and cattle raising sometimes swamps the story. But one does not forget the predatory matriarch who lets nothing balk her.<sup>11</sup>

Thus, within the last fifty years and especially within this century, the farm has become a recognized precinct of American fiction. Curiously enough, it was not until the census statisticians began to denominate the country as more urban than rural that novelists began to write persuasively and interestingly about the farm. People revolted physically against a rural life only to recreate it artistically. But today agriculture and the farmer are common themes for our artists. It is peculiarly fitting that the Mississippi Valley, the great productive center of the nation, should have produced the most satisfying rural novels. Ellen Glasgow has written beautifully of agrarian Virginia, Erskine Caldwell achieved a *succès à scandale* with his picture of Georgia in *Tobacco Road* (1932), and John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* (1939) is essentially an agricultural novel with the scene shifting from Oklahoma to California, yet in bulk our best farm novels from the beginning to the present have come from the Middle West.

What might be said of the quality of these novels? The fact that one remembers only characters like Alexandra Bergson and Beret and Gulla Slogum suggests one generalization: our farm novelists on the whole have not succeeded in individualizing their people. Fresh characterization is the crying need not only of drama but of fiction. Yet very few of the novels already discussed contain portraits instinct with life. Two or three names and faces stand out; the rest

<sup>11</sup> In *Old Jules* (Boston, 1935), which is excluded from discussion here because it is not strictly fiction, Miss Sandoz has sketched life in the Niobrara Valley in western Nebraska with remarkable power.

are puppets on whom certain narrative strands are hung. Their mediocrity quickly consigns them to oblivion. Secondly, the reader observes that most of the novelists bring to their field only the meagerest technical equipment. The style is usually competent, seldom either salient or rich. It is accurate, simple, direct, but often stereotyped and impoverished. In similar fashion the technique of the narrative is bare and unoriginal, and many of the plots lack intensity. Good storytellers are rare among these novelists of rural life. Only exceptional writers like Rølvaag and Miss Cather escape this arraignment. Finally, one is convinced that as a result of the slow evolution of farm novels, the authors have learned to present their backgrounds with fidelity and completeness. There is no longer vagueness, uncertainty; instead one sometimes feels that the pendulum has reversed too far and that there is a superfluity of detail. The spareness of Miss Cather's later books might well instruct less competent artists.

Eventually a great farm novel is bound to appear (unless one is willing to accept *Giants in the Earth* as the desideratum), a novel as tremendous as *Moby Dick*, as lucid and poignant as *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, as human and real and galvanic as *Huckleberry Finn*. For man, despite refinements and adjustments, remains a creature of earth, and no human being is closer to the elements, to nature, than the farmer. And when that book appears it will be the natural and logical culmination of a long series of rural fictions.



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