

# Interpreting Minnesota's Farm Story

Rhoda R. Gilman

NEARLY three years ago, in the flush of the bicentennial, the promoters of Farmfest 76 sent to Governor Wendell Anderson a proposal for an agricultural interpretive center. It was to be modeled on the Iron Range Center then under construction at Chisholm. With high enthusiasm they outlined their vision: "What a great agricultural story Minnesota has to tell. It's our state's leading industry. One need only look at the farmers' cooperative movement to find Minnesota's impact on American agriculture. . . . Coops are the most dynamic marketing force in agriculture today. Minnesota holds a singular place in America as a grain milling and processing center. Our vegetable canning industry is famous worldwide. Our St. Paul Stockyards is the world's largest livestock terminal. When America fills its sweet-tooth, there's a great chance it's with Minnesota beet sugar. . . . The agricultural story is the single most important story in this ever-increasingly hungry world of ours. And Minnesota is writing her name in broad strokes on the face of world agriculture." What they clearly had in mind was a great permanent industrial exposition, and although Farmfest succumbed to the caprices of weather — the ancient nemesis of all farmers — the idea did not.

In Fairmont a year later the promoters of a similar center — to be designated "Heritage Acres, International" — published a brochure in which they asked: "What greater heritage does America have than the persistent excellence of the American farmer? . . . When people think of productivity, few think of food. Productivity is cars, boats, stereos, snowmobiles, motor homes, campers, and lawn chairs. An important goal of Heritage Acres, International, is to change this danger-

ous attitude. To reestablish priorities. To help non-farm Americans see food production as the miracle that it is. And to help farmers perpetuate and build on that miracle."

The framers of a competing proposal in Waseca seemed somewhat less certain of their message: "Defining what the Minnesota Agricultural Interpretive Center should be is an impossible task — and its greatest asset. It will be a changing, dynamic attraction. It will not remain frozen in the past, but will use that rich heritage plus the ever-changing present to tell more and more of what is, and what may be in Minnesota agriculture's future. . . . The long-range goal is to attract non-agriculturalists, labor, management, students, school children, tourists, local residents, and people who have lost contact with agriculture, but remember 'the good old days.'"

The 1976 legislature appropriated \$50,000 for interpreting the story of agriculture in southern Minnesota and passed on to the Minnesota Historical Society the task of deciding which — if any — of the plans presented promises to tell the story of the state's farmers with historical integrity and impact. In an effort to counsel those groups that asked for advice and to better understand the many problems involved in such a venture, staff members have looked to see what has been done elsewhere.

A nearby and impressive example of such interpretation is Living History Farms, located on the outskirts of Des Moines. There the experience of historical showplaces like the Farmers Museum at Cooperstown, New York, and Old Sturbridge Village in Massachusetts is being meticulously applied to the setting of central Iowa. Authentic operating farms of the 1840s and early 1900s are now complete, and visitors may wander through, watching the costumed staff perform daily and seasonal chores and relive the life of the time and place. For those attracted by nostalgia it is a peerless opportunity to revisit the "good old days," and it is a highly effective educational tool for showing children of today how the whole texture of their lives differs from that of their an-

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cestors. Nevertheless, despite the painstaking care that has gone into re-creating these Living History Farms, one still senses a certain confusion about the direction of further development.

The technique of living history is well adapted to portraying a given moment or life-style, but within this framework it is almost impossible to interpret changes over time or to deal with ideas and events. A supplementary museum is therefore being planned, but the message it will convey remains unclear. A third living history farm is projected to represent the present and future, and questions loom large over its message, too. Should it simply celebrate modern energy-intensive farm technology and the accompanying explosion in productivity? Will the farm of the future be an even more specialized crop and livestock factory based on monoculture and mass production? Or will the rising environmental concerns about chemical fertilizers, insecticides, defoliants, hormone treatments, and antibiotics bring a trend toward smaller units and a more labor-intensive, organic, and energy-conscious technology? Doubt likewise persists about the further development of a rural village which is already a part of Living History Farms. Such things as the blacksmith shop, the general store, and the one-room school were essential to farm life in the nineteenth century, but no more so than the cannery, packinghouse, creamery, flour mill, and sugar refinery — not to mention the county agent and the experiment station — have been in the twentieth century. How much of this is a part of agricultural history? Where does one draw the line?

All of these questions highlight the fact that even professional historians and trained museum people have great trouble in determining what an agricultural interpretive center ought to be. By comparison an Iron Range Center, devoted to a single industry and the people who poured their lives into it, or a Forest History Center, concentrating on a single resource and its varied use and misuse by humankind, seems relatively simple.

Why is the history of agriculture so hard to define — even within strict regional boundaries and within a time span of little more than a hundred years? I suggest that much of the confusion goes back to the very roots of our history as a nation. Americans have always been ambivalent about agriculture. Is it a way of life or an industry? The answer depends on whom you ask. On one side the farmer represents the agrarian society upon which our country was founded — the equalitarianism, economic self-sufficiency, and widely dispersed base of wealth that leaders like Thomas Jefferson saw as our final bulwark against tyranny and public vice. The importance of this view, whether as reality or myth, is generally emphasized by writers in social history and American studies. On the other side, agricultural historians and economists tend to see farming as one business compet-

ing with many others in a dynamic industrial society. They talk about farm history mainly in terms of capital accumulation, technological change, marketing problems, and productivity.<sup>1</sup>

Minnesota's various farmer-labor movements from the 1870s to the 1940s were based on the assumption that farmers and wage-earners together were "the people." Farming was the occupation of the common man. It called for little skill, only moderate capital, and enormous labor — labor that was normally shared by the whole family. Along with this view went a tendency to idealize the farmer and to see rural life as the source of all honesty and virtue. For an expression of this, one only has to look in the old song books:

Let sailors sing of ocean deep,  
Let soldiers praise their armor,  
But in my heart this toast I'll keep:  
The independent farmer.

He cares not how the world may move,  
No doubts nor fears confound him,  
His little flock is linked in love  
As household angels round him.

The gray old barn whose doors enfold  
His ample store in measure,  
More rich than heaps of hoarded gold,  
A precious, blessed treasure.

He loves his country and his friends,  
His honesty's his armor,  
He's nature's nobleman in life,  
The independent farmer.

But at the same time that Americans gathered around the parlor piano and raised their voices in this sentimental hymn of praise, farm journals and agricultural schools were already urging farmers to wake up and adopt scientific techniques, new technology, and business methods. In 1896 Gilbert Tucker, editor of *The Country Gentleman*, declared: "A farm is a factory. The owner may or may not live on the premises; exactly so may the owner of a cotton factory or a woolen mill live on the premises. People who have not enough to buy a farm at a reasonable price and stock it properly, should work for those who have, just exactly as a factory operative who has not money enough to start business for himself expects to work for somebody that has."

Tucker's words were prophetic. Today, eighty years

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<sup>1</sup>I am indebted to Robert Frame III of the MHS staff for calling to my attention a paper on this subject which was presented before the Popular Culture Association at Baltimore in April, 1977. It is "The Yeoman vs. the Scientific Farmer: The Conflict of Cultural Myth and Technical Change in Nineteenth-Century America," by Robert E. Snow and David E. Wright.

later, nearly all of "the people" have left the land. The process that began with the grim decade of the 1890s continued through the inflation of World War I and the long farm depression of the 1920s and 1930s. It climaxed in the years between 1940 and 1970, when the number of surviving Minnesota farms was cut by half despite sustained prosperity and skyrocketing productivity. That it still goes on, the current farm strike testifies.

Those who want to portray the future of Minnesota agriculture will have some hard questions to deal with. Already the capital required to get a start in farming is out of reach for all but a small segment of the population. If cost-efficiency calls for an ever larger base of operations, how long can we hold off the specter of corporate ownership? A specter of another kind has been raised by the energy crisis. Much of the "green revolution" achieved since World War II is based on the availability of cheap petroleum. How will agriculture be affected by a radical increase in the cost of oil? And while the miracle of food production unfolds in the fertile soil of southern Minnesota and elsewhere, what has happened to it on the grocery shelves? There the price of food threatens to become a nightmare for the average or poor American family.

So what is to be the message of an agricultural interpretive center? Certainly it should not be limited to the political rhetoric of farm protest over the past century, nor should it wallow in nostalgia for the independent farmer, the country store, and the one-room school. All too often farm life in the nineteenth century was an unrelenting round of drudgery and isolation — espe-

cially for women. The industrialization of agriculture has been a two-edged sword. It has driven the majority of people from the land, but it has also made life richer and more rewarding for those who remain. Minnesota agriculture has seen successive waves of technological change — the horsepower revolution in the second half of the nineteenth century, the gasoline-power revolution of the early twentieth century, rural electrification in the 1930s and 1940s, and the chemical and biological revolution of the last three decades. At the same time it has seen the growth of major industries devoted to supplying the technology and to processing and marketing the products of these revolutions. The story is one of absorbing interest and vast importance for all of us.

Nevertheless, simply to praise the excellence of the American farmer and to define success as productivity alone is to tell less than half the story. The visitors to such a center will include many urban dwellers who can remember parents or grandparents who were forced to give up the family farm and seek a livelihood in the city. And there will be tourists who have driven for miles through uniform fields of waving crops broken only by an occasional abandoned farmstead. They will wonder — and they will not be impressed.

Perhaps an agricultural interpretive center should take this very paradox for its central theme. Minnesotans, along with the rest of the country, have lived through the swift transition from an agrarian to an industrial society. We have enjoyed the material benefits; we have suffered the human losses; and together, rural and urban alike, we face an uncertain future.

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## BOOK REVIEWS

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*Minnesota: A Bicentennial History.* By William E. Lass.  
(New York, W. W. Norton, 1977. xv, 240 p. Illustrations. \$8.95.)

THE LENGTH of this book is the source of most of its virtues. William Watts Folwell presented the history of Minnesota in four volumes. Theodore Christianson needed five. With some difficulty, Theodore C. Blegen compressed his materials between the covers of a single book. Lass, who has been teaching Minnesota history at Mankato State University for some years, equals and surpasses this exploit. While Blegen told the story in 597 pages, Lass does it in only 215 (an annotated bibliog-

raphy and an index take up the remaining pages). It is a significant accomplishment, a miracle of compression.

The imposing dimensions of the task confronting Lass when he embarked upon this undertaking can be glimpsed by considering the range of topics to be explored and the quantity of materials available for study.

Lass surveys Minnesota history following paths traced originally by Folwell and Blegen. This means that the narrative moves, for the most part chronologically, along a familiar chain of topics: geography, exploration, fur trade, advancing frontier, statehood, politics, contemporary scene. These subjects have been studied in detail for a long time. After all, Minnesotans established their historical society before they achieved statehood. They have been preserving records and writing about their past ever since. Lass had both to digest prodigious amounts of information and present the history of a state in small compass.

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