

BACKGROUND BOOKS

AGRICULTURE IN AMERICA

"The glory of the farmer," wrote Ralph Waldo Emerson, "is that in the division of labors, it is his part to create. All trade rests at last on this primitive activity. He stands close to nature; he obtains from the earth the bread and the meat. The food which was not, he causes to be. The first farmer was the first man."

Raising and selling crops and livestock has become vastly more complicated since Emerson's day.

With sympathy and precision, Mark Kramer describes the recent impact of technology, changing markets, and economic pressures on the operators of **Three Farms** (Little, Brown, 1979): a prosperous Massachusetts dairyman, an Iowa corn and hog farmer, and the corporate managers of California's long-troubled 21,000-acre Tejon Ranch.

What all had in common, Kramer found, "was their ability to apprehend a system that nowadays makes victims of its slacker participants and to operate with the canniness and vigor needed to make do in hard times."

How U.S. farming has evolved into a big business since the Jamestown colonists first learned to plant corn from the Indians makes a good story, gripping in its human details. In **The Fruited Plain** (Univ. of Calif., 1980), Walter Ebeling illuminates an encyclopedic survey of advancing farm technology and complex economics with vivid vignettes—about the settlers' westward movement, the 1930s Dust Bowl tragedy, the slow mechanization of Southern agriculture that forced millions of sharecroppers

(black and white) off the land and into the cities.

More specialized are Howard S. Russell's **A Long, Deep Furrow: Three Centuries of Farming in New England** (Univ. Press of New Eng., 1976), Lewis C. Gray's two-volume **History of Agriculture in the Southern United States to 1860** (Carnegie Inst. of Washington, 1933), and Edward and Frederick Shapsmeier's **Encyclopedia of American Agricultural History** (Greenwood, 1975).

Perhaps the best sense of the past is found in contemporary documents: early colonists' letters on the harshness of the New World; George Washington's voluminous agricultural correspondence; official texts (e.g., the 1862 Morrill Act); admonitory essays from farm journals. All of this can be found in USDA historian Wayne D. Rasmussen's many-flavored four-volume **Agriculture in the United States: A Documentary History** (Random, 1975); it is available in the bigger libraries.

A detailed USDA overview of current trends, complete with charts, comes in **Another Revolution in U.S. Farming?** (USDA, 1979) by Lyle P. Schertz et al., with separate chapters on the Northeast, Southwest, and other regions. Providing the official numbers on everything from broccoli production to the school lunch program is the USDA's annual book of **Agricultural Statistics** (Government Printing Office, 1980).

With Washington subsidizing agriculture since the early New Deal, U.S. farm policy has stirred perennial debate. Some specialists see

postwar federal controls and subsidies as having created a stable economic climate for farmers that encouraged their rapid adoption of new technology, preserved "atomistic competition," and gave America "chronic food abundance." Economists Willard C. Cochrane and Mary E. Ryan make this argument in **American Farm Policy, 1948-1973** (Univ. of Minn., 1976). Stronger federal intervention may be needed in the future, they suggest, as U.S. grain exports fluctuate in the world market.

Economist Don Paarlberg, a former Eisenhower White House aide, is more skeptical in **Farm and Food Policy: Issues of the 1980s** (Univ. of Nebr., 1980). Waste aside, he suggests that, while federal subsidies helped many big farmers, they indirectly hurt smaller ones and may also have hurt America's competitive position in world markets.

Paarlberg devotes most of his wry prose to an issue-by-issue analysis of what lies ahead. He predicts that, given farmers' political myopia and declining power, agriculture will get far less preference in Congress when it comes to Western water rights, preserving farm land, new subsidies for commodities, environmental rules, and labor rights. Paarlberg believes that some issues, such as the behavior of "agribusiness," "are worth more to activists and politicians if they are unsolved than if solutions are found."

As Paarlberg notes, Washington is infested with scores of farm lobbyists, ranging from the venerable American Farm Bureau Federation to the National Farmers Union and the National Cotton Council.

These and many newer groups, including Ralph Nader's "consumerists," the "hunger lobby," and

welfare rights organizations are described in Harold D. Guither's **The Food Lobbyists: Behind the Scenes of Food and Agri-politics** (Lexington, 1980); their battles over a variety of recent issues are recounted in **The New Politics of Food** (Heath, 1978), edited by Don F. Hadwiger and William P. Brown.

Covering a broad range of subjects from soil conservation to plant genetic diversity is a useful collection of essays on **The Future of American Agriculture as a Strategic Resource**, edited by Sandra S. Batie and Robert G. Healy (Conservation Foundation, 1980). By and large, the authors are not alarmists. But economist Vernon G. Ruttan asks whether growth in U.S. farm productivity can be sustained.

As he sees it, there is a delay in translating new technology into higher crop yields. The biggest U.S. gains in this century occurred in 1950-65, long after the development of hybrid corn. Annual productivity growth has slumped since 1965. Research now underway—into improved plant species, induced twinning (in beef cattle), more effective pesticides—may not boost U.S. farm productivity by much until after the year 2000.

The apparent end of the long depopulation of rural areas is described by 22 sociologists and economists in **New Directions in Urban-Rural Migration: The Population Turnaround in Rural America** (Academic Press, 1980), edited by David R. Brown and John M. Wardwell. One reason for the turnaround: the sudden availability of jobs in the countryside as factories locate there to take advantage of lower wage rates.

Radical Agriculture, edited by Richard Merrill (Harper, 1976), is a Left critique of rural economic in-

equalities, with technology and corporations as prime targets. It is also a plea for small-scale "self-sustaining agriculture" based on organic methods. Essayist Jim Hightower indicts federally supported land-grant college researchers as handmaidens of agribusiness. He singles out the University of Florida, where a thick-skinned "hard" tomato was developed for machine harvesting, thereby eliminating the jobs of thousands of local farmworkers.

Despite mechanization, strong backs and careful hands are still needed to harvest most of the fruits and vegetables that grace the American diet. In **Hired Hands: Seasonal Farm Workers in the United States** (Rand McNally, 1978), economist Stephen H. Sosnick focuses on California; most of the hired hands there, he notes, are neither blacks nor Mexicans but young whites who go to the fields as a last resort.

When it comes to international trade, journalist Dan Morgan's **Merchants of Grain** (Viking, 1979) remains the best portrait of the secretive, but unsinister, big international corporations (e.g., Cargill, Continental) that buy, sell, and move

grain round the world.

Guarded optimism flavors Keith O. Campbell's **Food for the Future: How Agriculture Can Meet the Challenge** (Univ. of Nebr., 1979). The right application of science and technology, he contends, will increase world food production enough to feed the globe's two billion additional people expected by the year 2000. But many Third World countries must change present policies, notably to give local farmers price incentives to produce more food.

An opposing view comes from Medard Gable, in **Ho-Ping: Food for Everyone** (Anchor/Doubleday, 1979), who blames local food problems on maldistribution, Western profit-mindedness, and lack of a worldwide food management system.

In **Agricultural Development: An International Perspective** (Johns Hopkins, 1971), Yuiro Hayami and Vernon W. Ruttan analyze the differences among nations in farm productivity. They give good marks to the much-debated "Green Revolution" of the 1960s when improved seeds and technology increased crop yields even in India, one Third World country that now exports food.