Flight from the Farm

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Photographs / Images: Solomon D Butcher collection of four photographs showing families and their homes on the farms

FLIGHT FROM THE FARM

BY GILBERT C. FITE

IN 1933 Ralph Borsodi, a white collar worker in New York City, published a book entitled *Flight from the City*. This little volume told the story of how Borsodi and his family moved to a small farm outside of New York where the family became self-sufficient and freed itself from "the thralldom of our factory-dominated civilization." But the Borsodi experience had few imitators and it was opposite of the long-range trend in American life.

In fact, one of the most significant developments in American history has been the decline of farm population. Historically, most Americans have been farmers, residing in rural homes, and making a living by tilling the soil and raising livestock. The first federal census in 1789 revealed that more than 96 percent of the population was considered rural, and most of the people actually lived on farms. When George Washington was inaugurated, there were only five towns of 8,000 population, or more. At the time of the

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Civil War the great majority of Americans still lived on farms, and it was not until 1920 that, for the first time, the census showed a larger urban than rural population. By 1930 the actual farm population had declined to 25 percent, and by 1958 only 10 or 11 percent of the American people resided on farms. Not all of these, however, actually made farming their main economic activity. Indeed, during the last generation the United States has become predominantly a nation of city dwellers.

This flight away from the farm is not a new development. Throughout the nineteenth century there was a steady exodus from the great rural areas of the nation, a development which produced widespread discussion and comment. As early as the 1820's the decline of farm population was evident in New England. With the growth of industry, farmers and their children forsook the old homestead and sought employment in the growing textile factories. The Windsor *Vermont Chronicle* reported in 1845: "Within a few weeks, the daughters of Vermont have passed our doors by the score at a time, to be employed in factory work in another state." In New England the number of men employed in agriculture between 1840 and 1870 declined some 40 percent. Abandoned farms also appeared in New York and Pennsylvania early in the nineteenth century.

As this trend gained momentum a strong effort was made to halt the migration of farmers to the cities. Warning of the evils of city life, a speaker at Bennington, Vermont, declared in 1857 that "all great cities are cursed with accumulations of ignorance and error, vice and crime and misery; . . . their theatres and gambling houses, drunkeries and brothels are well patronized; . . . far better is it for our youth to breathe the pure air and enjoy the salutary moral influences of their native state than to be brought into contact with such masses of putrefaction." Warnings and arguments of this nature, however, had no effect on reducing the flight from the farm.

In the latter part of the nineteenth century, parts of Illinois, Indiana, Iowa and other rich agricultural states of the Midwest lost farm population, following the pattern set earlier by New England and the Middle Atlantic States. By the end of the nineteenth century the relative decline of farm population, and the growth of urban centers was becoming a matter of national concern. Arguing in the Jeffersonian tradition, it was held that American democracy would be endangered and the nation's moral fibre would be weakened if the drift away from the farm continued. Many people, even those in cities, considered a large farming population absolutely essential for the nation's economic, political, and social welfare.

The question which many were asking was, why did people leave the farm? Editors, farm leaders, government officials, and others sought to explain this phenomenon. Writing in *Forum* magazine in 1895, Henry J. Fletcher concluded that it would take a better and more cheerful rural life to keep farmers from migrating cityward. "When the farmer and villager begin to study more how to enrich and beautify farm and village life, when perfect roads, daily mails, the telephone, the electric railway, and the manual training school, shall have carried into the remotest corners the blessings of the new civilization, it may be that the incentive to live in cities will be largely removed." Although this idea was widely held in the late nineteenth century, it proved to be poor prophecy. All of the modern conveniences imaginable were not enough to halt the movement away from the farm.

There have been two conflicting images of farm life throughout American history. The highly idealized picture of the honest yeoman on his own land, enjoying an abundance of food, clothing, and shelter, and living a life in the open air close to nature has been presented in story, song, and verse. On the other hand, the picture of an isolated, ignorant, poverty-stricken country bumpkin has represented another picture, one much more widely held seventy-five years ago. Farm life was reputedly dull, unin-

teresting and lacking in any excitement or social intercourse. In fact, poverty and the drabness of rural life were cited most frequently to explain why people left the farm.

As late as the 1890's, writers for popular magazines were deploring the isolation of agricultural life. E. V. Smalley, writing in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1893, declared that, while life on the prairies might not be so bad in the summer, it was almost as lonesome as death through the long winter months. "Each family must live mainly to itself," he wrote, "and life, shut up in the little wooden farmhouses, cannot be very cheerful." Then Smalley proceeded to describe what he believed to be the situation in much of the Upper Plains States. "There are few social events in the life of these prairie farmers to enliven the monotony of the long winter evenings; no singing-schools, spelling-schools, debating clubs, or church gatherings. Neighborly calls are infrequent," he continued, "because of the long distances which separate the farmhouses. . . ." Smalley argued that the only remedy for the purported dreariness of western farm life was to abandon the isolated farmhouses and form agricultural villages. This, he said, would make possible much more social "enjoyment." The women could gather around the village well to gossip, the men might sit nearby smoking and visiting, while the young people could play ball or other games on the village green. Such was the ideal pictured by Mr. Smalley.

Smalley was by no means alone in recommending the formation of agricultural villages based upon the European pattern. John W. Bookwalter, a writer for *Forum,* urged the formation of farm villages in 1891 and 1892 as a means of bringing farmers together so they could better provide for their social and economic needs. If as many as one hundred farm families were brought together, Bookwalter claimed that the close association would produce physical, intellectual, and especially social and moral advantages. Even Hamlin Garland recommended village living for farm families. "I see a time when the farmer will not need to live in a cabin on a lonely farm. I see the farmers coming

together in groups. I see them with time to read, and time to visit with their fellows. I see them enjoying lectures in beautiful halls, erected in every village. I see them like the Saxons upon the green at evening to sing and dance."

There is abundant contemporary evidence that farm life had its pains and problems. However, it is interesting and significant to note that the stereotype of farm life accepted by so many people has been produced by the writings of nonfarmers, especially those who had been raised on farms and who then left for city life and urban employment. In the Midwest and Upper Plains region, Hamlin Garland, Willa Cather, Mari Sandoz, and other writers emphasized the hard life of farmers. Indeed, one may wonder if they did not lean over backward to criticize and to bring farm life into low repute. After Hamlin Garland returned to the family farm in Dakota and saw his mother's health break, he wrote that his "sorrowful notions of life on the plain" had been confirmed and "I resumed my writing in a mood of bitter resentment, with full intention of telling the truth about western farm life. . . ."

No one who has lived on a farm before the day of the tractor and electricity will deny that it was a hard life. However, in evaluating or judging rural life in the latter part of the nineteenth century, one must be careful not to take it out of the social and economic context of that day. First of all, we must remember that a great deal of life in the urban centers was sordid, monotonous, unhealthful and poverty-stricken. The average wage in manufacturing in 1900 was about $435 a year, which meant that more than one member of a family usually was required to work in order to eke out a living. Many city workers earned less than this amount. Moreover, hours were long, as much as twelve or thirteen a day in some industries, and the work was hard. The purported leisure associated with city life could not be enjoyed by most wage workers in the 1880's and 1890's. The idea that these city dwellers spent hours in theatres, art galleries, or restaurants is, of course, ridiculous. To make matters worse, periods of unemployment

were frequent and, while farmers suffered from drouth and low prices in the 1890's, workers in American cities were tramping the streets looking for food and work. In other words, farm life three quarters of a century ago has not often been compared to the great mass of American industrial workers, but to that of bank presidents, industrial leaders, and upper-middle class professional people.

Many of those who condemned western rural life did so after they left the farm and had achieved a certain degree of material affluence. Some of the severest critics of farm life were easterners, or westerners, who had deserted their native habitats for the opportunities in eastern cities. Undoubtedly, as they looked back at their early experiences on the farm from a vantage point of success and popular acclaim, life in their early rural environs did appear dull and drab. But the views of Hamlin Garland or any of the other literary critics of farm life should not be accepted as typical. Memory is a fickle thing and reminiscences are not very good sources for attitudes toward farm life. While some migrants away from the farm have tended to be bitterly critical of farm life, others have romanticized and idealized their experiences on the farm. One of the great voids in agricultural history is the lack of reliable contemporary evidence on farm life between the Civil War and World War I. That is, there is a relatively small amount of information covering broad areas on the attitude and reaction of farmers to the life they were then leading.

Fortunately, a number of diaries and collections of letters kept by farmers in Nebraska, Kansas and other farm states have been preserved and are available for study. Some of these have been partly or wholly published while others remain in manuscript form. A close examination of the diaries of Elam Bartholomew, Charles A. Thresher, and Hiram M. Young, all of whom farmed in Kansas, and those of John Sanborn, Edward Hawkes, and John Loder, who lived in Nebraska, contradict some of the ideas generally

held about the isolation and dullness of farm life in the period between 1870 and 1900.

One of the best and most complete diaries kept by a pioneer farmer in the Great Plains is that of Elam Bartholomew who settled in northwestern Kansas in 1874.[1] Single and without appreciable funds, Bartholomew left Illinois to homestead in Rooks County, which at that time was on the outer tier of civilization and is located just west of the 99th meridian. He spent the first two years breaking some land, building a house, and taking on whatever extra work he could find in the community. As was true of a good many other easterners who went west, he taught school for a short time. In June, 1876, he went back to Illinois and married Rachel Montgomery. They returned to Kansas a short while later, and on October 14 moved into their new home on the Plains.

The Bartholomew diary reveals a full social life throughout all of the year except during short periods of planting and harvesting. The family attended church and prayer meeting with devoted regularity. Singing socials and meetings of the local literary society were important not only for the Bartholomews but for most of the people in the community. Bartholomew made frequent reference to the good times which the family enjoyed at the various community affairs. By 1885 a new schoolhouse had been completed and it became the meeting place for socials and parties. On December 24, Bartholomew wrote: "In the evening took wife and the children over to the schoolhouse where we participated in the Christmas tree festivities and enjoyed ourselves very much. We all received a number of pleasing presents. A very large crowd was present and everything went off nicely." A favorite type of entertainment was the debates which were held at meetings of the literary society. On February 19, 1887, they debated the question: "Resolved that man will do more for the love of money than he will for the love of woman." The women

[1] The Bartholomew diaries are located in the Kansas State Historical Society at Topeka.

were no doubt flattered when the negative won. A similar debate recorded by Edward Hawkes, a Nebraska farmer, dealt with whether "there is more enjoyment in poverty than in riches." Again a negative decision was rendered.

There was a great deal of visiting back and forth among the neighbors in most rural communities. The term "social visiting" is repeated very often throughout Bartholomew's diary. It was nothing to drive a team of horses six or eight miles to visit friends, and Bartholomew records that it was frequently midnight or later before the family returned home. Bartholomew has left an exhausting schedule of family social activities during the Christmas season of 1887. On Monday evening the family attended a "social party" at a neighbor's home. On the following night they went to prayer meeting, while a singing school was attended at the local schoolhouse on Wednesday evening. Remaining at home Thursday night, the family bundled up and traveled to a neighboring schoolhouse to enjoy a musical and literary exhibition the next evening. Despite intense cold, Bartholomew and his wife visited neighbors on Saturday night. In other words, in six nights they were home only one. Few twentieth century Americans could stand such a social pace, and the schedule preserved gives an entirely different picture than that painted by Smalley, Bookwalter, and many other writers. John Sanborn of Franklin County, Nebraska, recorded on December 24, 1887, that the family had set up a nice Christmas tree. A package from his parents in Illinois had arrived with presents for all, and three other couples with their children joined in the Christmas Eve festivities. The party was, according to Sanborn, "very successful."

The idea that Nebraska and Kansas farmers were lonely and isolated, that they went for weeks without seeing a friend or neighbor is mostly imaginary. Settlement in most areas took place rapidly and the sparsely populated frontier existed for only a short time, probably not over two or three years in most places. Mrs. Martha Oblinger, who lived in Fillmore County, Nebraska, wrote to her par-

ents in Indiana on April 12, 1878, that while three years earlier there had been a great deal of vacant land, now most of it had been settled. She said houses were going up all around them and there were two schoolhouses within one mile of their home. Such was the situation in many areas of the West.

Even in the western parts of Kansas and Nebraska, the first land unit was the traditional quarter section, or 160 acres. This meant that neighbors were not more than a half mile, or perhaps a mile apart after settlement was fairly complete. Even a distance of two or three miles was no deterrent to social intercourse. Actually, in the days of the horse and buggy, settlers were much more mobile than has been generally recognized. Modern Americans have become so dependent upon their automobiles that they have difficulty imagining how people could possibly have traveled so often and sometimes many miles. Bartholomew lived about eight miles from Stockton, Kansas, and it was not uncommon for him to drive to town two or three times a week, and some of his neighbors always seemed to be there. His diary shows that one week he drove to Stockton five times, and for little reason other than visiting. Moreover, the Bartholomews would drive many miles to church, to a Sunday school convention, or to some other meeting. On July 2, 1883, he mentioned traveling eight miles from his place on a "curranting expedition." Mrs. Bartholomew frequently accompanied her husband on these trips, and sometimes the women and children went to town alone. Hiram H. Young who lived near Concordia, Kansas, recorded in his diary on August 3, 1887, that his wife and children had gone to town to attend a show. Between October 7 and 22, 1887, Young, or members of his family, went to town five times either for business or pleasure. This was an average of once every three days.

In December, 1876, Edward Hawkes went to town, had company, or attended some social event thirteen out of the thirty-one days. Mrs. Oblinger wrote on February 27, 1876, that "it does not take long to drive 20 or 25 miles . . ." She

mentioned going five and seven miles to church and being glad it was no further. Sanborn's travels and visits in January, 1888, reveal this same picture. On January 23 he went to town and his wife visited neighbors; the next day he again went to Franklin, Nebraska, for coal, and his wife visited other friends. They both visited neighbors on the 26 and 27. On January 28 they went to town, and Sunday the 29 to church. Then on Monday, January 30, they again went to Franklin to shop. Seven out of eight days saw both Sanborn and his wife away from home. On much of the frontier a trip to town was by no means confined or limited to Saturday night, a statement which has been repeated by many commentators on nineteenth century farm life. It might be argued that these social events were not particularly exciting, but they fulfilled the same social needs as the saloons and other gathering places frequented by city dwellers.

To visit a neighbor, of course, meant staying for dinner or supper. Bartholomew, who was more methodical in his record-keeping than most farmers, preserved a list of the number of people who called or visited at his home in 1880, only six years after he migrated to Kansas. He also kept track of those who ate meals around the Bartholomew table. Altogether, 1081 persons of all ages visited at the Bartholomew home in 1880, and Mrs. Bartholomew served meals to 783 people over three years of age. The number who accepted the Bartholomew hospitality, including small children, varied from 53 in December to 185 in August, which was threshing time. Mrs. Bartholomew may have been extremely weary, but certainly she was not lonesome. One gets the impression from reading her husband's diary that she would have preferred more, not less, solitude. Obviously, the preparation of such quantities of food must have been a burden to the women, and comes as a shock to modern housewives, both rural and urban, who have come to rely on precooked and frozen foods, all kinds of mixes, as well as dishwashers and gas or electric stoves. Evidence is clear that the Bartholomews did a great deal

of traveling, and the figures on visitors to their home indicate that other people in the community followed the same pattern.

The lodge was another source of pleasure, entertainment, and social intercourse for farmers. Hiram Young wrote about attending a lodge meeting in 1887 and confided to his diary that he had experienced a "great, glorious time." When Bartholomew was initiated into the Modern Woodmen of America, he did not get home until 3:00 A.M., and after another lodge meeting he and his wife did not even start for home until 4:30 A.M., arriving at 6:00 A.M. in the morning just in time for milking.

Family affairs seemed to be happy and satisfying occasions. Writing about Christmas of 1881, Bartholomew told how he fixed up a Christmas tree, which, he said, impressed the younger children a great deal. "Popcorn and plenty of apples made the evening pass pleasantly to all of us," he wrote, "and will be a green spot in our memories in years to come." There were other types of relaxation, at least for the men. Hawkes recorded on May 1, 1876, that he went to Fairbury and while there spent $1.20 for whiskey and $.80 for pool. And when Hawkes went to town on June 22, 1876, in hundred degree weather, he spent $.50 for billiards, $.60 for cigars, and quenched his thirst with $1.50 worth of beer and whiskey.

One of the interesting and challenging things in a frontier community was the opportunity to organize new institutions. The formation of a new church, the organization of a school district or a literary society fulfilled many of the people's social and intellectual needs. There was a feeling of achievement and accomplishment as the schoolhouse was built and the church or lodge established.

Despite the fact that farm life in the Bartholomew neighborhood was not isolated or lonely, farmers left the community in substantial numbers between 1885 and 1895. This was also true in communities of western Nebraska, eastern Colorado and other areas of the Great Plains. The

Kansas census of 1885 showed that there were seventy-one farms in Farmington Township where Bartholomew lived. Of these fifty-six contained the traditional 160 acres of land. The largest farm was 800 acres. However, by 1895, following years of drouth and low prices, only forty-seven farmers remained in the township. The largest holding was now 1,120 acres and then only seventeen farmers had as little as a quarter section. In other words, about 33 percent of the farmers had moved out of the township in the decade ending in 1895, but those who remained greatly expanded their holdings. Bartholomew had doubled the size of his farm and operated 320 acres in 1895.

This flight from the farm in Farmington Township in Rooks County, Kansas, was typical of much of the western prairie and plains region during the years before 1900. Hundreds of farmers left their farms to return East, to seek land elsewhere, or to move to town.

The principal exodus of farmers from western Nebraska and Kansas occurred in the 1890's, a period which was characterized by drouth and low farm prices. Thirty-four of Nebraska's ninety counties lost population between 1890 and 1900, and nine of these counties lost 30 percent or more of the people. Fifty-three, or over half, of Kansas' one hundred and five counties had less people in 1900 than a decade earlier, and fifteen counties lost from 30 to as high as 68 percent of their population. Counties in western South Dakota and eastern Colorado also saw a decline of population. Consider, for instance, the twenty-five counties which are west of the 100th meridian in Nebraska. This area (ten organized counties in 1880) had a total population of 11,299 in 1880; 103,188 in 1890; but only 87,904 in 1900. The number of farms jumped from a mere 1,070 in 1880, when settlement was in its earliest stages, to 19,353 ten years later. By 1900, however, the census reported only 13,335 farms. As the population dropped in these western counties, and as the number of farms declined, the average size of holdings expanded from an average of 221 acres in 1890 to 663 in 1900.

There is no doubt but that the decline in rural population in parts of the West was closely associated with poor crops and low prices in the early 1890's. There was a strong economic impetus behind this flight from the farm. Many people simply could not hang on. However, economic privation was certainly not the only reason. In a study of Harrison township in Hall County, Nebraska, Arthur F. Bentley found that, of the eighteen farmers who moved to towns or villages between 1878 and 1892, "in all cases they are men who can be ranked as having been fairly successful farmers." But debt, poverty, disappointment in the West, and inability to continue farming operations were major forces behind the move away from the farm.

This decline of farm population, especially in the 1890's, caused widespread alarm and stimulated the idea that the low economic and social status of farm life was accountable for the trend. Actually, of course, what was taking place was a fundamental and badly needed adjustment between land and human resources. Much of western Nebraska and Kansas was overpopulated in the first place since that region was never meant for 160-acre or even 320-acre farms. It took the rather normal conditions of the area, which included severe periodic droughts, to convince people that the land could not support so great a population on farms and ranches. According to the federal census, the average size of farms in Cheyenne County, Nebraska, increased from 223 to 1,049 acres between 1890 and 1900, a development in keeping with the geography of the area. Thus the flight from the farm in the late nineteenth century in the Great Plains region helped to bring a better relationship between the remaining people and the area's productive agricultural resources.

If we can associate low farm prices and unfavorable physical conditions with the relative decline of farm population in much of the western prairies and Great Plains, how do we explain the exodus from the farm in more favorable agricultural regions.

First of all, it should be emphasized that there was probably much more population pressure on the land than generally has been assumed, even in the rich Midwest. Certainly, this was the case in New England and the Middle Atlantic States even before the Civil War. New England residents, for instance, found that under current farming practices the hill country of northern New England simply could not support its farm population in a satisfactory manner. U. P. Hedrick, the principal authority on New York agriculture, declared that many of the abandoned farms in that state should never have been cultivated in the first place. These farms were eventually incorporated into larger and more productive operations.

In both the Middle Atlantic States and the Old Northwest the increased use of machinery made possible bigger farms and in turn fewer people were needed on the land. Moreover, this ability to farm larger acreages came at a time when there were growing industrial opportunities in Chicago, Cincinnati, St. Louis, Milwaukee, and other cities. Instead of having to divide up the available land as population increased, surplus workers were siphoned off to land further west or to city employment. Those who remained were then able to expand their operations and improve their income position. Although we have seen an exodus from the farms in parts of the Great Plains because more people settled in the region than the land could adequately support, there were undoubtedly areas in states east of the Missouri River where the same conditions existed. The question of the relationship of land and human resources in the late nineteenth century has never been adequately evaluated, but there is much evidence to substantiate the theme presented here. Two factors were operating. In the first place there was not enough land for all the sons to remain on the farm, so one or more of them sought city employment. Not only was there this push of individuals toward the city, but the opportunities to be found in urban centers had a strong drawing power as well. Complaints about the poor returns from farming compared to that of other industries go back to the colonial and early national

periods of our history. As one New York farmer wrote in 1849, farming "may be made the most happy pursuit of men," but it certainly was not the most profitable. The unfavorable comparisons of farm income with that of businessmen, professional people, and skilled factory workers was obvious to all.

There were other factors, of course, which encouraged men and women, and boys and girls, to leave the farm. No one can examine any of the contemporary sources on this subject and not be impressed with the part played by women in the exodus from the farm. Alvin Johnson, who gained a national reputation as an economist, was born on a Nebraska farm in 1874. He recalled in his autobiography, *Pioneer's Progress,* how his mother urged him to forsake the farm because it was nothing but hard work. Mrs. Johnson told her young son that if opportunity developed at all on the land, it came very slowly. She did not want him to wear himself out "prematurely with hard work." If he stayed on the farm, she said, he would be an old man when in other professions men were just reaching their prime. Moreover, Johnson's mother emphasized what she considered the disadvantages of a marriage in their rural community. Where would he find a wife, she asked, except among the country girls all of whom were "ignorant, some frightfull dull, others silly." Life on the farm would be nothing but a round of hard work, devoted principally to raising a houseful of children. Such was the assessment of farm life by one pioneer Nebraska mother.

In 1889 a Nebraska farmer's daughter, writing to the *Western Stockman and Cultivator* published at Omaha, expressed a strong dislike of farm life. She said: "to be a farmer's wife suggests the idea of being a slave, which nearly every farmer's wife has to be." She discounted the prose and poetry which told about the virtues of living close to the soil. Then this young lady described the marriage of a young farm couple, and the life of the bride. "Let ten or twelve years pass over her head. She is hurried nearly to death with work, for she is seamstress, washer-

woman and dairymaid. Churning the snowy cream sounds very fine in poetry," she continued, "but when it has to be done three or four times a week, the poetry wears off, especially if the butter has to be sold to buy groceries for the family. She has to get three or four meals a day, besides the daily routine of sweeping, making beds, and keeping the house in order." Farm wives, she declared, could not hire help, because of the cost. Moreover, she concluded that "farmers expect their wives to creep meekly about drudging for them, receiving two or three calico dresses a year and a pair of calf-skin shoes, for it is considered extravagant to wear fine clothes or dress nicer than in calico in a farming community." Statements of this kind could be multiplied almost at will.

But it was not only the hard work and lack of conveniences of the farm which brought protests from the women. In their minds agriculture ranked low in social prestige compared to most other industries and professions. In other words, farming was considered fit only for those who could do nothing else. It was often the mother who encouraged the children to leave the farm, women like Alvin Johnson's mother, who hoped and prayed for something which she thought would be better for her children. And this something better was always away from the farm. The ministry, law, medicine, teaching, business, anything other than farming. It seemed to be almost a passion with many farm women that their children should pursue some occupation other than that followed by their parents. The Horatio Alger tradition, the idea that cities offered great opportunities for the honest and hardworking young man or woman, had a magnetic effect upon farm youth of the late nineteenth century. This idea seemed to have been promoted by many farm mothers who did not want to see their sons or daughters continue on the farm. The compiler of the 1860 Census of Agriculture hoped that the growing number of machines available for farm work would elevate agriculture "to its proper position in the social scale, as one of dignity and independence and not one of mere physical toil, to be shared in common with the brute." But

"There was a great deal of visiting back and forth among the neighbors in most rural communities."

(Photo by Solomon D. Butcher. Sod house home near Ansley, Custer County, Nebraska, circa 1890)

"No one who has lived on a farm before the day of the tractor and electricity will deny that it was a hard life."

(Photo by Solomon D. Butcher. Sod house home of James Wood, Dale Valley, Nebraska)

"All of the modern conveniences imaginable were not enough to halt the movement away from the farm."

(Photo by Solomon D. Butcher. Later frame home of James Wood, Dale Valley, Nebraska.)

"The lodge was another source of pleasure, entertainment, and social intercourse for farmers."

(Photo by Solomon D. Butcher. Laying cornerstone of I. O. O. F. Hall, Kearney, Buffalo County, Nebraska.)

while increased mechanization of agricultural operations lightened farm work, it did not remove the stigma which for many people was attached to agricultural employment.

No doubt women were influenced in their attitude toward farm life by the common practice of putting everything back into the farm and spending relatively little to improve day-to-day living standards. The scarcity of capital was probably responsible for the policy of farmers investing every spare nickel in some productive phase of the farm operations. Thus there was money for additional fencing but not enough to provide a convenient water supply for the housewife. The barn might be fixed up to protect valuable livestock, while the farmer's dwelling deteriorated both inside and outside. The pressure was to cut living expenses to a minimum so money would be available for the productive purposes of the farm.

This constant postponement of expenditures which might have raised farm living standards may have been good business for the farmer, but it was distressing and discouraging to most women. It seemed always that the new clothes, new furniture or any household conveniences had to be postponed until next year, and then the next, and the next. Farm women also objected to the uncertainty and lack of economic security. They did not oppose the hard work so much as the possibility that no amount of toil could produce the standard of living which they read about being enjoyed by their town or city acquaintances. The insecurity produced by uncertain weather, undetermined prices and other factors which affected farm income made many women urge their children to seek a business or profession which could offer more security.

There is still another phase of this problem of people leaving the farm which needs to be mentioned. In both the past and present, rural life has often failed to provide the intellectual challenge desired by the more aggressive sons and daughters of the farm. It is true that modern farming requires an increased amount of business and mechanical knowledge, but where can the inquiring and original mind,

or the daring spirit, find satisfaction and challenge on the farm. Could this be the basic reason why so many of the most intelligent and energetic of our farm youth have left their parental farmsteads to partake of the broader, more complex and stimulative world of the city?

The reasons why people deserted the farm in the late nineteenth century are numerous and very complex. Some of these factors are fairly easy to explain in terms of urban economic advantages and the possibility of higher living standards in nonfarm communities. On the other hand, many of the reasons are less easy to assess or evaluate because they are not altogether rational. It is a matter of record that a great many people who migrated away from the farm cannot accurately or adequately explain their action. It was probably a combination of factors so closely interwoven that they cannot be neatly catalogued. Whether the reasons were economic, social, intellectual, psychological, or a combination of them all, we know that life on the farm has not been such that it could hold back the avalanche of migration toward the towns and cities.