

**America's "Corn King" - David Rankin – 1825-1910**  
**Extraordinary Farmer, Businessman**  
(Draft June, 2012, rev. May, 2019)

David Rankin was a farming legend during his lifetime when at the height of his enterprise (1900-1910), he was actively farming approximately 24,000 acres in Missouri plus 3,500 acres in nearby Iowa.<sup>1</sup> He believed in a strategy based upon raising corn to feed beef cattle and hogs – or “selling his corn on the hoof”. Rankin was called America’s “corn king”.<sup>2</sup> To this point, he fed his entire corn crop and purchased much of the other corn available in the region. *Saturday Evening Post*, among many publications, crowned David Rankin “the biggest farmer in the United States” at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>3</sup> In 1909 it was said,

*“More corn (was) grown on his farm last year than in the nine states – Utah, Oregon, Washington, Arizona, Idaho, Montana, Rhode Island, Wyoming and Nevada combined”.*<sup>4</sup>

During his lifetime, David Rankin was an American legend in agriculture.

**Family Trail to the United States:**

Most Rankins in the United States trace their family history back to Scotland. It is believed that David Rankin’s forefathers emigrated from Scotland to North Ireland and then to the U.S. through Philadelphia. As they sought out good cheap farm land, it is also thought, but not verified, that they moved west through Chester County and Lancaster County Pennsylvania into the Cumberland Valley. Alexander Rankin, David’s grandfather, is thought to have been born in Ireland in 1774. He and his wife, Elizabeth, were reportedly married in September 1794 in Washington County, PA and over the next several years they raised one daughter and seven sons.<sup>5</sup> In keeping with the movement west, this Rankin family then established itself in Jefferson County, Ohio under a land patent dated 1814. However, the drive westward continued. William, the second oldest was David Rankin’s father. William was born in 1797, reportedly in

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1. Coshocton Standard, Coshocton, Ohio, “Extends The Largest Farm”, March 17, 1905.
  2. Stronghurst Graphic, “Breaking Up The Biggest Farm”, compiled by Virginia Ross, November, 1919, Part1.
  3. The Saturday Evening Post, “America’s Greatest Feeding Farm”, Forrest Crissey, April 12, 1910.
  4. David Rankin-Farmer, autobiography, Tarkio, Missouri, 1909, cover page (reprinted in the 1970’s by Garst & Thomas Hybrid Corn Co, Coon Rapids, Iowa)
  5. Descendants of Alexander and Elizabeth Rankin Originally from Washington County, PA, Register Report 22 September 2000, Cecil Stewart, Ames, Iowa, page 1.

Jefferson County, Ohio, but there are no records from that date so this remains unverified. Alexander Rankin died in 1822 in Sullivan County, Indiana.<sup>6</sup>

The 1820 and 1830 Census shows members of the Rankin family in Sullivan County, Indiana. William Rankin married Elizabeth Gross on March 25, 1824 in Sullivan County and their first son, David Rankin, was born in Merom, Sullivan County, on May 25, 1825. In the unending search for cheap, fertile land, the Wm. Rankin family, with several relatives, continued west. Next was Parke County, Indiana where in 1831 William purchased land, then he returned to Sullivan County for a short period before going to Vermilion County, Illinois for the three years 1833-1835. The next move was to Henderson (formerly Warren) County, Illinois.<sup>7</sup> Much of the extended family located there with the William Rankin family arriving in 1836; however, they first appeared in the Census in 1850 and 1860.<sup>8</sup> William's older brother, Joseph, bought land there in November 1840. William and Elizabeth Rankin raised nine children in Henderson County, with David being the oldest. William died on March 8, 1870 and is buried in the Walnut Grove Cemetery, Henderson County, Illinois, and Elizabeth died February 8, 1876 in Crawfordsville, Illinois, where she lived with one of her children.<sup>9</sup>

In spite of the trail of land purchases as they moved west, the William Rankin family was rather poor and son, David, never had the opportunity of a good education. The small subscription schools on the frontier offered children a primitive schooling at best. David was ten years old in 1836 when his family arrived in Henderson County, Illinois. There were no fences, no bridges and houses were often 20 to 30 miles apart. To get there the family crossed the Illinois River at Peoria in a flat bottomed boat.<sup>10</sup>

### **David Rankin as a Young Adult:**

By age eleven, David was working with his father who, in 1837, built and operated a saw mill. In 1846, at age 21, he started working by himself, breaking the prairie with a wooden mould-board plow and an oxen team he purchased on credit. The first John Deere steel plows in this area appeared in 1844 on a farm at Farmington, Illinois near Galesburg, and Rankin took note.<sup>11</sup>

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6. United States Federal Census, Sullivan County, Indiana, 1820 and 1830, page 112, Alexander Rankin, Joseph Rankin
  7. History of Mercer and Henderson Counties, Illinois, H. H. Hill Co., 1882, Pages 1161, 1168-69.
  8. United States Federal Census, Henderson County, Illinois, 1850 and 1860, Schedule 1, Township 9N4W
  9. Descendants of Alexander and Elizabeth Rankin Originally from Washington County, PA, Register Report, 22 September 2000, Cecil Stewart, Ames, Iowa, page 1.
  10. David Rankin-Farmer, Autobiography, Tarkio, Missouri, 1909, page 4.
  11. Ibid., page 11.
  12. Mississippi Valley Historical Review, "Cattle Kings in the Prairies", Paul Wallace Gates, 1945, page 383.

He was also a careful observer of a Jacob Strawn, from Jacksonville, Illinois, who back as far as 1831 had accumulated 20,000 acres and operated as an early cattle feeder.<sup>12</sup> Rankin was impressed but felt he could combine farming and feeding. Strawn, who operated until his death in 1865, utilized the “tenant” farmer concept under which Strawn owned the land but hired others to live and work on the farm. Later, Rankin would employ a similar strategy.

Rankin always embraced new technology to improve his business. In 1847 D. Rankin drove a herd of about 50 cattle to Chicago over open prairie where they could feed as they traveled. There was no refrigeration, so packing houses only operated in the cold winter months. Rankin was acquainted with both Messrs. Swift and Armour. The latter had recently arrived in Chicago from Milwaukee. There was only one bridge across the Chicago River at this point and the prairie came to within one or two blocks of the Court House. The Chicago mayor then was “Long John” Wentworth who, as agent, sold D. Rankin 80 acres south of Biggsville, Illinois for \$200.00.<sup>13</sup> During this same time period, Rankin saw the first practical reaper built by Cyrus McCormick and in 1848 he bought one for about \$125.00.<sup>14</sup> It represented a huge improvement, yet it still took two men and four horses to operate one machine. David Rankin is quoted as saying this machine helped him reduce the cost of harvesting in two ways – it saved labor and eliminated the cost of whiskey provide farm hands, which he refused to provide. Rankin paid his men monthly on Mondays instead of on Fridays, hoping to reduce wages spent on liquor and reflecting his stand on temperance.<sup>15</sup>

In 1850 David Rankin married Sarah Thompson and that marriage produced three children who lived to adulthood: Annetta “Nettie”, who married John F. Hanna, John A. Rankin who married Harriet “Hattie” Newel Arms, and William F. Rankin who married Elizabeth “Lizzie” Marshall.<sup>16</sup> There were three other children who died in infancy. Sarah died in 1878, and in early 1880, D. Rankin married a second time to Elizabeth Phillips Gowdy,<sup>17</sup> the widow of Robert Gowdy (1834-1871) who died in Garnett, Anderson County, Kansas. She had five children by Gowdy: Ella, Mary, Rolly, Chester and Grace. The second Rankin marriage produced one child, Esther B. Rankin, born in 1885 and who later married Morrison B. Giffen, a fellow alumnus of Tarkio College and a 1908 Rhodes Scholar from Missouri.

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13. David Rankin-Farmer, *Autobiography*, Tarkio, Missouri, 1909, page 16

14. *Ibid.*, page 16

15. *Ibid.*, page 17

16. *Ibid.*, page 18

17. *Ibid.*, page 18

## **The Young Farmer:**

In the fall of 1850, Rankin purchased an additional 320 acres of land in the Biggsville area in two different parcels for \$200.00.<sup>18</sup> He paid \$50.00 of his own, borrowed \$50.00 from his brother-in-law and the seller provided credit for the balance. The town of Biggsville was not formally laid out until 1855 by surveyor, Wm. McChesnery.<sup>19</sup> Rankin was now a big farmer with 400 acres. From the outset he rotated crops; wheat for one or two years followed by corn which he fed to cattle. D. Rankin was innovative and the recent introductions of McCormick's reaper and Deere's steel plow had his attention. These devices left such an impression on the young farmer that in 1853 he conceived of combining two of his shovel plows allowing him to plow on both sides of a row. Rankin believed this was the first straddle row cultivator ever made. This cultivator saved the work of one hired hand. This interest in labor-saving farm equipment would reappear years later when Rankin founded what became the Midland Mfg. Co. Early on, Rankin understood that improving farm profit required increased production and reduced costs – a concept started during this period that made U.S. farm production the “bread basket for the world”.

Bank credit for farm working capital was scarce, especially this far west, and what did exist was expensive. In the period between 1852 and 1861, Rankin recalled that he paid interest rates between 15% and 18%, but such credit gave him the chance to buy more land.<sup>20</sup> He recalled that during the panic of 1857, many banks went broke and anyone with cash could dictate the purchase price for corn. Under these circumstances, D. Rankin built a barn filled with corn cribs allowing him to buy corn in quantity at \$0.08- \$0.10 per bushel, hold it and later sell it in the crib for \$0.80 per bushel.<sup>21</sup> During this period, Rankin developed the business strategy he used for his entire life – invest profits in land and borrow money seasonally for farm operations – keeping his own money in the farm land. He believed land was the best investment by far. During the Civil War period the “greenbacks” were deeply depreciated and Rankin once saw a man give \$260.00 in paper money for \$100 in gold.

## **The Civil War Era:**

The men of Biggsville, Illinois supported the Union war effort, some as volunteers and others as underwriters helping to raise recruitment. On July 20, 1862, David Rankin

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18. Ibid., page 20

19. History of Mercer and Henderson Counties, Illinois, “Biggsville”, H. H. Hill and Co., 1882, page 890.

20. David Rankin-Farmer, Autobiography, Tarkio, Missouri, 1909, page 23

21. Ibid., page 23

22. Copy of Original Document dated July 22, 1862 held by writer.

joined with 12 other men to personally underwrite the recruiting bonus of \$25.00 per man for volunteers to enlist and serve under Captain Frederick Garternicht (1827-1910) in Company G of the 84<sup>th</sup> Illinois Infantry at Oquawka, Illinois.<sup>22</sup> Rankin acted as treasurer for the funds collected and made the disbursements to the men. He was in his late thirties at this time.

In the 1865 post-war era, Rankin purchased cattle in Chicago for \$1.50 to \$1.75 per hundred, put them on the prairie near Paxton, Illinois, fed them corn and sold the fattened cattle in New York via railroad for \$6.00 to \$6.50 per hundred. He was trading on the growing demand for meat in the east, a market now made accessible by the railroad investors funding the expansion of roadbed into the West. True to his strategy, Rankin reinvested these profits in more land, purchasing 5,000 acres east of Paxton at \$6.25 - \$7.00 per acre.<sup>23</sup> Similar land investment in eight sections, or 5,120 acres, was made by cousin, William A. Rankin, a Civil War officer who returned with money in his pocket. Over time and with D. Rankin's tutelage, W. A. Rankin acquired between 11,000 and 13,000 acres on his own. The town of Rankin, Illinois was founded in 1872 on the D. Rankin land.<sup>24</sup> Town history acknowledges David Rankin as the "Founder" of the town. It should follow that W. A. Rankin would be the "Godfather" of Rankin. David Rankin never lived in Vermilion County but his cousin did live there and was able to manage their mutual business interests in the area. Both men were investors in the D. and W.A. Rankin Grain Elevator business and they worked hard to bring the railroad to the area. With disbelief by neighbors, the Rankin men decided to raise broom corn on this land and instead of the forecasted failure, D. Rankin sold at \$320 per ton and made \$200,000 on this market. He again invested his profits in more land further west. In 1875, the Rankin cousins joined with Eugene H. Whitman to established Rankin – Whitman & Co., private bank and grain dealer. They had known Whitman who managed the D. and W.A. Rankin Grain Elevator business for them since 1873.<sup>25</sup>

During this same period and in keeping with David Rankin's interest in farm equipment, he purchased a Halladay windmill, the first in western Illinois. Purchased in Batavia, the Halladay model was built by the United States Wind Energy and Pump Co.<sup>26</sup> Again, Rankin overcame his neighbors' skepticism and through these windmills made well water available to the stock in the fields. Rankin later stated that he went on to purchase hundreds of these in future years.

### **A Big-Time Farmer by Age 40:**

A trip to Europe made Rankin realize and appreciate the fine quality of his farm land. He did try to export cattle under a sale in Liverpool, but after costs he didn't made more

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23. David Rankin-Farmer, *Autobiography*, Tarkio, Missouri, 1909, page 24

24. *History of Rankin, Illinois, Vermilion County, County, "Stories of a Prairie Town"*, 100 Year Celebration 1872-1972, David Rankin and William A. Rankin, pages 3-8.

25. *Ibid.*, pages 9-10

26. David Rankin-Farmer, *Autobiography*, Tarkio, Missouri, 1909, page 25

than a similar shipment to Chicago so he didn't repeat that effort.<sup>27</sup> The entrepreneurial drive was building and David Rankin, by worth and reputation, was extending his interests. He was named the third president of the Monmouth (Illinois) National Bank, serving from 1874-1876,<sup>28</sup> but farming was David Rankin's enterprise. He said through farming you make your wealth - by the "toil in the soil" - and in his view farming was creative.<sup>29</sup> By his attitude, he made it so.

His search for cheap, fertile land continued. On a trip to Texas in the mid-1870's, Rankin was marooned by flooding at Corning, Iowa.<sup>30</sup> This turned out to be the beginning of his move to Missouri. He heard of a man in the Atchison County area, just over the Iowa state line, willing to sell very good farm land at \$6.00 per acre.<sup>31</sup> So in 1876, he started to make large land buys with other family members, including his brother-in-law Silas Prather, the husband of his sister, Emelina "Emma" Rankin. Prather was the first of the family purchasing land to relocate to this Northwestern Missouri area arriving in 1878.<sup>32</sup> Prather was followed in 1880 by D. Rankin's two sons, John and William Rankin, but due his wife's ill health and his farming operations in Illinois, David stayed in Biggsville. D. Rankin was a big farmer with an established base in Biggsville, Henderson County, Illinois, where he now owned 4,000 acres and occupied a very large and stately home four miles south of town. A history of Henderson County states that by 1882 David Rankin owned over 25,000 acres in Iowa, Missouri and Illinois, with 20,000 acres in corn, and was feeding 500 to 600 head of cattle. The profits from Vermilion and Henderson Counties, Illinois were parlayed into Missouri where Rankin bought superb farm land for \$5.00 to \$10.00 per acre.

### **Ongoing Ties to Biggsville:**

During the 1870's, Biggsville was Rankin's base for several reasons. Sarah Rankin's poor health, his farm activities and his involvement in politics all contributed to his orientation to Henderson County. D. Rankin was elected an Illinois State Representative serving terms beginning in 1873, 1875 and 1883.<sup>33</sup> In 1889 D. Rankin traveled east to attend the inauguration of Benjamin Harrison. Rankin was a delegate to the Republican National Conventions nominating Grant in 1872<sup>34</sup> and Taft in 1908. During his last term as a state legislator, he asked not to be nominated again because time and travel was costing him \$25,000 per year. The other reason was Sarah Rankin's ill health which caused her to suffer for years with painful rheumatism. She died on December 27, 1878 and is buried in the Ellison Cemetery. Her brother and pastor, Rev. Samuel Findley Thompson was with her at her death.

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27. Ibid., page 27

28. The National Bank of Monmouth (IL), letter to Dorothy J. Caldwell at the Missouri Historical Review dated January 24, 1972.

29. David Rankin-Farmer, Autobiography, Tarkio, Missouri, 1909, page 29

30. The Iowa Homestead, Des Moines, Iowa, untitled article, September 23, 1915, page 16 (1644).

31. Mansfield News, Mansfield, Ohio, "Biggest Farm on Earth", February 16, 1909.

32. History of Atchison County, Missouri, Biographies-Silas H. Prather, page 922

33. Biographies of State Officers of Illinois, The Biographical Publishing Company, 1883, page 202

34. 1872 Illinois Delegate Ballot, U. S. Grant for President, Republican Convention, D. Rankin 1-1/2 votes.

In the constant quest for new farming ideas, D. Rankin attended the World's Fairs: the 1876 Centennial at Philadelphia, the 1893 Columbian Exposition at Chicago and the Louisiana Purchase Exposition at St. Louis in 1904. In St. Louis, Rankin, his Rankin Farms and Midland Manufacturing Co. were major exhibitors. David Rankin dazzled those attending the St. Louis Fair with a huge wall-sized mural (15' X 35') made of grain, showing his 6,000 acre corn field with mules pulling 42 two-row cultivators.<sup>35</sup> This field was located a few miles east of Tarkio, MO on what is now Rte. 136.

### **Cattle Ranching Venture in Nebraska:**

By now Rankin clearly understood the unsatisfied demand for fresh beef in the eastern markets. This fact and the Rankin drive pushed him to explore opportunities even further west. Nebraska, formerly the Nebraska Territory, was admitted to statehood by Congress in 1866 and it was wide open. It was particularly attractive because the Union Pacific Railroad offered special rates to cattlemen, and legislation was passed allowing the temporary use of large areas of prairie land without residency – free cattle range.

He started The Bar 7 Ranch in 1877, and in 1880 Rankin took on Caleb Stemm as a partner to run this cattle grazing operation in the Sand Hills region near Seneca, NE on the Middle Loup River.<sup>36</sup> The Bar 7 Ranch and The Rankin Livestock Co. operated on eighty square miles (51,000 acres) of open prairie between the Dismal and Loup Rivers owned by the government, of which about 35,000 acres were in Cherry County. At one point, a forty mile furrow was actually plowed to clearly define the line between the Bar 7 and The Circle Ranch, owned by a man named Batt and which lay to the south)<sup>37</sup>. They bought and had shipped as many as 7,000 head of Texas feeder cattle to Nebraska to be fattened and then sent to market. This venture was successful until 1884 when in a suit brought by Plummer & Jewett, a Platte River outfit, it was pointed out that ticks brought in by the Texas cattle were infecting and contaminating the local stock. While the Texas cattle were immune, the local cattle were not and often died. The court found against Rankin with damages awarded of \$20,000, so he closed down this venture in 1887.<sup>38</sup> Likely he would have left soon anyway because the grangers were coming in droves and, by 1890, most of the outfits doing the big open range ranching were forced out. As was said, “the plows move in on the cows”. From this point forward, Rankin focused his activities in Missouri and to a lesser extent in Iowa.

### **Continuing West from Illinois to Missouri:**

The Missouri Territory was admitted to statehood in 1821, when most of the population was based in the eastern portion around St. Louis. St. Louis was then the gateway to the West, witnessing thousands of people heading to the frontier. The northwest corner of Missouri (3,149 sq. mi.) was purchased from the Indians by the US government in

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35. World's Fair Bulletin, St. Louis, Missouri, August 1904, “A Cereal Portrait”, Page 38.

36. American Cattle Producer-Nebraska Edition, “Sand Hills Ranching in the Eighties”, Chapter 1, J. M. Hanna, December 1939-April 1940, page 4

37. *Ibid.*, page 5.

38. *Ibid.*, page 6.

1836 (Platte Purchase) and added to that state by President Van Buren on March 28, 1837. The corner bordering Iowa and Nebraska is Atchison County, which region was first settled along the Missouri River about 1850. Rock Port is the county seat located about eight miles east of the river and settled prior to the Civil War. Atchison County geography includes both rolling prairie land and rich bottom land, with the creeks and rivers flowing west to the nearby mighty Missouri River. By the mid-1870's D. Rankin, together with family members, was buying land in the area from eastern speculators. Rankin, again with his family and associates, set about organizing and plotting a new town under the Tarkio Town Company. While buying large amounts of land, David Rankin was leading the effort to establish the new town by investing in Rankin Water Co., Rankin, Stevenson & Co. Bank (1882), First National Bank of Tarkio (1883), and Rankin Land & Loan Co.<sup>39</sup>

By 1885 David and Elizabeth Rankin had moved from Biggsville to a modest home in Tarkio. A daughter, Esther Beatrice Rankin, was born August 11, 1885. About 1889, David Rankin purchased the home originally built about 1880 by his son, John, who was relocating to Greeley, Colorado due to his wife's health. Following the purchase, David Rankin built a 13 room addition to the original structure at a cost of over \$11,000 (i.e. lumber, \$3,411; carpentry, \$3,008).<sup>40</sup> Following the deaths of Elizabeth and David Rankin, the residence became the home of Esther and her husband.

Over the next 25 years, Rankin continued growing his farm business, while also investing in the local community. He helped found Tarkio College (1883), the Rankin Electric Light and Power Co. (1889-1890), Rankin Auditorium Co. (1891), Conley-Wolfe Improved Kiln Co. (1889), Rankin, White & Laur Bank in nearby Westboro (1889), Independent Telephone Co. (1901), Tarkio Ice Plant (1906), David Rankin Manufacturing Co. (1902) and its successor, Midland Manufacturing Co. At one point, Rankin owned one-sixth of the Towns of Tarkio, Fairfax and Westboro, Missouri.<sup>41</sup>

### **Midland Manufacturing Venture:**

Rankin's early intrigue with the double-row plow in 1853 reappeared and in 1902 he formed the David Rankin Manufacturing Co. (later named Midland Manufacturing Co.) to design and build two-row cultivators.<sup>42</sup> He had tried this type of cultivation equipment on his own farm and knew the benefits. The factory opened for business the first day of January, 1903 and by 1905 it had produced more than two thousand cultivators and plows, plus windmills, tanks, pumps, hay stackers, manure spreaders, etc. The company, located in Tarkio on a rail spur, employed over 140 men. In June 1903, the factory was completely destroyed by fire, but a major rebuilding effort had the plant back

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39. Biographical History of Nodaway and Atchison Counties (Missouri), "David Rankin", Lewis, Chicago, IL. 1901, Pages 621-623.

40. Tarkio Avalanche, Tarkio, Missouri, "Hon. D. Rankin's New Residence", March 25, 1900; Detailed estimate in D. Rankin files held by writer

41. Missouri Historical Review, Columbia, Missouri, "David Rankin=Cattle King of Missouri", Dorothy J. Caldwell, April 1972, pages 382, 384

42. Tarkio Avalanche, Tarkio, Missouri, "Midland Mfg Co.", January 26, 1924



in operation by October, 1903. Ultimately, this business was sold to the Wm. Galloway Manufacturing Co. of Waterloo, Iowa.<sup>43</sup> The end came when the plant was dismantled and closed in 1924.

### **America's "Corn King":**

By 1905, Rankin owned and actively farmed 23,000 acres in northwest Missouri plus 3,500 acres across the border in Fremont County, Iowa. This farming operation was designated "the largest corn farm in the world".<sup>44</sup>

Due to the size and scope of this farming operation, Rankin became regarded as the "Corn King" and the subject of many articles. *The Saturday Evening Post* magazine published an extensive article on D. Rankin dated April 2, 1910 entitled "America's Greatest Feeding Farm" by Forrest Crissey.

The corn planting for Rankin's operations used 4,000 to 6,000 bushels of seed corn per year and few if any could top that number.<sup>45</sup> Rankin did not try to grow seed corn, but instead he planted and tested several varieties of corn seeking to expand his yield. The soil was kept rich by letting the cattle and then hogs forage in the fields after harvests. The soil was plowed and turned completely, then pulverized by either harrowing or disking before planting. The crop was tended by harrowing before the corn was up and then cultivated at least four or five times to conserve the moisture from periodic rains.<sup>46</sup> Rotation continued as part of the strategy with four or five corn crops, followed by clover or timothy pasture where cattle could graze for three to five years before it was put back to corn. During this period the cultivated Rankin land produced an average of 800,000 bushels per year.<sup>47</sup> As a farming pioneer, David Rankin understood that good farm land is a limited resource and that the farmer must constantly improve the soil, while seeking methods to produce more per acre without disproportionately increasing costs.

H. J. Waters, College of Agriculture Dean, University of Missouri (1895-1909) summarized:<sup>48</sup>

*"David Rankin put the science of soil conservation into practice on his farm in advance of the scientist and the teacher. In contrast with the American spirit of gaining wealth at the expense of the soil, Mr. Rankin, with a soil that was new and supposedly inexhaustible, pursued the policy, from the outset, of husbanding its resources that he might hand it over to those who were to follow him unimpaired in productiveness and value."*

Early on he understood the conservation benefits of investing in labor saving farm machinery. In some cases the equipment saved labor and improved the soil as in the

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43. Ibid., "Midland Plant to be Dismantled", January 22, 1925

44. The State of Missouri – An Autobiography, "Agriculture", Walter Williams, 1904, page 85

45. David Rankin-Farmer, Autobiography, Tarkio, Missouri, 1909, page 32.

46. David Rankin-Farmer, Autobiography, Tarkio, Missouri, 1909, page 32.

47. The Homestead, Des Moines, Iowa, "A Millionaire Farmer", April 12, 1900, page 605

48. David Rankin-Farmer, Autobiography, Tarkio, Missouri, 1909, page 62

manure spreader which he used heavily to enrich his land. He made a distinction between machinery that saved him money and those, such as the spreader, that actually made him money; he called manure spreaders “coinage machines”. Machinery allowed Rankin to farm intensively and extensively.

**Success from Hard Work:**

Rankin’s grand farming business led to some very impressive production numbers. The enterprise was divided into ranches each with a foreman or partner, with ranch sizes ranging from 700 acres to 8,000 acres. The cattle feeding activity took place in what was even then called feed lots and they ranged from 160 acres to 640 acres. While modest by today’s standards, the average corn yield was between 40 and 60 bushels per acre. The best was a very respectable 118 bushels per acre.<sup>49</sup>

According to the Rankin 1899 Statement of Feeding Operations, the Missouri business broke down as follows:<sup>50</sup>

<u>Ranch Number:</u>	<u>Acreage:</u>	<u>Foreman or Partner:</u>
#1	3,280	G. Ross
#2	560	Kenny
#3	252	Hampson
#4	640	Stanton
#5	2,720	Y. New
#6	2,000	F. Mullen
#7	3,080	Levi Hanna
#8	1,000	Sunderland
#9	690	J. Kendall
#10	800	McDowell
#11	2,243	Wreath
#12	943	Town
#13	960	Rankin & New
#14	<u>2,200</u>	Rankin & Cowden
Missouri Total	21,968	

Proceeds from sale of 9,129 cattle .....	\$179,298
Proceeds from sale of 6,732 hogs .....	\$ 73,812
Expense for 438,084 bushels of purchased corn .....	\$114,010

After some careful study, it is possible to develop an analysis comparing several years of operations in this period. The Rankin operation was extraordinary for this period in history, and he could be considered in agriculture what Ford was in automobiles – remarkable.

1897                      1898                      1899                      1890

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49. Ibid., page 36

50. Original document held by writer

No. of cattle shipped	8,803	9,801	9,129	7,539
No. of hogs shipped	6,060	6,200	6,732	8,249
Bushels of corn purchased		106,466	438,084	385,749
Cost of corn purchased		\$98,507	\$114,010	\$105,546

In a special report to the New York Times, entitled, "Cost of Raising Cattle", dated April 27, 1902 issued from St. Joseph, Missouri, David Rankin disclosed the cost to raise cattle on high priced corn and how modest the profit involved.

Ave. for steer purchased (1,000 lbs. @ \$0.04)	\$40.00
Feed to fatten (75 bu. @ \$0.60)	45.00
Shipping and selling expenses	<u>3.50</u>
Ave. cost to market	\$88.50
Ave. sale (1,325 lbs @ \$0.0685)	<u>90.77</u>
Net per steer	\$ 2.27

*Note: No cost was assigned to labor, land or interest, but a comment was made that some of that cost was covered by profits from the hogs feeding on what the cattle left in the fields.*

In 1906, David Rankin had 18,000 acres of the 24,000 acres planted and was referred to as the biggest farmer in the United States of America. By 1909, The Rankin Farms were scheduled to produce a million bushels of corn annually.<sup>51</sup>

Corn was stored, or cribbed, on each ranch, with his largest crib holding just over 25,000 bushels of corn. In this period corn was harvested and stored on the ear. Each ranch was accounted for individually by Rankin's bookkeeper with the laborers and ranch foreman paid a good salary. Some corn was raised on a "shares" basis, where the rancher partnered on the crop and cattle, but Rankin owned the land. Under this arrangement, Rankin would put up the capital for stock and crop, with the "shares" partner paying interest on half that capital from his share of the sale proceeds which were split evenly. During the period between 1885 and 1910, the livestock markets expanded with cattle previously sold in New York or Chicago now being actively sold into markets along the Missouri River at Kansas City, St. Joseph and Omaha.

### **Rankin and the Railroads:**

In 1880, the same year that Tarkio was laid out, David and Elizabeth Rankin donated 80 acres to the Tarkio Valley Railroad.<sup>52</sup> The Tarkio Valley, organized April 10, 1880, was to build rail service from Corning, Missouri (Holt County) to Northborough, Iowa (Page County). The same month, Tarkio Valley leased this right-of-way to the Kansas City, St.

51. Technical World, "David Rankin-Plain Farmer", Homer Croy, December 1909, page 368.

52. Deed Book, Atchison County, Missouri, David and Elizabeth Rankin of Henderson County, Illinois, grant for \$1.00 to The Tarkio Valley Railroad, May 10, 1880.

Joseph & Council Bluffs Co. which firm proceeded with the construction from Corning to the State line (25.41 miles) in late 1880.<sup>53</sup>

The expansion of the railroads into the newer farming areas was a major improvement, accelerating the speed to markets and drastically reducing shrinkage. The railroads transported the stock to be fattened, and then took the fattened cattle to market in large numbers. For example, in March, 1899 Rankin did one of his largest stock buys and purchased over 11,000 head of Texas steers at one time with delivery scheduled for September and October.<sup>54</sup> This required about 300 cars using 25 trains for delivery at an expense of \$25,000. The cattle weighed over seven million pounds with a value including freight of about \$250,000.

Railroad freight was a big cost to the Rankin farming business. In March 1889, D. Rankin offered resolutions by the Atchison County farmers and stockmen to the state legislature protesting a newly proposed tariff by the railroads charging by weight rather than by train / carload.<sup>55</sup> He then appeared before the railroad commissioners, who ultimately directed the railroads to charge by train / carloads.

Likewise, Rankin became dissatisfied with the freight arrangements at the Tarkio Valley branch of the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy and in 1902 he pushed to build a new railroad bed from Tarkio to Blanchard, Iowa that would connect with Des Moines, Iowa.<sup>56</sup> This never took place.

### **Farming - Unlimited Possibilities:**

Rankin paid all his men monthly at a rate considered “good wages, plus good board”. Paydays were on Monday, as his way of reducing wages wasted on drinking. He had as many as 250 men on the payroll, many of whom had been with Rankin for years. Frequently, a foreman’s wife was paid to cook the noon meals for the hired men and in some lean years, she could make more than a hired hand. By September 1, 1908, the financial statement for D. Rankin showed an “inventory” valuation of \$3.2 million, most of which was his land investment.<sup>57</sup> He attempted to run his farms a bit like a manufacturing business with corn being his raw material. By feeding cattle on his corn, he improved his profit while generating a huge amount of fertilizer to improve the crop land. He believed fully in re-investing in and improving his land. Wet bottom land was made productive by straightening creek beds, trenching and in some cases setting tile to drain the fields. In the more demanding lowlands, dikes were built to help control spring flooding. In this way some of the most fertile bottom land (top soil 16 feet deep)

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53. United States Treasury Department, Report on the Internal Commerce of the U.S. for Fiscal Year 1889 Part II, William F. Switzler, Washington, DC, page 287

54. Missouri Historical Review, Columbia, Missouri, “David Rankin-Cattle King of Missouri”, Dorothy J. Caldwell, page 389.

55. Tarkio Avalanche, Tarkio, Missouri, “Stock-Weighing Abandoned”, April 13, 1889, page 1.

56. Tarkio Independent, Tarkio, Missouri, “Rankin the Cattle King has a Big Railroad Scheme”, June 30, 1902

57. Country Life in America, “I Made Three Millions Growing Corn”, David Rankin, April 1, 1910, pages 691-694.

became his most productive. The rolling farm land was terraced, reducing the erosion run off of top soil and fertilizer.

In 1905, D. Rankin bought 3,500 acres of bottom land near Riverton, Fremont County, Iowa paying from \$10 to \$20 per acre.<sup>58</sup> He conceived of the idea of building a dike along the Nishnabotna River flowing through the land. This allowed him to reclaim this rich bottom land for farming and grazing. With a large group of men and animals, the crew started in April and worked until mid-winter, building a dike seven miles long and varying in width. It was 14 feet high and mostly 40 feet wide with a total cost of \$20,000. The spring floods proved the design sound.

While scale was part of the Rankin enterprise, he made it clear that the small farmer could buy feeder cattle just as cheaply as he could and likewise sell stock into the market at top dollar. His point was to feed the corn crop you raise and take advantage of favorable market conditions. He believed every farmer must approach his business with a plan to maximize the enterprise, and those working on the farm must understand that plan. The farmer must invest in the latest labor saving equipment and he must do so long before the old is worn out. Rankin believed it better to have two idle horses, then to lack one. He also reinvested in good land because the more acres farmed, the greater the profits; farm all you can and do the work right and feed all you raise. He felt the possibilities were unlimited – according to him the user of the reap hook, the cradle, the hoe and all the other implements have and always will have an honored place in history, and as the ages pass these time honored tools have played their part in broadening the vision of the farmer – helped to make his possibilities unlimited.

### **College Co-Founder**

Outside of farming, David Rankin's love was Tarkio College, which he co-founded. He served on the Board as Board Treasurer for the period 1894-1910.<sup>59</sup> The college was founded in 1883 and later located in a building on a prominent knoll outside of town. Actually, the College was an afterthought. The original purpose of the building was to entice the voters to relocate the County seat from nearby Rock Port, which was voted down. This forced a revision in plans and resulted in the founding of this liberal arts college affiliated with the United Presbyterian Church. The College cheer, "Set Fire", was adopted from a D. Rankin phrase meaning "let's get going!". During his lifetime, David Rankin gave more than \$285,000 to the College,<sup>60</sup> and his immediate family and heirs continued that tradition until, after management problems, the College closed its doors in May, 1991 and later filed bankruptcy.<sup>61</sup> This sad ending had a terrible impact on the students, alumni, the town of Tarkio and its merchants.

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58. Coshocton Standard, Coshocton, Ohio, "Extends The Largest Farm", March 17, 1905.

59. Missouri Historical Review, Columbia, Missouri, "David Rankin-Cattle King of Missouri", Dorothy J. Caldwell, page 384.

60. Ibid., page 384

61. The New York Times, "A College Acts in Desperation and Dies Playing The Lender", July 7, 1991

One of the better known College structures was the “Mule Barn Theater”. This octagonal red brick building (originally three stories) was built in 1892 at a cost of \$10,000 and located on his home farm to house the mules and horses used in the fields.<sup>62</sup> This “Gothic Revival” style structure was 80 feet wide between opposite walls, all eight sides of which were 33 feet long. There was a floor divided for living space for farm hands, with the top floor used for hay storage. The very high third floor roof included triangular gable vents above the windows, making a cathedral ceiling. The cupola stood 114 feet high. The barn first burned in 1907 and was rebuilt with modification to the dormers and a simplified roof line. After it was acquired by the college in 1965, it was converted to a three quarters “theater in the round” and played an important role in the college and the community. An upper floor space was given over to a Rankin era museum. In 1970, the Mule Barn was approved as a Registered Historical Place”. It was totally destroyed by fire in 1989 shortly before the College closed. All of the Rankin items displayed in the museum portion of the Barn were lost. There is a modest collection of David Rankin items maintained currently in Tarkio by the Atchison County Historical Society and the Tarkio College Alumni Association.

### **The End for a “Plain Farmer”:**

David Rankin said he was proud of his record and what he accomplished as a “plain farmer” in his words. But the one thing he counted as his greatest work was raising his four children who were looked upon as honorable, industrious respected citizens, worthy of the confidence of their neighbors and to whom he left his life’s earnings with full confidence it would not be used for any questionable purpose. In March 1907, at the age of 82 and part of his estate planning, David Rankin incorporated The Rankin Farms and distributed shares equally to his children.<sup>63</sup>

Elizabeth Rankin died from cancer on September 22, 1910. Less than a month later on October 18, 1910, David Rankin died from a stroke at age 85. David Rankin and Elizabeth Phillips Rankin are buried near many relatives in the Home Cemetery in Tarkio, where there is also a monument to D. Rankin’s first wife, Sarah Thompson Rankin. Her remains are buried in Biggsville, Illinois.

Following the death of David Rankin, notes of sympathy were received from hundreds of people, including W. C. Brown, President of the New York Central Railroad, Hon. David C. Francis, Ex-Governor and Ex-Secretary of the Interior, and Hon. Paul H. Morton, President of the Equitable Life Insurance Co. and Ex-Secretary of the Navy. David Rankin will remain in the histories of Henderson County, Illinois and Atchison County, Missouri as an unusually successful businessman and farmer who employed methods ahead of his time and a man who contributed to his community.

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62. National Register of Historic Places Inventory-Nomination Form, “Mule Barn Theater”, July 7, 1970, page 8.

63. Stronghurst Graphic, , “Breaking Up The Biggest Farm-Part 2”, Compiled and edited by Virginia Ross, November 20, 1919.

The Rankin children continued to expand The Rankin Farms business and a statement as of December 31, 1912 showed total operations including The Rankin Farms, Rankin & Co. and Comanche & Co held 28,891 acres and had a book net worth of \$2.4 million.<sup>64</sup> Ranching operations had been extended back into Nebraska. The Ditch Company, in O'Neill, Nebraska and operating as a branch of The Rankin Farms (Inc.), shipped twenty-one rail cars of fat cattle to Chicago on April 29, 1917 with another 500 head to be shipped within the following sixty days according to Everett Brown, the Ditch Company manager.<sup>65</sup>

David's son, William F. Rankin, succeeded his father as manager of The Rankin Farms operations. Unfortunately, he died in 1918 at age 57, eight years after his father's death. The last chapter for the corporation was written in 1919 when the remaining three heirs agreed to divide the enterprise and distribute four equal shares as the interests then existed. Facing a buyout of the W.F. Rankin Estate, the multiplication of heirs, and the differing needs of the families, a division of The Rankin Farms was inevitable. The divided farms were operated independently by daughters Nettie Rankin Hanna, who died in 1928; Esther Rankin Giffen, who died in 1955; and surviving son John A. Rankin who died in 1928. Some heirs continue farming operations on land originally acquired by David Rankin.

The United States recognizes leaders in its history, including those in government, military and industry, but there are few recognized in the forefront of agricultural. Being recognized as the biggest farmer in the United States circa 1900, employing techniques such as feeding rather selling corn, and rotating crops to benefit the soil should qualify David Rankin of Tarkio, Missouri as a legend in agricultural history.

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By: John F. Schoenfelder  
(Great Grandson of David Rankin)

Robert Allen Rankin, Jr.  
(Great Great Grandson of David Rankin)

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64. Lincoln Daily News, Lincoln, Nebraska, "Making \$100,000 On A Farm That Didn't Pay 6 Per Cent", December 15, 1913, page 8.

65. The Lincoln Daily Star, Lincoln, Nebraska, News Tidbits-Holt County, Nebraska, "Twenty-one Cars of Cattle Bring Them Big Money", April 29, 1917.