The Rise and Decline of the Family Farm in Central Southern Wisconsin: 1890-1990
A study of the economic, social, and political ramifications of the loss of family farms
on the rural communities of Columbia and Dodge Counties, Wisconsin

By

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The family farm in America is often referred to as the backbone of the Nation's identity. The number of active farms in Wisconsin has shrunk from a high in 1934 of 200,000 to the current number of less than 68,000 according to the National Agricultural Statistics Service. With the loss of these farms, Wisconsin’s rural society loses jobs on the farm and throughout the community. When economics change in any one’s life his social status, personal well being, and family stability are all at risk. Aside from sociological effects, the dislocation of families on the farm has brought with it a void of local political activists. This research focuses on the negative social, economic and political impact on rural communities resulting from farm loss. Additionally several causes for the farm decline are explored such as the poor profit to effort ratio of farming, the increased productivity of mechanization, and the influence of government actions that actively or inadvertently favored larger more specialized agricultural pursuit.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LIST OF TABLES</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF FIGURES</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Chapter**

I. INTRODUCTION
   - Question (Hypothesis) .......................... 2
   - Definition of terms ................................ 3
   - Decline of family farms .......................... 4

II. OVERVIEW OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF FARMING IN THE U.S.
   - 1890-1920 ........................................ 9
   - Post WWI and Depression .......................... 13
   - New Deal Legislation .............................. 14
   - Post WWII .......................................... 15
   - 1970-1990 .......................................... 16

III. DISCUSSION
   - Comparative statistical analysis ................ 22
   - Transitional analysis from family farm to corporate partnerships .......................... 64

IV. CASE STUDIES OF CENTENNIAL FARMS ................. 68

V. CONCLUSION .......................................... 89

VI. BIBLIOGRAPHY ..................................... 93
# Tables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Number of Farms</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Number of Farms Nationally v. Wisconsin</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Value of Wisconsin farmland and Buildings</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Value of Wisconsin Farm Equipment</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Wisconsin Farm Income</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Wisconsin Farm Income v. All Worker Income</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# Figures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Figure 1</td>
<td>Map of Wisconsin showing Columbia and Dodge Counties</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 2</td>
<td>Location of the Kreuger Farm</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 3</td>
<td>Four Generations of Kreugers</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 4</td>
<td>Map of Arlington Township Showing Caldwell Land</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction

A definition of terms and identification of the rise of farming, the decline of family farms, and the emergence of corporate farm primacy.
"Burn down your cities and leave our farms, and your cities will spring up again as if by magic; but destroy our farms and the grass will grow in the streets of every city in the country."

- William Jennings Bryan

With each passing year the landscape of Wisconsin takes one more step in an evolution that was begun over one hundred years ago. Driving the criss-cross web of rural roads, one cannot help but notice the disappearance of fencerows. These small elements of the much greater whole that comprises our Nation have meaning that extends to its roots. Each of these wire and wood edifices represented the delineation of the property of a citizen farmer, most often a family farm operator. So with the departure of each fencerow one may witness the loss of a family farm. As the wire is rolled and the posts are pulled the Nation, the State, and the community loses the active participation, the economic contribution and the social bond once provided by the members of a family farm. This research will explore two primary assertions; first the decline of family farms has had a negative social, economic and political impact on rural communities in the central portion of southern Wisconsin, and secondly that the decline of the family farm between 1890 and 1990 is the result of several factors including the poor profit to effort ratio of farming, the increased productivity of mechanization, and the influence of government actions that actively or inadvertently favored larger more specialized agricultural pursuit.

To fully understand the role the family farm has played in central southern Wisconsin, one must first place the issue within a national context. To achieve this goal the concept and definition of a farmer, a farm, and specifically the family farm must be achieved, and the place the family farms have held within the history of the Nation established. According to the United States Department of Agriculture, a farmer is defined as the person who runs the farm, making the day-to-day management decisions. He may be an owner, hired manager, cash tenant, share tenant, and/or a partner. Under this definition a farmer is not necessarily a landowner if he is a principal farm operator. According to the United States Environmental Protection Agency website, “the U.S. Census considers a farm as any establishment which produced and sold, or normally would have produced and sold, $1,000 or more
of agricultural products during the year” (government subsidies are included in sales). By that definition, there were fewer than two million farms in the United States in 1990. This however is deceiving as the census inflated the number of agricultural establishments that qualified as farms through the inclusion of a point system accounting method. Those establishments that did not have normal sales in a given year, but produced goods that had a value, were rated with points equivalent to their sale and still qualified for the definition of a farm if the awarded points and/or cash sales totaled $1000.00. This allowed operations that had $500.00 in government subsidies and $500.00 in points to qualify as a farm though they had no actual income from farm product sales. So both the definition of farmer and of a farm allowed for many classes of operations and individuals to lay claim to the titles and therefore were included in the agricultural census. This distinction is important to understand when reviewing the numbers of family farms over time.1

Having established the government’s functional definitions of farmers and farms, this analysis will turn to the definition and classification of family farms. This review will again start with the United States Department of Agriculture for its terminology. It may be assumed that the family farm would be well defined and specific as it accounts for major segments of the agricultural census. This is not the case. The title family farm has traditionally been given to one in which ownership, operation, and control of the farm business is held by a family of individuals, related by blood, marriage, or adoption. This definition is simple and to the point, much like the 1870s era from which it takes its roots. In fact this definition would be this author’s choice as it would most certainly adhere to the average reasonable citizen’s description of a family farm entity. Overtime the legally accepted version has been revised and become a bit more complex.2

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2 Tracing its origin to the 1980’s, the current family farm definition accepts any establishment where the principle operation is by a single family but may include significant contract work and related responsibilities by non-family members. Additionally, based on the previously related definition of a farmer, a farm may qualify as a family farm (though they do not own the property) if the operators are
In 1890 there were 4,564,641 farms, over double the number of farms that existed in 1992. Moreover, the numbers of farms reported were limited to only those establishments that exceed $500.00 in production. Taking in consideration the equivalent value of a dollar, $500.00 in production in 1890 would be on a par with $7,800.00 in 1992. Using this valuation there were significantly more farms in 1890 than were counted had the same expectations as 1992 been used. In addition the 1890 report shows that eighty-two percent of all farms were owner operated with an additional nine percent operated by the principal renter. These farms account for over eighty percent of the production value of all farms. It may be extrapolated that an overwhelming majority of these concerns were family owned and operated. Less than one percent of all farms in 1890 qualified as a corporate entity and family farm corporations were virtually non-existent. This firmly places the family farm as the leading component of all farms for that census.\(^3\)

The state of the family farm at the end of the period studied is best represented by the 1992 Agricultural Census. This document reveals that ninety-percent of the Nation’s farm sales were produced by sixteen percent of the farms. This same report states that eighty-six percent (1,655,758) of all farms are family farms, one-percent (19,253) are deemed corporate farms, and another three-percent (57,759) are family corporations. In addition, of the almost two million farms, nearly half (906,517) responsible for the daily managerial decisions of its operation. The classification of family farm is also afforded concerns that have families in partnerships with other non-related individuals. Further, the family can operate land they may or may not own that is held in a corporation with others not related. Based on the combination of definitions and exceptions related to the census of farms it may be stated that the government’s count in recent decades is difficult to compare to the historic data. The concept of the family farm has taken on a multitude of manifestations over time that in some cases have no comparisons in historic accounting. It will then be important to take a more detailed approach to these figures and look at them in terms of aggregate production output.

"USDA - NASS, Census of Agriculture - 1987 Census of Agriculture."

were identified as having actually lost money.\textsuperscript{4} Though not specifically extrapolated within the census data, one may see a pattern that suggests a phantom vision of family farms. In many cases they exist in form but not substance. By 1992 the vast majority of family farms were near superfluous to agricultural production, as they represented at most ten to fifteen percent of the value of output. When compared to the 1890 numbers, one can see that for nearly all intents and purposes the family farm has faded to a historic relic.

Comparative information of this nature is difficult to completely quantify; however, one may see two assumptions validated by the contrast of this data. First, the family farm as an economically viable agricultural entity lost significant status between 1890 and 1992. Second, the corporate farm has risen and assumed the leading role in the agricultural production of the United States in the same time period. Defining corporate farms becomes even more complex than family farms as the two have become intertwined to a point that defies separate definitions.\textsuperscript{5}


\textsuperscript{5} Legal corporations are distinguished as such through registration with the State. Perhaps the most challenging component of defining family farms is the large number of farms that are leased or contracted within much larger concerns that function as arms of corporations without the legal registration as such. Given the current operational versus legal definition confusion, this paper will adhere to the legal version of the State recognized corporation. Even at this point there are several organizational versions of corporations, each with its own legal peculiarities. The Limited Liability Company (LLC) is currently the most used by family farms as a method of encompassing all those related (or not) in the possible operation, in hopes of making the transfer of ownership less economically challenging. Other forms used are; S Corporations, that are operations that elect to pass corporate income, losses, deductions, and credit through to their shareholders for federal tax purposes, and a C corporation, which is recognized as a separate taxpaying entity. The C Corporation is the most common non-family farm organizational method, as it functions as a separate entity from the shareholders making it more difficult to transfer. Corporations then may be seen as both competitors of family farms and an organizational method of perpetuating family farms. Uniform Partnership Act, State of Wisconsin.
The family farm between 1890 and 1992 changed due to internal factors such as the profit to effort ratio of farming when compared to other professions and external factors such as government policies both favorable and not so. To explore these factors, this researcher will review government policy at the national and state level, than investigate the local level and finally through case studies of individual family farms.
Overview of the Development of Farming in the United States
A review of farming nationally from 1890 to 1990 with discussions regarding economic conditions, government legislation and social impacts.
In *The Unsettling of America*, author Wendell Berry offers a caustic indictment of the social and cultural penchant of white men to victimize and exploit those that would desire roots. Berry describes the history of the new world culture and agriculture as a cycle of reoccurring conquests. He starts with the well-documented dispossession of native land but carries the process from first contact to present day. The author describes an unending conquer mentality that drives the majority of humans. Yet at each stage there are those who stop and stay, choosing to create a new home and sink roots. There are always those that choose to build permanence rather than chase the possibility of gold, but this is illusory as the next wave will exploit their efforts and force or lure them off the land to allow for its more efficient use. Berry paints a bleak picture of an ever more avaricious industrial imperialism that victimizes those who have dreams of staying put and building a life on a homeland. He envisions the world as a constant struggle of what at first may be labeled conquerors and victims but later are more specifically assigned the roles of exploiters and nurturers. This is complicated by a revolving cycle of those who exploit in turn being exploited, as elements of each are inborn for all citizens as products of the society that created them. The author likens the two roles of exploiter and nurturer to strip mining for the former and what he terms the “old-fashioned ideal of a farmer” for the latter.6

The national review of agriculture in this research will reveal the exploiter role has been assumed by many constituencies often for logical reasons within the context of their times. The government, corporate entities, and farmers both large and small have seen the land as a resource from which the greatest production must be obtained in the most efficient manner. Berry offers that within each person there is the elements of both nurturer and exploiter and indeed the exploiter may become the exploited. This cultural tendency casts an important shadow on the events in agriculture from 1890 to 1990.

Paul Conkin offers a brief but cogent history of the American farm leading up to 1890 in *A Revolution Down on the Farm*. Conkin sets the stage by describing a

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farm community often considered self-sufficient but in reality dependent on trade of all kinds. This immediate functional dependence on commerce provides the impetus for seeking cash crops. The author takes the reader through an early agribusiness tour from lumbering to tobacco and on to cotton, wheat, and corn. Conkin describes a land so vast that as it wore-out one could simply move on. This description fits well into the dual definition of nurturing and exploitation. This author continues his historical review by examining the output of these past agrarians. He points out that the early advantage of abundance due to fertile land, acquired skills, and the gradual development of tools to assist in production and harvest. These attributes allowed America to compete on the world market with the lowest price, often-exchanging foodstuffs for manufactured goods. In that time period, Conkin estimates that over ninety percent of the population was tied in one form or another to agriculture. By 1870 the introduction of the reaper and combine transformed the labor equation. At that point in American history one farmer was able to feed a total of four families, by 1900 six, and in 1930 almost ten. These numbers represent what Deborah Fitzgerald explains as the industrialization of agriculture in full bloom.

In her book, Every Farm A Factory, Fitzgerald writes of an agricultural system that seldom serves the best interest of the family farmer or the land but is deemed inevitable by government and business. While less explicit than Berry, Fitzgerald presents a case of exploitation that is more endemic, painting the family farm community as willing participants in their own demise. Her story conjures the image of farmers unwittingly rushing to new technology even as it dooms them to obsolescence.

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8 Productivity remained an issue through much of the nineteenth-century with more than fifty percent of human labor necessary to procure food. Ibid.5.
9 Ibid.3.
In the long run, the pursuit of efficiency damaged the family farm but in the short run it was logical to farmers and the government. The United States Department of Agriculture was established in 1862, when a majority of voters were farmers. The farm community’s hope was that it would aid them in becoming more productive, which would translate to greater income. The USDA’s mission to secure high levels of production remained a constant target from its first organization forward. National priorities have generally taken the lead in the actions of this powerful arm of the government. The USDA became an agency obsessed with tracking by the numbers as a means of understanding what was happening in agriculture and how to control it. Fitzgerald declares this the historical moment when the profession of farming in the United States became “Rational and legible to the State, when it became national policy to ensure farmers operate in as standardized and routine manner as possible.”\(^{11}\) This target fits well with the factory/corporate farm vision but may be seen at odds with the more conventional family farm concept.

Between 1870 and 1890 the department fleshed out its ranks with bureaus and divisions and then agricultural colleges to facilitate communication and education. The land grant colleges created in 1862 and established in every state by the turn of the century were charged with the research and dissemination of greater methods of production and efficiency. This form of systemized training in agricultural science and engineering was another primary force in the move toward industrializing farming. It was no longer rational to operate diverse farms; specialization drove the efficiency of effort and made the selection and operation of mechanized equipment more productive, sparking an increase in both numbers and size of these tools.

In 1900, one could have concluded that the USDA had done well. Certainly farmers were.\(^{12}\) 1900 to 1920 would be dubbed the “Golden Age” of agriculture and cited for the next fifty years as “the economic ideal to be sought through government

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11 Ibid, 36.
12 The January 1, 1900 issue of the New York Times, which stated in the 1899 economic review, “The farmer, the miller, the stockman, and all classes engaged in like industries are reaping the benefits that flow from bounteous harvests and good prices.” Bruce L Gardner, American Agriculture in the Twentieth Century: How it Flourished and What it Cost, (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 2002), 1.
policy."Farmers welcomed prosperity, but their means to that end, the pursuit of efficiency, created a contradiction. Farm income is based on production, yet production generates surplus, which in turn depresses prices causing farmers to produce more to make up the difference in lost income. This spiral condition drives farmers for further dependence on government policy to increase foreign trade, expanding the market in hopes of increased prices. This dependence is often a risky partnership as the trade goals of the Nation take precedence over the needs of the farming community. The balance of trade often requires cheaper prices of American agricultural products for competitive advantage; here lies the crossed purpose of the USDA, as they work to increase production to keep competitive price advantage for foreign trade even to the detriment of the producers. However, these people did not know the future. At the time, to many of them, the pursuit of efficiency and the drive for expansion seemed smart.

Growth in production up to about 1900 was determined by the expansion onto land that had marginal use prior, but through technological advances was now viable. In fact the decade of 1890 to 1900 saw the largest increase in farm use of land, growing nearly two hundred million acres. From 1900 forward, the growth was now dependent on the more efficient and effective use of the preexisting landscape. All land had effectively transferred to private ownership by 1900 with the exception of around three hundred million acres in the west that would transfer from 1900 to 1960.

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13 Ibid. 1.
14 Ibid, 3.
15 The 1902 Federal Reclamation Act used funds gained from the sale of western lands to build dams and regional irrigation projects making arid land viable. This act was effective through 1923 when the funds ran out and were replaced with borrowed monies; ultimately it accounted for one fifth of all irrigated lands. Since most of the cost for these projects had no commiserate income, they may be considered subsidy programs. Under these programs the irrigated western land increased from around seven and half million acres in 1900 to almost fourteen million by 1920. Ibid, 178-179.
Commercial infrastructure developments in the early years of the twentieth century were motivated by legislation that promoted agricultural marketing cooperatives. The extension programs, handled through the land grant colleges, carried out much of this work, operating under a policy called “teach by doing not telling” created by Dr. Seaman Knapp. This program facilitated the start of Farm Bureaus. The Farm Bureaus spread nationally from 1911 to 1920 originally acting as a social opportunity for farmers to exchange communication; they eventually became the voice of farmers for legislative priorities.16

As the decade of 1910 to 1920 progressed, hostilities in Europe presented opportunities for American agriculture to market and sell surplus internationally. The increased demand during World War I drove farmers to expand their operations so they might take advantage of the growth market and its positive effects on prices. To assist and promote this development the Federal Farm Loan board, created in 1916, instituted the first nationally chartered and regulated rural credit institutions offering farm mortgages. These loans along with other incentives to expand production would prove to be a mixed blessing as the war ended.17

The net effect of these developments along with the progress in field implements generated a fantastic production increase as seen in the comparison of the 1910 and 1920 Agricultural Census figures. The total increase of agricultural production in that decade exceeded $5,764,815,110. During the same time the number of farms increased by a small margin of about 120,000 to just over

17 International marketing assistance was created in the form of the Food and Fuel Control Act of 1917. This gave the new Food Administration the power to regulate foreign and domestic trade. Their charge was to seek out and limit waste and hoarding as well as offer subsidies for the importation of fertilizer and the support necessary for its domestic production. The goals were to increase production, lower margins and rid international trade of excesses in profiteering. The government activism shown in these programs was in line with the progressivism of the time period. Gardner, American Agriculture in the Twentieth Century: How it Flourished and What it Cost 186 - 187.
6,400,000.\textsuperscript{18}

The growth in production in the decade preceding 1920 resulted in a rising standard of living in rural communities nationwide. This improved status should not be overstated as the average farm family was still living in the previous century compared to their city cousins. Electrification for much of rural America was still two decades away. Though mechanized implements were prevalent, and indeed a major contributing factor in the growing profitability of farms, much of the work was still performed with horse and mule power. The attraction to an urban life with greater income opportunity and modernity was significant for the youth of rural America. In this decade the population accelerated its transformation from an agrarian nation to an urban one. The farm population remained flat for the first extended period in our history, while non-farm rural population increased by twenty-five percent and the urban growth exceeded forty-four percent.\textsuperscript{19}

In the 1920s the need for economic research in the field of agriculture became a vital conversation among the proponents of farm management and farm economics. The falling prices resulting from the end of the war concerned government officials, but ultimately they were unable to develop the appropriate actions to stem the oncoming crash. As the economists began reviewing farm operations, they found over half of the farmers were operating blindly without true accounting methods to determine their profitability. With the 1921 crash the concerns over farm management became a farm management crisis. Anxiety over the erratic nature of the commodity markets of the 1920’s, and over the federal tax would assist economists in generating farmers’ interest in farm management.\textsuperscript{20}

Prices did not return to the 1920 level throughout much of the twentieth century and had actually fallen below the 1933 level by 1990. The strongest price period post 1920 would be from 1940 to 1950 based on strong international markets

\textsuperscript{19}Gardner, American Agriculture in the Twentieth Century: How it Flourished and What it Cost, 93.
\textsuperscript{20}Fitzgerald, Deborah Kay. Every Farm a Factory: The Industrial Ideal in America Agriculture. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 45-47.
during World War II and the rebuilding years following. The result of the slump in the agricultural economy of the early 1920’s was accompanied by a migration from farming to urban settings. This was the case from 1921 through 1930; however, as the 1930s began and economic conditions worsened across all work segments, there was a back to the farm movement that led to an increase in farms to the highest level in America’s history, as seen in Table 1.  

Table 1. National Number of Farms 1910-1935

![Bar chart showing number of farms from 1910 to 1935]

Source: USDA Agriculture Census,1932, table 1.

By the 1930’s nearly half of all farmers were on the verge of bankruptcy. Government intervention was no longer optional; immediate action was needed as a national security measure. Even with the actions taken, over twenty five percent of farmers would eventually lose their farms. This marks the first major wave of family farm departure from the American landscape. From 1930 to 1938 the combined efforts of administrations from both parties and eight years of congressional work built the modern farm policy that included agencies, bureaus, and legislation much of which was still in place in 1990. The majority of these efforts were geared toward price stabilization, the administration of farm management, and technological

Perhaps the most broad-based program of the New Deal era that has had enduring impacts was the Rural Electrification Administration. Through the auspices of this agency, electricity and phone services were established in rural communities beginning in 1935. Few programs could match the social impact of the REA as it brought light and communication to these communities nationwide. Closely related to the impact the REA made by connecting communities was the nearly one hundred percent increase in investment in education and research accomplished in the New Deal years.

As the 1940s began, war was again the driving force in agricultural marketing. Higher prices were now accompanied with the best-cost margins achieved to date in fact better than any since. The realization of equity in effort to return with their urban brethren came close to fruition for rural communities. As a result of the controls on consumer goods and aggressive food rationing, there were limits on the profits farmers could enjoy. This held the price of land in check, as there was not enough advantage for speculation. The war years saw minor changes in technology on the farms as industrial production was occupied in the war effort. Electrification continued and those that had been lucky enough to purchase tractors before the war took advantage of the tractor’s greater efficiency when compared to the horse. The dairy industry was one of the most positively affected by the use of electricity that altered the process of milking cows. Lighted barns and electric milking machines

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22 Specific to the farm community, the Agriculture Adjustment Act of 1933 introduced the concept of processors participating in the subsidy of the growers in certain allotted products, hogs, corn, cotton, wheat, and tobacco among them. This program produced excellent results; however, in the years since, the processors have acquired legal relief from their participation leaving the programs as pure subsidies and adding to their bottom line. The AAA placed the government in the farm management role developing production quotas and holdbacks as well as negotiating and subsidizing market pricing.


transformed the once daunting task of handling on average five to six cows to farms with double-digit herds. With this increase in herd levels came a need for larger pastures and fields to support their appetites. The increases in technologically driven efficiency did not have a major impact on shrinking the number employed on farms. This had already been affected by the war effort. There was; however, continued filtering out of farms throughout the war based on other circumstances, and by 1945 the number of farms in America was just over five and one half million or approximately back to the 1890 level. At the same time the number of acres employed were significantly higher than 1890, remaining steady with the 1934 number when a million more farms were in operation.  

In the post war era revisions were made to New Deal legislation yet the goals remained substantially constant. The most important change was the inclusion of set-aside programs. These were used through the 1980s when ultimately almost twenty five percent of cropland was in set-aside. The late 1950s and 1960s were a time of continued mechanization and consolidation of American farms as the number of farms fell from around five and one half million to just over two million seven hundred thousand with the largest drop occurring in 1959 with a twenty three percent decline. The accumulated decrease in farms included a minor decrease in land under till accounting for the average farm size increase to just under four hundred acres by 1969. The causes for this decline are many; however, the largest issue was a twenty percent widening of the gap between the farmers selling price and the consumer price. In other words profitability declined significantly for agricultural products. The activist role the government had played during the war, and the years that preceded it, had spawned an agricultural industry dependent on government market management to ensure price support. 

26 Ibid.  
27 In 1963 President Kennedy conferred with farm groups on whether they preferred production controls with higher prices or the freedom to produce with probable lowe prices. They chose to have the freedom to produce; however, through their political
The two decades from 1970 to 1990 were the most challenging decades for the family farm since the Depression. In the ten years following 1970, there was a forty percent increase in real prices paid by farmers for production items. During this same time family workers on farms dropped by fifty percent, presumably in search of better pay. The most dramatic change was seen in the farm share of the consumer food prices, as from 1970 to 1990 the farm share-to-price gap widened by over one hundred percent.\(^{28}\) These issues coupled with a bubble in farm credit brought on what was dubbed the farm crisis of the 1980s. The resulting combination of these market conditions produced a farm recession that disrupted rural families and communities nationwide.

The bubble, as it now may be called, had its roots in the 1970s. President Nixon had released the dollar to float with world currencies; as its value fell American commodities became relatively cheaper to a world market, based on the favorable currency exchange. This event coupled with poor weather conditions and crop failures around the globe drove the price levels realized by American farmers to some of their highest levels in history. A wheat and grain deal negotiated with Russia in 1972 had a dramatic impact on the prices, driving wheat to double its former level and corn to triple. It appeared the long years of hard work and development of technological and managerial skills had finally bore fruit as the farm income was approaching par with industrial profits. Earl Butz, Nixon’s secretary of agriculture, encouraged farmers to plant as much as they could—“fence row to fence row.” Farmers nationwide were energized to compete for the profits through growth and Butz emphasized the race stating, “Get bigger, get better, or get out.” To promote this growth even further, available credit was entering a unique period. As the OPEC cartel drove fossil fuel prices higher, the profits from lucrative grain deals amplified clout were able to convince Congress to pass a series of deficiency payment programs that would make up the difference between the market price and the target price (often well above the market price). These programs were tied to land setback requirements that led to the huge quantity of idle acreage in the 1980s.


\(^{28}\) Ibid, 155-172.
by climbing inflation allowed farmers to payoff loans with cheap money.29

Kathryn Dudley relates a story of farmers caught up in the expansion fervor of the 1970s in her Minnesota hometown, to which she gives the pseudo name of Star Prairie. In her book Debt and Dispossession: Farm Loss in America's Heartland, she tells of a Farmers Home Administration loan officer comparing the 1970s to a "feeding frenzy". The author goes on to quote this gentleman’s description of the time further:

... everybody was consuming credit like crazy. Rural banks actually ran out of money. We frequently saw some pretty good farmers in our [FmHA] offices, not because the bank did not want to lend to them but because they didn’t have money to lend to the guy. Inflation was heating up real good, especially on farmland. [The price of] land was going up. People could borrow against their land to cover their losses, their mistakes, whatever. People that would’ve been struggling could keep going because of easy credit. People that were doing well used this easy credit to expand, buy machinery, gobble up the neighbor’s land, and bid up land, whatever. It was a self-perpetuating spiral that sort of fed on itself.30

This same story played out across America as farmers took on record debt assuming there would be no end to the record profits they were experiencing as the farm income tripled from 1971 to 1973. By the end of the decade, farm income would be ten percent higher than at the beginning, when adjusted for inflation. Compared to the twenty years prior to 1970, when real income fell thirty-eight percent, farmers were experiencing a renaissance.31

The stage then was set for what may be considered the deathblow to small farms and the lifeblood of rural communities. Policies in the 1950s and 1960s, that were geared toward over-production and resulted in low prices, had created a farm community starved for opportunity. The 1970s offered hope in the form of Trojan horse gifts. Farmers capitalized on huge export sales and easy credit. Inflation drove

31 Gardner, American Agriculture in the Twentieth Century: How it Flourished and What it Cost, 129.
the value of the land beyond imagination and the credit continued to flow. In 1971 farm debt totaled $54 billion, by 1985 it was $212 billion, at the time larger than the combined debt of Brazil, Argentina, and Mexico.\textsuperscript{32} Raw capitalism at its finest was in full bloom and the profits were staggering for those that were in tune with the changing needs of management. The market, however, offered a false profit to those who were not sophisticated in the realm of finance. Many family farms became over dependent on future income that was not forthcoming as the bubble burst.

The 1980s began with a grain embargo levied upon the Soviet Union by the Carter administration in response to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. The effects this embargo had on Russia were negligible, as they were able to secure grain from other sources. On the other hand, the effects this action had on the farm community were significant. The presidential election of 1980 ushered in the Ronald Reagan administration. One of his first actions was to end the grain embargo in April of 1981. Reagan took office with the objective of lowering farm subsidies and shrinking government. Driven by the huge farm product surpluses that had accumulated in the second half of the 1970s, Richard Nixon had expanded the Federal Food Stamp program by liberalizing access. The costs of the plan had soared in spite of efforts by the Carter administration and Congress to slow its growth. Though the costs were high, the actual impact on the total farm sales was less than one percent, while nearly ten percent of the population was participating in the program. The major complaint of this form of assistance was that taxpayers were subjected to costs for both buying the surplus commodities and then again for their distribution to recipients. Reagan wanted to create a more market-based form of agriculture policy. His goal was to increase foreign sales to minimize government purchase of surplus and lower the burden on taxpayers. The issue was complicated by the efficiency of farmers themselves.

By 1980 farms had achieved a level of productivity that exceeded domestic needs by over forty percent. This surplus would either need to be exported or purchased by the government and stored. The possibility of exportation was

hampered by the grain embargo and storage actually compounded the issue, as the next year's supply would become available, the problem would continue to escalate. Due in part to the Carter administration’s foreign policy, exports were not sufficient to handle the surplus production and also clear the federal storehouse backlog. While these developments were occurring for the farm community the consumers were faced with double-digit inflation reaching twenty-one percent by 1980. In an effort to control the rising prices, the Federal Reserve raised interest rates limiting cash in order to affect a lower inflation rate. This in turn squeezed market prices sending farm products lower. Farmers were slow in either the recognition of the market dynamics, or how long term they may be. This allowed for a disconnect in the valuation of land to the potential return in production income. Land values continued to rise, even while the market deflated to unprofitable levels. The result was farmers over producing, forcing prices to lower even further. To maintain their farm and lifestyle, they accumulated greater debt against what was becoming over inflated land value. By 1982 the bottom fell out of land market. According to the 1984 Wisconsin Blue Book, by 1982 the ninety thousand Wisconsin farms held the sixth highest debt to value ratio in the Nation. An inability to meet financial obligations resulted in downsizing, farm sales, and at its worst - bankruptcies. The 1980s were a time of great change in the rural communities, as many long-term successful farmers would be forced out of the profession. By 1992 the Federal Agriculture Census recorded the State had fewer than sixty-eight thousand farms, a decline of twenty-two thousand operations in ten years, or stated another way nearly a quarter of the farm community was gone.33

As family farms were lost, owners lost land and hired help lost jobs, stores closed, schools were forced to merge, rural population declined forcing the few job generating industries to reassess their chosen location. Rural communities that were economically depended on the surrounding farm families died. Osha Davidson explains that economists use a water metaphor to describe the resulting impact felt by

rural communities, as family farms were lost, calling the phenomenon a ripple effect. She goes on to say that the more analogous metaphor would be a sinkhole, as this geographic event is the result of underground (unseen) erosion of the foundation of the soil that is not apparent until the hole forms.\textsuperscript{34} One may liken much of the exploitation accomplished by, for, and to farmers during the one hundred years of history from 1890 to 1990, as erosion under the family farm culminating in the agricultural crisis of the 1980s.

\textsuperscript{34} Davidson, \textit{Broken Heartland: The Rise of America's Rural Ghetto}, 52.
Discussion

Overview of the Development of Farming in Wisconsin and Specifically Columbia and Dodge County

A historic review of central southern Wisconsin rural communities, the economic impact of farming transformation, the social impact of the population migration from farms to urban communities, and the political changes in local governance.
Nationally family farm totals significantly declined and the impact, particularly between 1980 and 1990 was devastating to many rural communities. The decline of family farms had a negative social, economic and political impact on the rural society, and was the result of several factors including the poor profit to effort ratio of farming, the increased productivity of mechanization and the influence of government actions that actively or inadvertently favored larger more specialized agricultural pursuit. The balance of this study will focus on creating a more specific picture of the effects that the structural changes have had on Wisconsin, Columbia and Dodge Counties, and specific family farms within the region (Figure 1).

A 2008 MSN article offered evidence that landowners of all types are twenty-five percent more likely to vote than their counterparts. Non Profit Vote corroborates this point in a longitudinal study that shows income and ownership are closely related. This report shows lower income voters are twenty-eight percent less likely to vote. These two studies show a clear relationship between land ownership and voter participation.

Wisconsin has traditionally been very active politically. This tradition has deep roots prior to the turn of the twentieth century. Active participation at all levels has been documented showing influence on state politics asserted by farmers, organized labor, and many of the State’s major businesses in the form of first

lumbering then railroads and finally agribusiness. The influences of national movements such as the Progressives have had their share of impact as well. Currently the state holds the status of being in the top two states for voter turnout. Yet, even in a state with a long tradition of political participation, only slightly over half of the individuals that comprise the thirty-two percent of the population that rent are likely to vote. This may be compared to over seventy percent of landowners exercising the same right. Other forms of civic participation are affected in a similar, if not greater, fashion. While ownership in general is a broader issue than farms, this paper is focused on the specific factors that facilitated a major decline in farms owned by individual families. As farms are consolidated into ever-larger entities, a greater number of people become less likely to be landed citizens. This in turn may facilitate less political involvement and a move toward self-disenfranchisement.

Wisconsin's landscape itself exposes the portrait of this transformation from smaller family unit farms to larger entities. The number of active farms in Wisconsin has shrunk from a high in 1934 of 200,000 to the current number of less than 68,000 according to the United States Department of Agriculture National Agricultural Statistics Service. The five most recent years have seen a loss of about five hundred farms per year. With the loss of these farms the community loses precious resources. These come in many forms. The most obvious is job creation, not just on the farm as the primary economy but the secondary and tertiary positions as well. The 120-acre farm in the post World War II era would have supported between two and three full-time positions as well as providing part-time positions for the children who may have played a role as additional farm hands. The loss of the 132,000 farms between 1934 and the current total represents nearly 400,000 full- and part-time jobs that have been

lost to the State. Increasing the total loss were the positions lost from the community that would have supplied those workers with services such as retail sales, maintenance, health care, education, banking, and insurance. The ripple effect of these lost positions becomes staggering.

The social impact of this change cannot be ignored. When economic status changes in anyone’s life, his social position, personal wellbeing, and family stability are all at risk. These issues have generated changes in many rural communities leading some sociologists to dub the recent phenomenon as the rise of the “rural ghetto.” This issue is often ignored in the face of inner city economic woes that have taken center stage for the past forty years. While urban redevelopment has been sought with varying degrees of success in many cities, the rural communities across the Nation have watched their main streets become pockmarked with empty store fronts and the countryside dotted with decaying barns and houses that once were the homes of America’s yeomanry. The struggles of many small farm communities are often missed as hidden stories on back roads. The flow of land from the common hands of the many to the few wealthy hands of land investors is reminiscent of the land speculations of bygone eras.

This transfer of wealth and ultimately political power has a self-perpetuating momentum as the policies are dictated by political decisions dominated by ever-larger business and land ownership. The dislocation and dispossession of families on the farm has brought with it a void of local political activists. Those individual farm landowners with vested interests in the community, its schools, its businesses, and its future in partnership with the operators of local secondary economy suppliers were the backbone of rural communities. Now those same communities must bend over backwards to draw industry in for hourly jobs often with no guarantees of a future as the business is in a constant state of courtship from other communities with ever better deals, or in danger of foreign replacements determined by a distant parent corporation.

For the purposes of this paper, the story of Wisconsin’s agriculture begins

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40 Davidson, Broken Heartland: The Rise of America's Rural Ghetto, 5.
with the conversion from grain and cattle farming to dairy. In the post Civil War period, half of Wisconsin's population was made up of settlers transferred from Ohio, New England, and Pennsylvania where their early training had been in the cultivation of wheat. The low capitalization and minimal field maintenance required in growing wheat coupled with the increased demand for the grain due to the growth of industry in the Northeast and England made growing wheat very appealing. The state had good success immediately with the cultivation of wheat in the southeastern region. This coupled with a very aggressive campaign to attract new settlers grew the number of farms at just over 20,000 in 1850 to 69,270 operations exporting the equivalent of 1,300,000 bushels of the grain from the Great Lakes ports by 1860.41 This type of production of course could not be sustained, as the Yankee tradition of exhausting the soil was no different in the early days of Wisconsin than it had been in the East.

The concept of soil preservation and conservation was not prevalent in the day. The plentiful availability of land generated a scorched earth farming methodology where one uses up the soil then moves to literally greener pastures. This however was not the case of the German settlers that at that time made up about one-sixth of the population. Having come from a planting intensive farm background in Germany they were more aware of the use of fertilizers; in addition they were not as willing to leave the convenience of the near by ports. From the beginning, they utilized more diversity in crop selection with vegetables and orchards being a vital segment of their production. This form of farming was less efficient and more time consuming but fit with the patience of a people intent on staying put.42

The Wilhelm Krueger family is a prime example of this group. The family records show the purchase of land in Dodge County near Watertown in 1861. Working the land with his family, Krueger settled all accounts on that mortgage by 1866 and then went on to purchase a few other properties. The Kruegers were among the first farmers in the south-central region of Wisconsin to adopt dairy farming. Their records will be used in the ensuing section to compare farm production.

42 Ibid. 221.
valuation in the post World War I era.

For those that remained true to their eastern training, the growth of wheat would continue through the decades of the 1860s and 1870s. The invention of the reaper by Cyrus McCormick may be seen as the first major mechanized influence on Wisconsin farming. The transformation of the use of labor brought to the farm by this piece of equipment was the nearly the equivalent of the cotton gin for the South. Additional labor saving devises would soon follow with the Appleby knotter used to bind the grain stalks for straw. This process once required the labor of two men on a platform of the reaper but now could be done automatically with twine. Next the Case thresher, produced in Wisconsin, could remove the wheat grains from the cut tops, a job formally done by many hired hands or members of large families with flails. Through the use of these tools the efficiency with which the land was exploited increased. As the soil was depleted, many attempts were made to convert to other farm ventures. For a brief time Sauk and Columbia county farmers became one of the Nation’s leading producers of hops. Unfortunately, a louse infestation and New York’s return to production of hops led to a crash in this market. Though calamitous for many farmers in the region, this event led to a transformation of Wisconsin’s agriculture.

William Dempster Hoard was a hops producer near the city of Columbus, Wisconsin where he lost his investment in the 1868 crash. Seeking a replacement for the failed concern, he fell back on training he had received as a youth in New York in dairy production and cheese making. Not having the investment capital to start his own concern he chose instead to start a newspaper, the Jefferson County Union. Hoard would use this paper as a vehicle for promoting the dairy industry, urging farmers to “substitute the plow with the cow.” This would become a life long

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43 Wool production was a fairly successful industry in the southeastern portion of the State. Animal husbandry became the next wave of production, as need for wool declined the sale of mutton replaced it which led to the addition of oats in the crop choices. The increase of hogs led to the cultivation of corn, specifically in the southern two-thirds of the State.
Ibid. 228.
44 Ibid. 229.
mission.45

Hoard's efforts effectively converted Wisconsin to the dairy industry by the turn of the twentieth century. The Census of 1900 was the first to measure progress of the dairy farm business. In that year to qualify for the designation of a dairy farm, forty-percent of the establishment’s income must have been obtained through the sale of milk and milk products. Using these standards, about one-seventh of the State’s farms were considered dairy farms. At the time of that census, the state had reached nearly a million cows specifically bred for milk production.46

While the view of most Americans is that new settlements across the Nation exemplified independent determination, these events did not occur without significant assistance and influence from Federal agencies, State governments, and other interested organizations.47 Significant institutional assistance may be seen in the progression of the dairy industry. First, for dairy products such as butter and cheese to be adequately distributed to markets, farmers needed a dependable and fast form of transportation. Railroads would provide the means for Wisconsin farmers to distribute and market fresh, quality dairy products. While this stunted the growth of dairy in the northern portions of the state, where many miles of rail originally built for the defunct lumbering were already abandoned, the southern and central parts of Wisconsin had a reliable rail system intact.

The central and southern areas of the State had railroads established by the Milwaukee, Soo Line and Northwestern companies before the dairy market existed, and the relationships between rail and agriculture had been firmly established in these areas for the shipment of wheat in the 1860s and 1870s. By the latter portion of the nineteenth and early years of the twentieth centuries, the rail enabled the rapid

45 Milwaukee Journal, February 17, 1935.
46 Hoard not only promoted the use of cows bred for maximum milk production but also the advances in nutrition that aided in that production. Having studied the work of French agriculturalist Aguste Goffart on the benefit of fermenting forage, Hoard began to advocate the use of silos.46 By 1900 there were 716 of these structures, in the next twenty years that number would grow to over 100,000.
transportation of Wisconsin dairy products to Great Lakes ports and opened major markets for cheese in the East and internationally with England.48

The State’s educational infrastructure provided institutional assistance for all forms of Wisconsin’s agriculture, particularly the burgeoning new dairy industry. By the 1880s the College of Agriculture at the University of Wisconsin was leading the movement toward improved production. It created the short courses in cooperation with the County Extension services established through the Department of Agriculture. In 1886 the farmers' institutes were created and taken to the field through the extension agents.

Social interaction would provide the third form of institutional assistance. Extension agents would facilitate county meetings of farmers to discuss the agricultural issues of the day and exchange best practices, generating improved methodology across all sectors. The State Fair, County fairs and exhibitions also educated through displays and lectures and created an opportunity for interaction with suppliers of new technologies and mechanization. The assistance of these agencies and programs resulted in higher quality production of cheese and butter on the farm. State inspection requirements would ultimately force the transfer of production from the farm to the factory and allowed for even more consistency in these milk products facilitated by the cream cooperatives.

First developed as local creameries where farmers would bring their milk for mass separation, cream cooperatives evolved to facilities for standardized cheese and butter production. The federal government supported the cooperative movement through the extension service. The goals of these organizations were to allow farmers to jointly market their products directly to consumers and international markets. The predominate dairy exports during the first decade of the twentieth century were butter and cheese. When the first Borden’s condensed milk plant opened in Monroe a new method of marketing fluid milk products was begun. Canned fluid milk became a substantial portion of the dairy export business and by 1920 Wisconsin controlled a quarter of the Nation’s condensed milk market. With the growth of dairy, agriculture

continued its expansion as the primary industry of the State, and the state showed its commitment by establishing the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture in 1915.

The work of the State’s Department of Agriculture consisted of the enforcement of laws for the protection of agriculture, the control of animal and plant diseases, and putting into operation up-to-date methods of agriculture to aid farmers, particularly new settlers. Wisconsin’s agricultural policy placed the control of regulatory and administrative work under this department. The education and experimental work in the College of Agriculture proved so logical and practical that it was adopted by the United States Department of Agriculture for the entire Nation.49

The department did show significant success in its dairy herd testing, cleaning up a high percentage of cows showing signs of tuberculosis. In addition the department supported the pasteurization of fluid milk.50 Though it had obvious success in this industry, the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture did not limit its work to dairy. In its first eight years of operation the department successfully addressed, hog Cholera control, bee disease eradication, minimization of the sale of dead seeds, and the creation feed and seed regulation to rid the state of many weed issues.51

In addition to the Department of Agriculture, the State established a Department of Markets whose expressed responsibility was to develop and standardize markets for the agricultural products of the state. Working from the premise that the typical citizen lived an average of 1000 miles from the point of production, this department assisted farmers in the complexities of marketing their production as well as facilitated the access to the basic needs associated with that production. The department also acted as a liaison between shippers and producers to minimize conflict. The third responsibility held by this department was to support

50 These two efforts moved Wisconsin to the forefront of the Nation’s high quality, safe milk producers. Through the joint efforts of the federal and state government agencies the University of Wisconsin's College of Agriculture, UW Extension office, farm cooperatives and the individual farmers, Wisconsin had built the foundation for becoming America’s leader in dairy production.
Ibid. 286.
51 Ibid. 286.
standardization and inspection of all products. The intent being that properly graded
and tested production would generate the highest quality products and in turn garner
the highest prices. Next the department would support market news including price
conditions in all major centers. This service would be made available for all citizens
without cost. Support of the industry cooperatives, inspection of management
standards, and supervision of a products exposition to promote Wisconsin goods to
the national and international marketplace would complete the roles of the
Department of Markets.\(^2\)

As in the Nation as a whole, 1900 to 1920 was the golden age for Wisconsin
farmers. Farms increased from about 160,000 to nearly 190,000 reaching the near
peak of numbers for the state. Accompanying this growth in operations was a
significant growth in the value of those farms, with a statewide increase of
$2,700,000.00. In each of the four segments in which the census divides farm assets,
land, buildings, implements, and livestock, growth occurred. Since the total value
increase stated above included newly developed land, the real growth of existing
farms was seventy-seven percent, increasing the per acre value to $120.78. This
placed the agricultural land value of Wisconsin as the ninth highest in the Nation.\(^3\)
The income gap between farms and urban jobs, always difficult to determine,
appeared to be at an all time low. Wisconsin farms were not just growing in numbers
but also in size. The fastest growing census segment was occurring in those concerns
that were five hundred acres and larger.

Mechanization was rapidly decreasing the number of hours required for
production, and legislation was primarily geared to assistance rather than production
or profit limiting regulations. The growth of the family farm seemed secure for that
shining moment. There were several factors that contributed to this temporary
positive outlook such as: a strong international trade spurred by war conditions in
Europe, a rapid growth in domestic population, increased marketing and distribution
efforts, and specific to Wisconsin, sales of dairy stock that was considered some of
the best in the Nation. The state’s policies and legislation facilitated much of this

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\(^2\) Ibid. 287.

\(^3\) Ibid. 34.
growth.\textsuperscript{54}

The economic success enjoyed on the farm translated to other forms of growth within the state. The number of retail stores increased by fifty percent exceeding forty-five thousand in the first decade of the twentieth century, school districts grew to over seven thousand, and home ownership had topped sixty percent. Farming, and the businesses farm production supported drove this economic accomplishment with nearly eighty percent of the state having some connection to Agriculture. Evidence of the impact agriculturalists had may be seen in the number of farmers holding civic positions. Cross checking names against the 1920 census occupation column exhibits the fact that nearly half of the State Board of Education had farm ties. A similar sampling check for State Assemblymen and County Board members yields comparable results.\textsuperscript{55} Several members of the Krueger family participated in civic responsibilities most notably Wilhelm’s son, August, held the roles of Town Chairman for the Township of Emmet and later the position of treasurer. Other family members participated in the leadership of the local dairy cooperative, school boards,

\textsuperscript{54} The Populists movement, begun in response to the federal move to the gold standard, had a positive effect on Wisconsin legislation, particularly during the tenure of Robert La Follette’s administration as governor. La Follette adopted many of the Populists’ platform ideals in his version of progressivism. Under La Follette the state passed legislation that helped to lower the cost of shipping by rail, and changed the cumbersome methods previously in place for banking regulation. Prior to a 1902 amendment to the State’s constitution, all banking legislation had to be accomplished through statewide referenda. Originally intended as a method for the citizens to have direct control of banks, this process essentially left banks without regulation. The new amendment placed the supervision of banks under the State Banking Department. As evidenced from the Banking Commissioners annual report from 1913, the most effective actions of the department were in the examination and standardization of banks that led to greater reserves and tightened banking practices. The department may also be credited with the support it gave to increasing the number of institutions available. This increase fostered greater competition and that led to lower interest rates. This gave Wisconsin a distinct advantage in mortgage rates that averaged eight tenths of a percent below the national average. The interest rate of just over five percent would be used by sixty percent of the State’s farmers for mortgages worth on average just over $4000.00. The availability of money was considered a boon for new farmers, particularly as it allowed easier entry into the farm business and contributed to the growth shown above.

\textit{The Blue book of the State of Wisconsin 1923}, (Madison: [s.n.], 1923), 17-23.

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid.
and chamber of commerce. On its surface it appeared that the joint efforts of the agrarian citizenry with effective government support in marketing and education had produced an unqualified success. Wisconsin in 1920 may have been viewed as one of the closest examples to Thomas Jefferson’s agrarian republic to exist in the Nation’s history. This success would be short lived as the State would enter a long slide as the market adjusted in the post World War I era.

The opportunity for quick profits between 1914 and 1920 enticed farmers to invest more funds to enlarge or modernize their operations. The sales growth that accompanied the war driven economy provided false security. Many overextended their mortgage costs, straining their ability to support it by using borrowed monies. Unfortunately, low interest and readily available money placed farmers in a high-risk position, as they sought funds to expand or mechanize. These loans resulted in debt held on farms increasing ninety-two percent from 1910 to 1919. On average this represented a debt of $4,072.00 on a farm valued at $10,765.00 in 1920; this same farm in 1910 would have had a debt of $2,116.00 against a value of $6,160.00. Though the value of the farm had increased by nearly seventy-five percent, the mortgaged amount increased ninety-two percent. The total dollar value of farm mortgages in the State increased by one hundred and forty-one percent during this time period, up from the 1910 figure of $146,815,313.00 to a 1920 amount of $354,574,391.00.

Taken within the context of rising prices, these numbers may not present a portrait of risk; however, the market conditions of the period should have created some concerns. The role of both the State and the Federal Departments of Agriculture included responsibilities to educate. Both departments accepted the role as it related to the production of farm goods; however, they both failed in regards to assisting farmers with the changing responsibilities of farm financial management. The Department of Agriculture became so intent on the increase in production as it continued to create positive trade balances that it failed to project the impact of a post

57 The Blue Book of the State of Wisconsin 1923, (Madison: [s.n.], 1923), 35-37.
war slow down. Perhaps the farmers themselves should have been more conservative and assumed the responsibility of such projections; however, the average farmer was ill prepared to recognize the macroeconomic market conditions.\textsuperscript{58}

The 1921 crash in farm production prices hit Wisconsin as hard and in some ways harder than other states because of its heavy economic dependence on agriculture. Nationally farm product prices decreased nearly fifty-five percent across all segments. The 1921 Wisconsin Dairy Statistics report shows that cheese production in Columbia County for 1919 was 5,513,419 pounds and sold for $1,531,793. In 1921 5,214,318 pounds sold for $859,111. This represents a forty percent decrease in return. From the same report butter production in 1919 was 1,213,6190 pounds sold for $704,385. In 1921 production actually increased to 2,565,091 but sold for $981,010. Though a real dollar increase of $276,625, the price per pound decreased thirty-four and one-half percent.\textsuperscript{59} In nearby Dodge County the Krueger family records show that they experienced a significant reduction in milk prices dropping from $2.21 in 1920 to under $1.64 by the following year.\textsuperscript{60}

\textsuperscript{58} In reviewing the educational background of farmers in comparison with non-rural residents, the 1920 report states that the rural population was less likely to have elementary school attendance and that the state as a whole was below average for high school or college attendance. This lack of schooling would not be considered the true flaw in basic farm operations, as the rural life taught excellent lessons in microeconomics. However, the lack of understanding of the macroeconomic conditions that were creating the market upon which the individual producers were making decisions would prove catastrophic for some. Even with the advent of income tax returns, few operators used debit and credit methods for managing their farms instead they chose simple cash on-hand methods. While prices were strong and on a continuous climb, the fiscal concerns of borrowing and budgeting were hidden time bombs set to implode as farmers were confronted with the market prices of 1921, Ibid.


\textsuperscript{60} Milk prices had remained stable from 1889 to 1902 at around one dollar per hundredweight. The low point was during the Panic of 1893 when prices fell to $.80; this appears to be a one-year phenomenon as prices exceeded $.90 by the following year and back to $1.05 by 1898. Starting in 1908 the prices steadily rose to a 1920 peak of $2.21 per hundredweight. Driven by the war economy and heavy trade with Europe the prices between 1914 and 1920 were very strong, contributing to the best margins of profit for Wisconsin agriculture in the twentieth century.  

Krueger Family Papers 1852-1991, Microfilm From Wisconsin Historical
The Kruegers were an exception to the fiscal mismanagement situation as they were both conservative in their expansion and consistent in their farm accounting. Though hurt from the falling prices, they were able to maintain their farm through the next fifteen years of poor profitability through frugal management and quality production that kept their product at the highest rates available. The same price adjustment experienced by the Kruegers may be seen in statewide statistics with prices on a continuous fall to below $.90 by 1932 constituting an additional of fifty-nine percent loss in market price. Even greater price decreases occurred across other farm output such as wool falling sixty-three percent, hogs dropping seventy-one percent and eggs and wheat declining seventy-four and seventy-five percent respectively. When compared to the overall costs and man-hours required to produce, spendable assets, the gap in real income in comparison to industrial jobs widened significantly sending many marginal operators off the farm. This precipitated in a decrease in the statewide number of farms by over seven thousand-seven hundred operations. In human terms a total population of over forty thousand left agriculture as a profession.

Based on the Krueger records from 1919 to 1925, the milk prices realized from the Rock Creamery decreased by twenty-six percent. The family’s accounting of assets from 1919 to 1924 show the total value of the farm deflated nearly twenty percent. Economic hard times force citizens to make choices. For the Kruegers, as in the case of most farmers, practicality would warrant cutting back on any expenses that were considered conveniences. The choice to disconnect their telephone in 1924 would be in response to the need to save on costs. The omission of this devise was common as nearly sixty percent of all Wisconsin farms had telephones in 1928 but by 1938 only thirty-seven percent were still using them. In many ways the impact of

61 Ibid.
62 Becker, 1932.

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the decade between 1920 and 1930 would return farmers to the way of life they had experienced in 1900. Had there been access to jobs in the non-rural sphere the numbers that left the farm between 1921 and 1932 might have been even more significant. Instead due to the lack of employment opportunities, the 1930's would see a back-to-the-farm movement that would eventually create the highest number of farms in the Nation's and States’ history by 1934.

The Kruegers’ inventory lends additional insight on the model for survival. Wilhelm Krueger lists all of the assets of his farm near Watertown, Wisconsin including sixty head of grade dairy cows valued at $13 each, and 10 older cows at the end of their production worth $2 each. The Kruegers would be milking an average of between fifty-five and sixty-five cows per day. These numbers would represent a milk heard that was nearly twice the size of the thirty-one cows being milked on the average dairy farm of Dodge County in 1920. On this inventory there is an entry for a tractor, placing his farm in an elite class for the time, however he does not have a milking machine or an automobile. The Kruegers chose to invest in mechanization for production rather than comfort. Though the farm is not electrified, power was available with the listed assets showing the inclusion of two mobile gasoline engines. These were in use for corn shelling and grinding, and the production of light for evening milking. These engines would have been more than effective in running the milking machines available in the time period. Like most farmers of the day he opted to not use the machine, instead choosing to milk by hand. It is difficult to determine if this was based on the feeling that machines were detrimental to the cow’s health, it was for cost savings, or just stubborn adherence to the way things had always been done. It is doubtful that the failure to convert to milking machines was some form of Ludditian ideal as mechanization was widely accepted in crop production. For whatever reason the Kruegers chose to not use the milking machine, the labor needed to milk up to seventy cows twice a day by hand would have been

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quite significant.\textsuperscript{66}

Reviewing the 1930 census tabulation of the State’s agriculture statistics offers one insight on an interesting dynamic occurring in farm economics in the decade separating it from the 1920 data. Between 1920 and 1930 Columbia and Dodge Counties experienced a decrease in total farm value. This decrease was seen statewide as well.\textsuperscript{67}

Federal relief efforts in the early 1930s had minimal impact. Even when New Deal programs began, problems at the state level inhibited aid. Wisconsin had used the Department of Farm Institutes from 1885 to 1933 to assist farmers through education programs focused on production cooperatives. This organization successfully aided farmers in the creation of the several marketing cooperatives selling in Wisconsin and cooperatives that would assist in the marketing the production of the State’s farm community in other states. These would cultivate

\textsuperscript{66}Over the next twenty years the acceptance of using milking machines would decrease labor needs on dairy farms by nearly thirty five percent, based on the self-reported labor hours of farmers on the agriculture census. This change alone would require one less farm hand per dairy farm.


\textsuperscript{67}There were variances in the decline as the State averaged twenty-one percent, Dodge County twenty-seven percent, and Columbia County significantly higher at thirty-five percent. Dodge County’s farm business was more heavily weighted toward dairy operations. It had a much greater value base than Columbia County with 1920 figures showing Dodge at $84,506,674.00 and Columbia at $46,811,081.00. The fact that both counties had a greater loss than the State average attest to the impact the farm price crash had on the central counties of Wisconsin. The difference between the two counties represents the value maintained for quality dairy production even in the face of depressed prices. The interesting aspect of the balance of the statistical data from this 1920 to 1930 comparison may be found in the change in inventory value of mechanized implements. In the State numbers, one may see that as buildings and land decreased by twenty-one percent, the value of implements increased by just over eight percent. A similar if not more dramatic comparison occurred in Dodge County with the buildings and land decreasing twenty-seven percent while the inventory of implements increased eighteen percent. Columbia County was dissimilar with a slight decline in implements, possibly due to the major loss in land value depressing the opportunity to reinvest in mechanization.

markets for a diverse agglomeration of Wisconsin products such as tobacco, wool, livestock, and dairy. The Institutes were essential as training grounds on organization and operation of cooperatives. From 1925 to 1933 they were particularly successful in protecting farmers from professional salesmen who would exploit them for their own profit to the detriment of the rural community. In 1933 the funding for this helpful arm of the State government was discontinued due in part to the lack of State funds in general and partially due to the advent of the New Deal programs begun by the Roosevelt administration. Many in the rural areas would be hurt by the departure of this farm assistance program, as it had been the lifeline that kept many farms afloat during the darkest days of the late 1920s and early 1930s.68

The New Deal programs offered the farm community help in several ways but unfortunately failed to deliver on those promises. In Wisconsin several issues would create barriers to true farm assistance. In 1933, former Madison mayor, Albert Schmedeman was elected Governor. He would serve what would come to be noted as an unimpressive term from 1933 to 1935. As a Democrat, it was assumed Schmedeman would work well with the Roosevelt administration’s efforts to ease the Depression driven economic woes of the state. Unfortunately he and his chief advisor Madison Banker Leo Crowley were unsuccessful in gaining the necessary support of the New Deal programs. In addition, Schmedeman dealt with two devastating strikes that greatly lowered the trust he held with Wisconsin citizens.69

69 The first of the strikes to rattle the Governor's administration were the 1933 Milk Strikes. Driven by desperation, farmers that had endured twelve years of declining prices for their labors grew steadily more frustrated as the saw no decrease in the retail prices for the foodstuffs they produced. This disparity in raw prices versus retail prices realized left those that could hang on angry at what appeared to them as obvious exploitation. Across much of the Midwest the farmers pushed to the point of marginal existence, were close to full revolt. Livestock sales embargos, milk dumping, and clashes of many types between farmers and law enforcement were fomenting from New York to Nebraska. In Wisconsin the issues were more complex. The sale of milk for cheese and butter had hit the profitless level of $.60 per hundredweight, while the higher-grade liquid milk producers were getting over double that amount. These dynamics created a situation where marginal producers were pitted against the wealthier (somewhat a misnomer as true wealth in agriculture...
Activities such as the Milk Strike plagued the administration of Schedeman and exacerbated the issues his government had with meeting the State’s responsibilities in the recovery efforts of the New Deal. Schmedeman was unable to secure the matching funds from the State legislators for federal programs due to fiscal concerns that arose from the Governor’s poor handling of the Civil Works Administration. This resulted in the Roosevelt administration labeling Wisconsin as one of the fourteen states that had “passed the buck” in response to recovery. Though members of the same party, Roosevelt viewed Scmedeman as inept and a stumbling block to recovery efforts and ultimately the President withdrew his support of the Governor. In due course these issues led to the replacement of Schedeman by Phil La Follette. Governor La Follette would have greater initial success proposing his 1935 Wisconsin Works legislation. Though he was able to garner tacit support for his progressive party program from Roosevelt, the legislation never passed. Still La Follette was able to pass a series of smaller acts that were characterized by some as the “little New Deal”. 70

Primarily geared toward industrial workers, the greatest impacts La Follette’s legislation had on the rural communities came from its support for the Social Security Act and the Rural Electrification Administration. The latter would ultimately have a major impact on Wisconsin’s farmers. In 1932 only 46,565 of the State’s 190,000 farms were electrified. In Columbia and Dodge Counties there were about eight hundred and nineteen hundred respectively. Closely related to the electrical service disadvantage was the plumbing of farm dwellings. Statewide only 28,454 farms had plumbing to the farmhouse, of those only 14,533 had bathrooms. For Columbia and Dodge Counties these numbers were three hundred fifty-three and six hundred seventy-three. The lack of these aspects of modernity created an even greater

disparity in living conditions between the rural and urban residents of the State.\textsuperscript{71}

Though separated by varying distances, members of the farm community knew their neighbors and interdependence was a common method for providing for the needs not readily available through commercial avenues. As electricity, phones, and indoor plumbing became commonplace characteristics for the urban dweller, farm families would remain without these luxuries for many years. Dedication to tradition, love of the soil, or feelings of independence and achievement garnered from farm living had to be the swaying determinant for the decision to stay on the farm as the Depression years wore on. The profit to effort ratio was not in favor of the farmer nor was the access to conveniences of modern development. By 1935 the back to the farm movement begun in 1933, due in part by the lack of employment opportunity in industry, was already waning. The New Deal legislation was beginning to show some affect on recovery for industry, still agriculture languished in low prices with little relief from either the national or state programs.

The New Deal succeeded in many ways in helping urban workers, which in turn had a positive impact on their purchasing power. This increase in income did flow to agriculture through sales of their products. The programs designed specifically to assist family farms were for the most part ineffective for Wisconsin farmers. Programs such as the Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA) made efforts to force increases in prices through subsidies. Farmers were given cash incentives in exchange for leaving land dormant or destroying the production of selected crops. The government identified nine crops as having the greatest impact on price averages. This program benefited larger farms. However, smaller operations unable to set aside land or those producing crops not on the hold back list received little relief.\textsuperscript{72}

Wisconsin farmers actually only qualified for four of the nine crops selected for limitation, and three of these had little impact.\textsuperscript{73} The corn-hog program would


\textsuperscript{72} Gardner, American Agriculture in the Twentieth Century: How it Flourished and What it Cost, 216.

\textsuperscript{73} Sugar beets were a very minor crop available for adjustment and had a near
offer the greatest assistance in the State with a two-year impact of nearly sixteen million dollars. These programs were paid for through taxing the firms that processed the agricultural products. In this fashion the federal government attempted to equalize the profit made by processors to the profit made by farmers.

The Agriculture Adjustment Act as administered within the State offered a total assistance for 1933 and 1934 of around twenty million dollars. Aside from crop production limitations, the AAA placed limits on milk production providing some improvement in dairy prices but it was not a long-term solution for the State’s impoverished dairy farmers. Weak market prices and drought conditions created desperate times throughout the decade of the 1930s for most Wisconsin farm families. Due to market conditions, lack of State support for the expansion of modern improvements to rural areas, and the forced frugality warranted for survival during the Depression years, the average Wisconsin farmer in many ways was living a lifestyle that was reminiscent of the previous century. This issue was explored in an article entitled, “The Situation in Agriculture” written by the State’s senior agricultural statistician, Walter Ebling. According to Ebling the average farmer had

incalculable impact on the State. Two additional crops had what must be characterized as minimal impact for farms of any size since tobacco and wheat were inconsequential elements of the State’s production in 1933 and 1934, amounting to just over a million and a half dollars in adjustment payments.

Ibid. 218.

74 Ebling in a sense explains the poor economic existence of farm families as a normal cycle of events. Citing a chain of events that creates a repetition of boom bust scenarios during and post wartime periods, Ebling describes the increase and subsequent decline in prices as a normal market function. In this description it appears he believes prices should ultimately remain static and the aberration of the high prices during war were not to be expected as long term growth. Ebling stated; “If previous post-war experience may be taken as a guide, the price levels of the past twenty years are unlikely to recur within the present generation unless another war or some other disturbance disrupts the economic relationships which now seem to be seeking a new equilibrium.” Ebling seems to explain away the Depression as a market readjustment that would level itself. This was of little comfort for the farmers in 1935 that were looking for the State to do more to improve their condition. While Ebling offers no solutions and seems unmoved by the loss of income experienced by the farm community, he does offer evidence and concern over the imbalance of commodities bought versus commodities sold by agriculture.


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forty percent less purchasing power in 1934 than he did in 1929, or stated another way farmers could afford only sixty percent of the goods they needed to purchase.\textsuperscript{75} Essentially the conclusion of the report on the situation of agriculture in 1934 was that it was appropriate for farm pricing to remain constant with the prices experienced at the turn of the twentieth century.\textsuperscript{76} This in effect meant farmers had made no progress toward equity of standard of living since that time and in fact the gap between rural and urban conditions was consistent, perhaps appropriate with market dynamics. This attitude was prevalent in a state government faced with issues of fiscal shortage, urban unemployment, foreclosures, bank closings and a myriad of other problems associated with the depressed economic times.

The Wisconsin family farm was hurting in the mid 1930’s, particularly any farms burdened with mortgages. In contrast farms that were not encumbered with debt, while languishing in a pre-900 lifestyle, were surprisingly untouched by the hard times. Life went on much as it had in the late 1800’s with the farm providing the needs of the family.\textsuperscript{77} Unfortunately many who moved back to the farms were not able to generate the level of income needed to maintain their own operation. It was

\textit{1935, (Madison, WI: Democrat Print, Co., 1935), 47.}
\textsuperscript{75} Ebling explains this issue by taking the 1929 price index for those items purchased by farmers and giving it the one hundred percent point for indexing. This point then compared to the price point scaled on the same standard for 1934 where the prices rate at eighty-one percent. Though lower in relation to the base year when indexed against the rate of change for prices realized for goods sold by the same farmers there is a forty percent negative contrast.

\textit{Ibid, 47.}
\textsuperscript{76} Ibid. 45-57.
\textsuperscript{77} An example of this may be found in a 1933 Milwaukee journal article entitled “No Depression Can Touch This Farm Family”. This article takes the reader on tour of the family farm of Jacob Pay. Here the family grows flax, barley, corn, and wheat. They milk cows, raise beef cattle, collect maple sap, tan leather, spin, and weave wool and linen and produce iron works necessary for all implements. Nearly self-sufficient, the family lived a peaceful, hard working yet fulfilling life untouched by the economic turmoil of the period.\textsuperscript{77} It was this ideal that led a back-to-the-farm movement that reestablished the farm count and grew it to around two hundred thousand by 1934. Farm offered the opportunity to provide sustenance if not cash income unlike urban businesses that required sales to provide the same level of living needs. "No Depression Can Touch This Farm Family." \textit{Milwaukee Journal} 20 Aug. 1933, 1933 ed., sec. Main: 3.
this inability to replicate the independence and skills required to produce the agrarian lifestyle coupled with an improving success of the New Deal in industrial job creation that led to an almost immediate reversal in the farm numbers that had inflated during the mid 1930s back to the farm trend.

For those that remained on the farm the hard times were far from over and the interdependence of rural communities was important for continued survival. Rural societies in Wisconsin were often very close knit. Service organizations, schools, churches, township boards, farm bureaus and cooperatives were all integral parts of their daily life. These interactions were important to the individual’s well being and the political, social and economic health of the region. The ownership and dedication shown by the members of these enclaves could be seen in the amount of time they would invest back into their local townships, clubs, and organizations. Often these people would work a ten to twelve hour day and then go to meetings in the evening to do their civic work. The records of the Krueger family go beyond the economics of their agricultural concern and include a social history of the area. Of particular note was the social function the cooperative creamery lent to the community. The family papers of August Krueger include the diary of his wife in which she explains the fun the family enjoyed at a dance held at the creamery. This affair was attended by all of the farm families associated with this cooperative.78 Perhaps it was this interdependence, a sort of extension to the family unit afforded by the communal aspects of farming that counteracted the lack of modern amenities for some. For those that needed the conveniences that urban life offered, movement off the farm was inevitable.

The second half of the decade of the 1930s brought farms in Wisconsin a slow recovery. To some extent this was due to the actions of the AAA. For the most part family farm economics improved as a result of the balance of New Deal programs improving cash availability in the non farm segments of the economy that in turn improved prices of agricultural production. Other factors were bringing small improvements such as the progress of connecting farms to high line electric service

through the assistance of the Rural Electrification Act. According to the survey of rural electrification of 1939, electrification had been a slow process. From 1927 to 1935 the Nation saw a growth of four hundred thousand farms connected to high wire service. From 1935 to 1938 through the support of the REA development of electric cooperatives, six hundred thousand farms were connected. This represents a one hundred and fifty percent greater number connected in three years than had occurred in the previous eight years. By 1938 just under thirty-five percent of the farms were electrified in Wisconsin. This was the second highest in the Midwest second only to Michigan and better than states like Iowa and Indiana that had greater density of farms per square mile. Columbia County had reached forty-four percent and Dodge sixty-eight percent connection by the publishing of the report. Electrification represented a significant advantage to the farm community in productivity by allowing work past dusk and access to labor saving devises such as milking machines. The electrification also represented a sign of recovery, as though relatively low in price, there was a monthly cost for the service that would not have been easily added to most farm budgets earlier in the decade.79 Other forms of improvement may be found in 1940 article written by Walter Eb ling. Here, Mr. Eb ling discusses the changes in Agriculture over the previous one hundred years 1840 to 1940. Focusing on his review of the late 1930s, Eb ling relates the following observations:

According to reports of assessors, Wisconsin had 61768 tractors in the year 1937, which number has increased annually since then. About one-fourth of the farms in the state have motor trucks and nearly all of the farms have one or more automobiles. Highways have been greatly improved and the whole system of transportation has been completely modified. These items along with rural electrification and general mechanization are now bringing changes at an extraordinary rate.80

80 Eb ling acknowledges that farmers though experiencing advances in modernity were having continued struggles with making ends meet. He cites the fact that savings were afforded the farm community through decreased taxes based on the decline of farmland value. While the savings may have been present, it would have held little value compared to the loss of real wealth. Eb ling himself represents the attitude held by government toward agriculture. His earlier dispassionate discourse on the cyclical
By the late 1930s the second phase of the federal New Deal legislation was in place and though less ambitious than the earlier actions, the combined impact was having a positive affect on several aspects of the economy. In Wisconsin, as with the Nation, agriculture was most impacted by the overall improved condition of consumers who in turn were beginning to buy more. This change in the economy was exploited by the farm industry's increased involvement in cooperative marketing. Between 1929 and 1939 Wisconsin had a thirty-seven percent growth in farmers selling, and a one hundred and twenty percent increase in farmers buying cooperatively. Additionally European turmoil was once again beginning to put pressure on the prices of agricultural goods. The 1940s offered a significant opportunity for farmers, as they would become the foodstuff provider segment for the "Arsenal of Democracy".

Between 1939 and 1940 little change occurred in the basic prices of Wisconsin farm goods, much to the disappointment of the agricultural community. Blockades by Germany and Great Britain had effectively minimized the assumed increase in demand expected by most farmers. Government direct payment programs added in the 1938 Adjustment Act would make up thirty-five and thirty percent of farm net cash income for 1939 and 1940 respectively. This would change with the advent of the United States' mobilization and entry into World War II. In the face of these world events, government direct payments dropped to thirteen percent of the farm income. As the Nation and the world entered 1941, Britain's wartime demands for food as well as the supply needs of an expanding U.S. military placed an upward pressure on agricultural prices. Nationally farmers enjoyed twenty-five percent more

nature of farm pricing and here his overstated imagery of a new standard of living for the farm community speaks to the numbers driven view often taken by the government in the 1930s. In reality, the 1930s was a time of winnowing the less apt through economic trial as farm totals dropped by just over eight percent.


purchasing power than they had in the previous year. Experts in the field anticipated the same type of increase for the following year. Secretary of Agriculture Claude R. Wickard, called for "the largest production in the history of American agriculture to meet the expanding food needs of this country and nations resisting the Axis." Wickard went on to promote increased production through price supports above the climbing market price. Assuming the wartime needs would ultimately outpace the subsidies, Wickard used these incentives to move farmers off the conservative planning mode dictated by the previous two decades of poor market performance. Congress moved to pass legislation to support Wickard’s position on increased production by passing the Steagall Amendment in July of 1941. This amendment directed the Secretary to support at no less than eighty-five percent of parity all non-basic commodities that would require increased production for the war effort. This was increased several times throughout the conflict reaching one hundred percent for some commodities.

While the new prosperity sparked by the war was a welcome relief to the Depression weary farm community, they viewed it with a cautious eye. To many it seemed they were heading onto familiar ground as the average age of tenured Wisconsin farmers was fifty-one. Of all State farmers over half had been on the farms during the worst price drops after World War I. An additional twenty-five percent had been on the farm during at least five years of the Depression. Of the remaining near twenty-five percent, all had experienced some form of deprivation due to the economic hard-times. These numbers trended slightly older than the national averages with about a one-year differential. The State and the Nation had a healthy concern over the long-term viability of a wartime windfall. The government was

83 Parity is essentially defined as a farm income that is on par with the average income of non-rural labor. It also refers to the balance of costs of production against prices realized, indexed against a 1910-1914 base period. This index is a calculation of prices paid for production costs and the costs of family living expenses in relation to the base period. The government estimates the quantities of these products and services.
84 Ibid. 12.
placed in a new role of offering price supports to motivate farmers to take the risk on
greater production rather than to cover the gap between production cost and market
price. The incentives appear to have worked, as a comparison of production from
1940 to 1945 exhibits tremendous growth. Though Wisconsin farms declined in
numbers from 1941 to 1945 by nine thousand representing an eight percent drop,
agricultural land placed in service for production increased by over seven hundred
thousand acres. This increase allowed for a fantastic growth in crops sold from just
over thirty-one million dollars to more than fifty-eight million dollars. This
represents a growth of eighty-seven percent.\(^{86}\) It was apparent Wickard’s call for
production was answered.

Farmers took advantage of a cooperative government environment, in some
cases not only ignoring land allotments but double dipping on setback payments
while receiving subsidy support by planting crops considered vital to the war effort.
The strategic need for production left the government willing to allow this type of
activity in its rush to supply the needs of the military and allied Nations. Most of the
wartime support and incentive legislation had been passed through 1948. Making the
war years and beyond a time of much improved economics for the Nation’s and
Wisconsin’s agriculture. Though production prices rose throughout this period, the
value of land did not greatly improve.\(^{87}\) Speculation was not driving the price of
Wisconsin land up even though the market had regained significant strength. There
was no rush to return to the farm as industrial jobs and military service were
insulating the rural community from any such migration. On the contrary farms
declined in number throughout the war continuing a trend that has not stopped since.
Perhaps more important than the value of the land was the impact the value
appreciation and better markets had on the debt to value ratio of Wisconsin farms.
During the period between 1940 and 1945 debt declined from fifty-four percent to
thirty percent. Representing a forty-five percent decline in debt in a five-year period,
this erased the increase in debt to value that had occurred from 1920 to 1940.\(^{88}\)

\(^{86}\) The increase was not achieved solely based on the price change as the production
saw a substantial surge as well. Corn improved by forty-seven percent, oats by nearly
one hundred percent, and dairy products grew by over one hundred and seventy
percent between 1940 and 1945, Ibid.

\(^{87}\) While the average farm in Wisconsin increased in value from $6,359.00 in 1940 to
$8,070.00 in 1945, on its face appearing to be a twenty-seven percent appreciation,
real growth equated to fourteen percent as the farm had increased in size by ten
percent. When compared to 1930, the land value was still deflated by twelve percent
and from 1920 by just under, thirty-three percent, Ibid.

\(^{88}\) Ibid.
The prosperity felt in the agricultural community was echoed in the urban areas of the Nation. The small cities and villages surrounding the farms of Wisconsin experienced less favorable results as retail establishments declined in number. The surviving retail stores increased their total sales, exceeding previous years but with fewer units. As the war years passed, the rural population declined from five people per household to less than four. While the numbers per household diminished, the state lost nearly nine thousand farms. The movement of population to urban areas resulted in a decline in rural retail. Another factor in the decline in small town retail came as a result of the rural community retail clientele having greater income and improved roads, both reasons for increased use of urban retail opportunities. A more mobile population opted for the greater diversity of shopping in larger cities. These two factors contributed to the decline of retail in the State from forty-seven thousand units in 1939 to forty-six thousand in 1948. This decline, while seeming relatively small, hides the fact that urban retail grew by a substantial margin; meaning rural retail experienced a much greater loss than apparent in the numbers.89

From these numbers one may begin to see a trend that would persist throughout the balance of the twentieth century. First the farm total was declining, second the number of people in a farm household was shrinking, and third the mobility afforded a more prosperous rural citizenry in combination with the previous two elements allowed for the concentration of retail in urban areas. As the farm population shrank and the farm community became less resistant to travel, retail followed the population to urban centers.

Whether fear of the trend of farmers leaving the field (already documented in 1948), the pressure for surplus food to use as a form of diplomacy, a hangover from New Deal legislation, or savvy lobby efforts on the part of the agricultural community, price supports were extended several times, well past the war years. In 1950 and 1951 the programs from the 1948 legislation were continued with little

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revision other than a relaxation of allotments and quotas. The 1950s would end with a track record of continuous subsidy programs geared in theory to support the healthy existence of all farms and in particular the family farm. The actual net result of this support in Wisconsin and the Nation was a continued decline in farm numbers and a trend of increasing farm acreage. Since small farms were either unable to participate at profitable levels or not sophisticated enough in the economics of the programs to take advantage, the over riding majority of subsidies were distributed to the largest producers.

Nationally the farm numbers in 1960 were about three million seven hundred eleven thousand farms down from the 1935 peak of six million eight hundred eleven thousand. This represents a decrease of forty-five percent. In Wisconsin farm totals in 1960 had reached one hundred twenty-eight thousand compared to the 1935 high of nearly two hundred thousand, representing a slightly better performance of a thirty-six percent decrease. These numbers show an exodus of massive proportions when one considers the real numbers of over three million farms gone nationally and over seventy-one thousand in Wisconsin. Using the census average of just under four

90 The Korean War strengthened the position of legislators in favor of fixed-point subsidy programs and again the ninety percent of parity price point was held. In 1953 the ninety percent of parity was extended for most crops and milk supports. Additionally within a year, in July of 1954, the Agricultural Trade Development and Assistance Act, better known as Public Law 480, was approved. This Act, which served as the basic authority for sale of surplus agricultural commodities for foreign currency, to make shipments for emergency relief, and to barter farm products in exchange for strategic material, proved to be of major importance in disposing of farm products abroad. With the passing of this law, farm products were officially adopted as a form of foreign policy. With the end of the Korean War the Agriculture Adjustments went through an overhaul. The supports for basic commodities were switched to a flexible formula rather than the rigid price-point method. To offset the lesser certainty of this format, set asides were instituted that allowed farmers to hold products over to the next season without them counting against the government support. In 1956 the Soil Bank was established to allow for farmers to place in reserve segments of their property that would have been used to grow allotted crops. Running through the growing seasons of 1958, this program was established to promote the selection of holding land back from production for which farmers were rewarded direct cash payments.

people per farm household in 1960, over a quarter of a million people moved off the farm between 1935 and 1960 in Wisconsin.\footnote{USDA Census of Agriculture Historical Archive, USDA Census of Agriculture Historical Archive, accessed April 15, 2013, http://agcensus.mannlib.cornell.edu/AgCensus/censusParts.do?year=1992.} In terms of farm numbers and people, the subsidy programs were not successful. Though this legislation was often proposed as pro family farm, one must note that protecting the smaller operations was often not the primary objective of these programs; instead by the late 1950s they were driven by other priorities. These goals would best be described as political over economic as they were geared to the creation and management of surplus foodstuffs to be used for diplomatic purposes.

As the Cold War ensued in the 1950s food became a diplomatic weapon against communism. For the surviving farm operations, the extensions and increases of subsidies, set-asides, set-backs, and direct payments had an addictive quality that may lead one to question if the farm community had become overly dependent upon them. Of equal concern was the growing change in character of the farms themselves. As the number of farms shrank the size of the farms expanded. The movement to larger producers was the real outcome of the subsidy format of farm policy. The growth of narrow-focused production of supported products coupled with the ever more efficient mechanization and scientific improvements in crop, meat, and dairy farming lent itself to farm factories. The government was faced with a growing issue of surplus. Large operations became increasingly savvier in their manipulation of the programs meant to control production while supporting strategic food need.

The Wisconsin experience during the twenty-five years of post World War II farm policy was a mirror image of the Nation’s. The continuation of farm production limits coupled with parity price supports and later direct payment income supports, were weighted to the advantage of larger operations. In the post war era the government found itself paying for both increased production in the form of subsidies and non-production in the form of set backs. This process was in place to allow the implementation of parity programs and production manipulation, but could never keep up with the pressures of the market. A slight change in policy, instituted in the
1960’s in an effort to bring some element of market orientation to the process, may have been a step in the right direction; however, it was perhaps too small of a step too late. Inherent problems continued to force marginal operators out of business. Marginal in this case does not necessarily refer to poor operators. Small farms struggled in a climate where prices were held in check by overproduction and government manipulation. Lower prices favor those operators that effectively operated through the advantage of economy of scale. Farms were forced to mechanize to lower labor costs, then expand to pay for the mechanization. This would prove to be a critical hurdle for both beginning operations and those run by aging owners.

As farms consolidated in the two decades leading to 1970, food became increasingly one of America’s best buys. In 1935 the median family income was less than $1,200.00 per year and the government recommended setting aside thirty-five percent of their budget dollars for food.\(^92\) By 1970 the average family income had risen to $12,000.00 and the food expense portion of the household budget had shrunk to twenty-two percent.\(^93\) With the savings in food budgets, consumers expanded their appetite and became more aware of diverse food choices leading to increased demand for variety. The specialization of farms, improvements in mechanization, and advancement in scientific methods of production led to higher quality and abundance of agricultural products. On its surface, agriculture in the United States and Wisconsin appeared to be a healthy industry.

In many ways it was a success story of production; however, there were many issues that now may be seen as concerns. Though income parity was an objective of the state and national programs, the farm community still lagged behind their urban counterparts. Even with the technological advancements, for many farmers the effort to income ratio was still weighted heavily in their disfavor. The technological advancement came with a price tag that often required expansion of the farm in order to justify paying for these improvements. The pressure to expand compounded by the


aforementioned lifestyle issues, would lead to a further decline in farms as rural citizens chose to seek urban employment. Between 1950 and 1970 the Nation lost forty-nine percent of its farms. Wisconsin continued to fare better than the Nation by losing forty-one percent (see Table 2). In raw numbers Wisconsin lost nearly seventy thousand farms in a twenty-year period. The issue of farm decline is compounded further in that the definition of farms began to change in the late 1960s to include farms with less production than previous years when inflation formulas are applied. This change inflated the farm totals slightly by 1970 and would become even greater as time passed.

Table 2. Farm Totals and Acreage

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number of Farms in Us in 1000s</th>
<th>Acres Per Farm Nationally</th>
<th>Number of Farms in WI in 100s</th>
<th>Acres Per Farm Statewide</th>
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<td>5000</td>
<td>4000</td>
<td>3000</td>
<td>2000</td>
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<td>1964</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>1000</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1969</td>
<td>1000</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Table 2 also shows the dramatic increase in farm size nationally with an eighty-one percent increase, and a lesser growth of thirty-four percent in Wisconsin. The impact of grain farm consolidation in the plains states contributes greatly to the national increase.

In Columbia and Dodge Counties the experience is much the same, as from 1950 to 1969 farm numbers decreased by thirty-three percent and thirty-two percent respectively. The acreage per farm was on both sides of the statewide average with Columbia slightly greater and Dodge slightly less. The discrepancy here relates to the land purposes employed in these two counties. The agricultural land use of these
regions had changed in character over time with Columbia County, gifted with river low lands, becoming more crop dependent, as Dodge County remained more dairy oriented. The values of these farms experienced differing increases based on the enhanced value of good cropland. Between 1935 and 1969 Columbia County land increased by nearly five hundred and fifty percent while Dodge County increased by four hundred percent. Both increases were impressive, but the impact of crop subsidies is evident in the value jump of the Columbia County land.94

In the 1970s the farm policy would once again be the subject of overhaul as the Nation experienced another change in political philosophy resulting from the 1968 election. As the Food and Agriculture Act was due to expire at the end of 1970, negotiations between Agriculture Secretary Hardin and the House of Representatives Agriculture Committee began. The 1970 bill, though heralded as a compromise action, was widely condemned by all farm organizations. This three-part program was focused on set-backs and an even more complex formula of allotments and subsidies that in effect curtailed over-production. Grain crops, tobacco, and cotton were squeezed into the tightest restrictions, while milk production was given greater assistance. The program was viewed as heavy-handed and too restrictive. In 1973 Earl Butz took over as the Secretary of Agriculture and shepherded the 1973 Consumer Protection Act through in response to a world market demand. Due to worldwide inflation and a devalued dollar in combination with foreign grain crop failures, prices were climbing and demand for America agriculture products was high. The strength of the market had drained the surpluses built up under past programs. The 1973 Act emphasized production in response to what Butz called “ever-growing worldwide demand for food and fiber.” He also stated that this legislation was “an historic turning point in the philosophy of farm programs in the United States.” This Act was a departure from previous agriculture programs in that it was created to maintain and increase production rather than curtail the growth of crops such as wheat, corn, cotton and tobacco. This was accomplished through target pricing that

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made direct payments to producers only when the market fell below the target price. The impact of higher prices did result in a brief period of increased profitability for Wisconsin dairy farms. The market formula offered some interesting incentives as the prices for fluid milk was determined for markets around the nation based on their distance from the upper Midwest. The theory of this price differential was that the majority of the Nation's milk supply was in the upper Midwest region. Therefore, the cost of transportation was added to the milk price to equalize it based on the distance from the region. On its face the logic of this plan is very clear, but there was a flaw for Wisconsin farmers. Since prices determined in this fashion became higher the further away from the state one traveled, the plan effectively offered an incentive to start up dairy farms outside of the Midwest. States such as California began to develop an active dairy industry to exploit the higher prices. New York may represent the most interesting difference from the pricing of Upper Midwest (that included Wisconsin). Prices for each market were as follows: $13.39 in New York to $11.90 in Wisconsin, a difference of $1.49 per hundredweight. The Wisconsin income opportunity created by this method of pricing and support was quickly reversed as competitors in the South, New York, and California entered the market. The result was a surplus of liquid milk offset through government purchase. The prices ultimately would lower with no discernible decrease in production driven

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95 Parity formulas were no longer used, rather the payments were solely dependent on market conditions. The plan included a disaster relief component that would assist farmers that were unable to plant the allotted amount of crops due to natural calamities. The overall objective of target prices and low commodity loan rates was to increase the producer’s reliance on markets and allow for the free distribution of commodities at world prices. Milk supports continued as they had prior to 1973 with parity loan payments at the discretion of the Secretary of Agriculture. By 1976 a support of eighty percent was signed by then President Nixon. The reaction was a rise in the hundredweight price culminating in 1981 at $13.14. This represented the highest price per hundredweight attained since the program had begun. However, when adjusted for inflation this price was on par with the prices paid in 1935 exhibiting the impact inflation was having on all prices. Rasmussen, Gladys, and James, "Post war," *A Short History of Agricultural Adjustment 1933-1975*, 1.1, 11-13.

54
by an increased number of producers and greater production average per cow. The government's attempt to support higher prices, or better-stated, prices that would keep pace with inflation in reality fostered a competitive atmosphere that inadvertently rewarded those producers furthest from Wisconsin with unfair price advantages. The net result therefore was over-production and lower prices. For Wisconsin it created competitors that due to their recent entry into the milk production had newer more advanced infrastructure to work with.

The 1970s were a heady time for crop production, as the grain deal with Russia would spark a price climb in nearly every segment of agriculture in the United States. In a review of the Whole Sale Price Index of 1973, prices realized for all grain products and meat animals rose sharply. Wheat tripled in price, corn and soybeans doubled, and prices for beef steers, fattened hogs, and broiler chickens went up by fifty-five, one hundred and two, and one hundred and fifty-three percent respectively. The average of all farm products went up by sixty-six percent. The income generated by these sales was somewhat negated by the ensuing inflation in all production cost segments. The increases in prices and costs had an impact throughout

Table 3. Farm Totals and Values

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th></th>
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<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of farms</td>
<td>9702</td>
<td>99875</td>
<td>75103</td>
<td>6116</td>
<td>232606</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Value of Land and Buildings per Farm</td>
<td>47303</td>
<td>82199</td>
<td>42448</td>
<td>85560</td>
<td>12950</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Source: Adapted from the Wisconsin Data, USDA Agriculture Census, 1987, table 3.

the decade. The net worth of farmers was positively impacted as seen in a comparison of Wisconsin farm values from 1969 to 1987 in Tables 3 and 4. One may see from the data that land and buildings tabulated as a single figure, and equipment increased dramatically. The relation between the two goes beyond the necessity for production as the increased value of land was used as collateral for loans to modernize equipment, buildings, and facilitate expansion. By 1975 the Farmer Home Administration and the Farm Credit System (FCS) held loans on nearly half of all farms in the State.\textsuperscript{97} Between 1971 and 1982 the loans in this program nationally rose from thirteen billion to sixty-four billion dollars, reaching thirty-four percent of all agriculture loans.\textsuperscript{98}

Table 4. Value of Farm Equipment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Value of Equipment per Farm</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1969</td>
<td>10742</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1974</td>
<td>23751</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1978</td>
<td>39075</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1982</td>
<td>53671</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1987</td>
<td>53970</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Adapted from the Wisconsin Data, USDA Agriculture Census, 1987, table 4.

\textsuperscript{97} Begun in 1916, the FCS was given expanded authority in 1971 as it was authorized to loan to farm business. The FCS was the first Government Sponsored Enterprise (GSE), and was created by setting up Federal Intermediate Credit Banks (FICBs) that were authorized to loan to commercial banks who in turn would offer credit to farmers and ranchers. Direct loans and subsidy programs overshadowed the FCS for many years until the 1971 overhaul that brought it to the forefront of farm credit. Blanchfield, John, "Rural Banking and the Farm Credit System," ABA Home, accessed May 2, 2013, http://www.aba.com/Solutions/AgBanking/Pages/gr_ag_background.aspx.

\textsuperscript{98} Ibid.
Many farmers still had memories of the difficult times they or their parents had lived through during the Depression and were reluctant to take on debt. In spite of this sentiment, inflationary costs forced them to expand in order to produce the volume and profit required to meet their income needs. The low interest rates and the increases in land value drove farmers to borrow heavily from all lenders. As the decade of the 1970s progressed, the interest rates of secured loans continued to climb. Farmers were able to maintain economic stability based loans secured by the future value of crops and the continued increase in land value. The situation resembled a stack of cards with each segment heavily dependent on the continued strength of the market.

The Wisconsin story, much like the Nation's, in the 1970s and 1980s was one of boom and bust. The combination of a strong world market and run away inflation created an ever-increasing market price that was balanced by equally ever-increasing production costs. The combination put farmers in a position of constantly increasing production to keep up with demand and expenses. In order to meet these production needs new equipment, better seeds, fertilizer, herbicides, pesticides, breeding stock, and feed supplements were needed, all of which were increasing in expense. In Table 5 the total

Table 5. Comparison of Farm Income to Expenses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total Gross Farm Income</th>
<th>Total Net Farm Income</th>
<th>Farm Production Expenses</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1972</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1973</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>1978</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>1979</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

gross farm income (including all government programs) may be seen compared to the net farm income (profit) and costs of production from 1972 to 1979. This chart offers a picture of consistent gross income and operating cost increases and less consistent net income. The net income is what the farm family would be living on, as many of the daily personal expenses are not absorbed in the production costs. Additionally, though gross income changed by one hundred thirty percent, net income increased by only one hundred and three percent. While the average inflation from 1972 to 1979 of consumer goods for the country was just under seventy-four percent, farm production costs rose one hundred and sixty-five percent. By 1978 the average farm in Wisconsin had a net income of $10,260.00, this was not enough to secure savings for emergency expenditures. The farm community was in an interesting dilemma as they attempted to sustain maintenance and future growth. 

The lack of liquidity of wealth meant the only way for the farmer to extract the accumulated earnings from the farm was to sell it or borrow against it. Both methods posed further complications, as the former required a career move and the latter method created future liability. This squeeze in cash flow would be one of the reasons the number of farms continued to decline from a 1969 total of ninety-seven thousand to the 1987 number of seventy-five thousand. This difference is a bit deceiving based on the change in definition of a farm during this time period. This new definition allowed lower volume establishments to be counted as farms meaning that the decline was greater than the statistics suggest. The price inflation of the seventies manifested the only year to show an increase in farm numbers. An increase of twenty-five hundred operations occurred in 1978 (refer to Table 3, p. 54). The significant increase in land value between 1974 and 1982 initiated an equally significant rise in mortgage and loan amounts carried by the farm community. The drastic inflation of prices may have offered a false incentive as production costs were climbing at a steeper rate squeezing the profitability. This led farmers to seek methods to expand to make up the difference in declining net income. The rise in net

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worth enabled farmers to secure loans for equipment purchases and production costs for future seasons. As long as the prices continued to climb, debt was not seen as an issue.

Unfortunately the strong agricultural markets of the 1970s could not be maintained as evidenced as early as 1979. In the January 1980 issue of Challenge, contributing writer Charles Farr documented the activities of the milk market for the previous decade. Farr acknowledged the tremendous growth in milk prices but offered a cautionary insight on the growing concern of over-production and lowered consumption, noting the increased dependence on the Commodity Credit Corporation (CCC) purchase of the market surplus. Farr recognized the cracks starting to form in the strong market that had driven the farm economics of the 1970s.

Though the seventies offered tremendous market growth and wealth improvement through land appreciation, the average farm family income was still not on par with their urban counterparts. The comparison of income from 1972 to 1979 shows that as the farm income improved at a fast pace the average income of all workers in Wisconsin showed steady improvement as well (see Table 6). Farm income increased by one hundred and twenty-nine percent, growing from six

\[100\] Farr, Challenge: Wisconsin Federation of Cooperatives, 3.
thousand four hundred and two dollars to fourteen thousand six hundred sixty-six dollars. Starting in 1973 the income of all workers rose by fifty-seven percent by 1979. Though a much more conservative growth percent, the “all worker” category began at a significantly higher level at ten thousand seven hundred sixty-three dollars. In 1973 the “all worker” category was sixty-eight percent higher than the farm income. The gap of urban workers to farm workers was in reality larger as the “all worker” segment included the farm income in the average. This issue persisted in spite of, or perhaps due to all government efforts to impact the agriculture market. The reason for this failure to equalize farm income or maintain family farm numbers may be rooted in the incompatibility of goals sought by these programs. As seen in the following quote from the Economic Research Service, the Nation’s agriculture policy had (and has) a focus of inexpensive food and farm economic equity.

For over 40 years, price support and adjustment programs have had an important impact upon the farm and national economy. Consumers have consistently had a reliable supply of farm products for a smaller proportion of their income than anywhere else in the world. Farmers have been assured of at least specified minimum prices for their products. The legislation and resulting programs have been modified to meet varying conditions of depression, war, and prosperity, and have sought to give farmers, in general, the opportunity to attain economic equality with other segments of the economy.

These goals represent crossed purposes. Both the objective of low food prices and the goal of a more equitable farm income can not be achieved, even with significant subsidy efforts in the production of farm products and the purchase of the foodstuffs they represent, based on the income comparison seen above.

In Columbia and Dodge Counties from 1978 to 1987 the total of farms shrunk by approximately thirteen percent. The farms that were lost during this time frame have several similarities. The smallest operations and the largest operations were insulated either by limited debt or enough size to weather the hard times. On the other hand those operations in the mid-size range were hardest hit. These farms were characterized by having owners in their early forties, about twenty years of

experience in farming, and farms of just under two hundred to five hundred acres in size. These farms were often in the expansion mode as the owner was young enough to be still looking to expand their operation and invest in the equipment to maintain modernized practices. All of these qualities made them desirable to loan to in the late 1970s. These advantages became liabilities in the early 1980s as the credit dried up and the market prices deflated.

In Columbia and Dodge Counties the change in farm size between 1978 and 1992 shows the impact of the market influence. In Columbia County the midsized farms decreased by five percent, while the farms over five hundred acres increased in number by over one hundred percent. Dodge County’s numbers are even more dramatic as nineteen percent of the midsized operations were lost while the larger farm total grew by two hundred twenty-two percent. The growth of larger farms appears to be a consistent side effect of subsidy programs nationwide. Likewise the loss of the midsize farm was a common factor nationally. In Wisconsin, as in much of the Nation, these farms could not carry the burden of the debt they had accumulated and either filed bankruptcy or faced foreclosure. Between 1983 and 1985 twenty-two thousand farms filed for bankruptcy in the State. This represents over a quarter of the total farms that existed in 1983. When understood in terms of midsized farms, those operations that had been considered well run and profitable four years earlier, the percentage is much larger. When one factors out the large farms, which actually grew in number during this same period, and the farms too small to have been effected by the land value collapse, the remaining number of farms is approximately sixty-two thousand. This would place the total of bankruptcies at thirty-six percent. This type of widespread economic failure earned this period the moniker of Farm Crisis.

Nationally between January of 1984 and November of 1985 over one hundred

thousand farms filed for bankruptcy.\footnote{The Milwaukee Sentinel, January 14, 1986.} In the State some of the farms were able to pull through the bankruptcy reorganization and ultimately survive, but for most it resulted in liquidation. Though this process of reorganization was very trying, others were faced with even more dire circumstances as they lost their farms through foreclosure.

In 1986 the Deputy Banking Commissioner, Jennifer Mckenzie, stated that foreclosures had increased by one hundred and twenty-one percent between 1984 and 1986.\footnote{Ibid.} The Governor at the time, Tony Earl, viewed this situation as a just cause to create a task force to look into methods to allow farmers to stay on the farm.\footnote{Ibid.} The results of these attempts were mixed as lenders were already attempting to assist farms in trouble through a process referred to as forebearance. This practice allowed farmers to maintain property control if they met their interest payments on loans. Though a step toward assistance, many farms were still lost to foreclosure.

According to Ronald Caldwell, the state director of the Farmers Home Administration (FmHA), in the January 26, 1987 Milwaukee Journal article at the end of 1986, two thousand nine hundred forty-six foreclosed farms were being held on the inventories of the FmHA, Farm Credit Services, and private banks. This represented nearly four percent of the farms in Wisconsin. Since the vast majority of these farms were over one hundred seventy-five acres, they actually represented nearly five percent of the viable operations in the state. Caldwell stated that the FmHA held two hundred sixteen of these representing forty-two thousand acres, and had another ninety-seven that would be foreclosed by the end of the reporting period. Of the farms mortgaged through the FmHA as of the writing of Milwaukee Journal article, twenty percent were delinquent on their loans.\footnote{Milwaukee Journal, "FmHA to sell Foreclosed Farms, Seek Tax Law Changes for Others," January 16, 1987, Morning edition, sec. Business.}

The 1980's farm crisis had a number of causes. Government supported mass-production, improved technologies in equipment, seeds, herbicides, pesticides, and meat and milk production, overextended mortgages, and shortsighted market analysis...
were all factors. Seemingly each attempt to manipulate the market or production had unintended consequences. Whether intentional or not the actions of governments, both at the federal and state level coupled with the economically inherent overproduction by farmers resulted in what may be seen as the demise of the family farm in Wisconsin.

One must temper the previous statement with the fact that family farms still exist as reported in the Agriculture Census, however the true character of these farms requires a more critical eye. In Wisconsin as of 1992 the total number of farms was reported as sixty-seven thousand nine hundred sixty-nine. Of these farms twenty-one thousand seven hundred seventy-nine report their occupation as other than farmer. Of the remaining forty-six thousand one hundred eighty, almost a fourth were owned in manners other than sole proprietorships. Of the approximately thirty-two thousand farms remaining, an additional six thousand three hundred sixty-two are operated by tenants and do not own the land. This leaves about twenty five thousand farms statewide. Using the same extrapolation of numbers for Columbia and Dodge Counties, about three hundred and five hundred farms meet these standards respectively. When viewed through the lens of the 1890 census data the change is monumental. In that year, based on farm income, the number of economically viable family farms in the state was in excess of one hundred thirty thousand. (The terminology economically viable takes into consideration the value of goods sold compared to the 1992 numbers with inflation equalized). This represents a loss of about eighty-one percent of the family farm base over the one hundred year period covered by this research.  

While it may be assumed that the continued technological improvements in equipment, horticulture and animal nutrition and husbandry would have forced the exit of farmers unwilling to maintain modern skills, this factor in and of itself would not have affected a decline of this magnitude. Other internal and external factors sped up the decline. Farming, unlike other labor segments, has significant entrepreneurial

aspects. The farm community has a long-term tradition of cooperative activity, yet the same farmers that work together for better prices were indeed in competition with one another for the consumer's dollar. This competition led to some interesting market dynamics; as the farms became less economically viable, neighboring farmers purchased them. In essence one farmer's troubles became another's opportunity. In a free market economy the end result of any business is oneness. The ability to rid one's self of competition and become the sole supplier is at the heart of capitalist competition. These factors exacerbated the government policies that favored increased capacity and specialized production. This combination of natural and contrived factors resulted in the decline of farm numbers and the increase in farm size.

The average Wisconsin farm size in 1890 was one hundred fourteen acres; by 1992 it had grown to two hundred twenty-eight acres. Taken at face value this may not seem to be a major change over one hundred years. Yet, one must look a little deeper to see what the true number is. As the average included all farms, many of which were of the hobby farm variety, it does not reflect the average of those farms that were economically viable. Whereas smaller operations were typical in 1890 with the primary objective of being self-sufficient, by 1992 farms were developed for profitability in a complex market place. The average size of the thirty-two thousand farms, recognized above as the true number of viable entities, is approximately four hundred seventy-one acres. This represents a more accurate growth of three hundred thirteen percent. The side effects of this consolidation of farms have been discussed earlier in this research and will be addressed in the case studies to follow. However, the concerns derived from the loss of farms and the subsequent impact on the rural community may be stated best within the 1984 political platform of the Wisconsin Labor and Farm Party. This statement was included in the 1985-1986 Wisconsin Blue Book within the platform this party offered the following stance on farm policy:

A severe crisis now confronts the great majority of farmers. The LFP rejects all arguments that lay the blame for this crisis on farmers themselves; it has not been caused by 'poor farm-management practices', 'or reluctance to change'. Rather, the current crisis has been caused by inappropriate
governmental policies and programs as well as the corresponding penetration and growing power of monopolistic agribusiness corporations.

Working together, government and large corporations have increasingly integrated farming into an economic system which is dominated by its need to generate immediate short-term profits for speculative, investment capital, and which leads to the long-term concentration of control and ownership of all facets of agriculture into fewer and fewer hands. The effects of these economic pressures have increasingly resulted in the forced industrialization of arming.

For years the economic pressure building toward the present crisis have resulted in the disruption - and all too often destruction - of rural communities. Thousands of rural residents have been displaced, often to urban areas that offer few, if any, employment opportunities. Once thriving small communities have become all but ghost towns, often dependent on only the caprices of tourists for economic survival. In short, an entire way of life – an entire rural culture is threatened with extinction.109

Certainly any party that is specific to farming, as the Labor Farm party was, would address the farm crisis in the dramatic fashion revealed above. Interestingly the platforms of the two mainstream parties both offer positions on farming that sounded significantly similar to one and other. The Republican Party offered the following statement:

The Republican Party of Wisconsin reaffirms its commitment to assuring the future of Wisconsin’s family farms. The family farm provides the backbone for the economy of most rural areas and small cities of Wisconsin, and provides thousands of jobs in the industrial sector of the state’s economy.110

Shared here is the Democratic Party’s statement that seems eerily similar to their counterpart’s platform.

We are committed to preserving agriculture as the cornerstone of our society. We must protect family farms and limit farming by nonfarm interests.111

Though these statements (particularly those from the two main parties) are steeped in rhetoric, the concerns for the rural communities were well founded. The Labor and Farm Party platform offers a specific charge of corporate involvement in the

110 Ibid. 866.
111 Ibid. 843.
economic hardships placed on farmers.\textsuperscript{112}

The issue of corporate farm ownership has a long history throughout the central states, starting in 1975 anti-corporation laws were passed in nine states. Wisconsin was one of those states, passing chapter 182 of the corporate laws that includes provision 182.001. This provision states: “corporations and trusts are prohibited from owning or carrying on farming operations.” Established in 1978, this law was put in effect to prevent what some viewed as the over industrialization of farming. The effectiveness of this law may be debated as from its establishment to 1992 the growth of corporations saw an increase of sixty-one percent. The law allows several loopholes as ownership of land may become confused through several options available. Shared ownership may be organized as several sole proprietorships that work cooperatively. Though trusts are disallowed cooperatives are supported. The difference between the two may become blurred to even the most astute observer. Contracts for production may be handled through a central purchaser of a large corporate entity that allows for specific control over the production of what appears as several separate entities, but in fact are contracted labor for several years at a time. Once again the attempt to control a market is often thwarted by the freedoms rightly expected by the citizenry.\textsuperscript{113}

By 1990 Farms had become complex economic engines dependent on continuous technological development aimed at ever more productive and efficient methods of generating the sustenance of the nation and often, major portions of the world. To accomplish this task they had come to require a significant partnership with the state and federal government in many forms from marketing to subsidies. This partnership, begun at the nation’s inception and developed truly in earnest during the darkest days of the Civil War with creation of the United States Department of Agriculture, has often been both a blessing and a burden. The results

\textsuperscript{112} Ibid.850.
of the century of internal and external factors on farming are evident in the farm numbers that have declined nearly every year with the exception of the mid 1930’s when catastrophic events created a brief reversal of the trend.

The goal of this research was to develop a coherent understanding of two primary assertions: first that the decline of family farms has had a negative social, economic, and political impact on rural communities in the central portion of southern Wisconsin, and secondly that the decline of the family farm between 1890 and 1990 was the result of several factors including the poor profit to effort ratio of farming, the increased productivity of mechanization, and the influence of government actions that actively or inadvertently favored larger more specialized agricultural pursuit. It may be stated that the loss of the rural farm families has had a ripple effect across the whole of the rural communities, impacting the secondary economies of small town Wisconsin, the political participation and support, and the social fabric once held together through the hard work and dedication of rural citizenry. The causes of this decline include factors both inherent in the profession and imposed from external forces.

It is at this point that this research will turn from a review of the general economic conditions and the effects they have had on rural communities to a more personal look at farming from individual family perspectives.
Case Studies
A Look at Farming Through the Eyes of Family Farms that Endured for the Century Between 1890 and 1990.

Two family farm portraits assembled from family archives and personal interviews.
The subject of this research has been on the decline of farms and therefore focused on those establishments that no longer exist. At this point the focus turns to two farms that endured over the one hundred years examined in this project. It is through their eyes that one may see the human experience as it evolved over time. Farming unlike many vocations is a lifestyle, often looked upon by its practitioners, specifically the successful ones, as a calling. The desire to pull from nature the sustenance of one’s life and from that venture, grow a family, a tradition, and a legacy carries with it a kind of stubborn commitment few people exhibit. What follows here are two stories of families that have left such legacies based on their lengthy commitment to the soil and its fruits. Each of these families has been recognized by the State of Wisconsin for their consistent operation of the same property across six generations of kinship. Century farms began being singled out for their achievement in Wisconsin in 1948 in conjunction with the State’s centennial. Since then about one farm out of twenty established prior to 1890 have gained this honor.

The Wilhelm Krueger family farm was introduced earlier in this research as an example of a well-operated farm that was able to survive during the farm product price crash of the early 1920’s. The resilience required for this achievement was well established by 1869 when Wilhelm, who had anglicized his name to William, purchased the farm that would be home for six generations three miles east of Watertown in Eastern Dodge County. William was born in the Pomeranian Province of Prussia. By the 1850s this region of Europe had spent the decades following the Napoleonic Wars transitioning from the feudal system. During this change many were pushed off the land and forced to find other methods of support. For some that meant immigrating to new lands. For William and his wife Wilhelmina (Minnie) the choice would be Wisconsin where his uncle had already set up residence near Watertown. There he would purchase forty acres for $1000.00 and begin farming and building wagons.

By 1864 William’s eldest son August, then nineteen years old, left home for

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Lake Michigan where he would become a sailor on merchant ships. In 1869 William and Minnie sold the original forty acres and purchased the farm that would remain in the family until 1987. Located three miles to the north East of Watertown in the Township of Emmit, the joy that accompanied the purchase of this new farm with its rolling hills and rich soil was short-lived, as Minnie would pass away in 1870. In that year August returned home to help his father with the family, now including six children.

Figure 2. Location of the Krueger Farm

August purchased the farm that year from William for $3200.00. The production on the farm began as many in the state had, growing wheat. August purchased the family’s first reaper and was in constant search of better ways to expand and develop the efficiency of the farm. In 1880 he joined others, such as William Hoard, in a new form of production for the State, as he began building a dairy herd, choosing Red Durhams as his milking cattle. This particular breed,

\[\text{116 Ibid, reel #1.}\]
commonly called milking shorthorns, were a sturdy practical choice very much in line with the no nonsense operating style the Krueger family would exhibit throughout their agricultural endeavors. The use of new technology and more modern farming choices such as dairy were prime examples of the traits that identified successful farmers throughout the state and the Nation. Based on the family papers that the Kruegers were very interested in growing their community as well as their farmstead. August married Mary Goetsch, the daughter of an established family in the neighboring township of Lebanon where her father was a founding member of the German Baptist church. The Kruegers and the Goetschs were connected by several intermarriages as August’s sister married one of Mary’s brothers, as did one of his cousins. August was a member of the German Baptist church’s council, and helped found the Rock Cheese Company and creamery. He also became involved in the politics of the Township of Emmet.

Figure 3. Four Generations of the Kruegers

Source: Krueger Family Papers, figure 3.

\[117\] Ibid, reel #1
\[118\] Ibid, reel #1.
By 1887 the farm was a typical Dodge County operation growing corn, hay, and grains and milking a prize herd of dairy cows. August and Mary had several children, the oldest of which was Alex. At the turn of the century the farm supported four generations, with the birth of Alex's son Edgar. Pictured from left to right are, Edgar, Alex, August, and William. August was an avid photographer, in addition all of the Kruegers were given to keeping meticulous notes and ledgers of their activities. This dedication to maintaining records has created a legacy of invaluable information about farming and life in Emmet from the 1870s to the late 1980s.119

August’s commitment to continued progress in the operation of the farm led him to support the further development of Alex’s understanding of modern methods by attending the Agriculture Short Course through the University of Wisconsin, where he participated in a wide range of studies. His writings offer insight into the new methods of herd development for dairy cattle, crop rotation, and animal selection based on the appropriate characteristics. Interspersed in the notes of his studies are diary-like notes of social events in Emmet and Watertown. Alex offers a wonderful description of the marvels of the retail establishments that were available in "the beautiful city of nearly ten thousands". Upon completion of his studies Alex continued to share operation responsibilities with August until the elder Krueger’s retirement to Watertown in 1914.120

The next few years were the most profitable for the Kruegers, as they were for most farmers of the Nation. World War I generated significant opportunity for the sale of American farm production. The impact of the end of the war on the Kruegers has been documented in the previous section. The practical development of the farm operations that was the hallmark of the Krueger’s style was an advantage during the hard times of the 1920s. By 1929 Edgar married Elna Summerfield from Tomah. Elna had moved to Watertown to work and had met Edgar there. This was the first marriage in the Krueger family to involve a partner that was not from the Emmet or Watertown area. This was actually a bit of an issue, according to an entry in Edgar’s notes, as she never felt totally part of the family. She and Edgar moved into the

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119 Ibid, reel #1.
120 Ibid, reel #1.
original farmhouse that had stood abandoned since Alex had built the larger new house noted for its oversized kitchen. The old house was in disrepair but Edgar and Elna made do as they took on fifty percent of the farm in partnership with Alex and his wife Flora.\textsuperscript{121}

In the early 1930s they built a new barn and expanded the herd of dairy cattle upgrading their status to Grade A milk production in order to receive the highest prices available. This upgrade kept the Kruegers out of the 1933 milk strike controversy as seen by the uninterrupted milk receipts in the family records. Edgar and Alex continued their partnership until 1948, which took the younger Krueger to his fiftieth birthday. In that year many changes occurred. In February of that year Alex passed away. Edgar offers a less than emotional entry in his daily planner stating, “Pa died Feb. 22\textsuperscript{nd} on Sunday at 9:00 PM in St. Mary’s Hospital. 75 years old, buried Feb 27.” By the end of that year Edgar rented the farm from his mother Flora for $1,200.00 and purchased the personal property for $1,000.00. In 1952 Flora retired to Watertown and Edgar bought the farm for $12,000.00 and continued to farm with his wife Elna and two children Bob and Shirley. The farm at that time appears to have been about two hundred and twenty acres, according to the 1948 property tax records. As the 1950s continued for the family, Bob followed the Krueger tradition and took the \textit{Short Course} at the University. Shirley moved to Watertown and married Delbert Oestreich, interestingly Bob married Delbert’s sister Bea Oestreich. Bob and Bea joined Edgar and Elna on the farm in the same manner as his father and his father before him. However, times had changed, the farm could no longer provide enough return for two families to sustain themselves comfortably. By the 1960’s Bob had had enough; unwilling to wait into his fifties as Edgar had done to take over the farm he left farming for a job driving truck out of Watertown. In an interview given to Marjorie McLellan, a researcher for the Wisconsin Historical Society, Bob offers what may be seen as his frustration with the problems of transferring ownership of family farms.\textsuperscript{122}

\textsuperscript{121} Ibid, reel #1.
The farm wasn’t big enough for two families. It was fine in its day and age, but there just wasn’t enough for two. And also I figured, I’m not going to end up like he [dad] did and be fifty some years old before I own a farm. I just can’t understand why they had to wait so long.  

Part of Bob’s frustration may have come from the amount of labor he was providing for the operation of the farm while Edgar followed his family’s tradition of community service. Edgar had taken over the responsibilities of the treasurer of the Township of Emmet from his father. In addition he had taken on a role in the County extension Bureau. Late he was also elected to the Dodge County Agriculture Stabilization and conservation Committee that met in the County Seat in Juneau. All of this community involvement meant significant time away from the farm and Bob was left to complete much of the work on his own. In 1963 the Barn on the home farm burned while Bob was doing contract work on another farm. He had taken on the additional labor to supplement the income from the home farm. Though the barn was insured and rebuilt that seems to have been the point at which Bob decided to leave the family farm and take the job driving truck. Edgar continued operation for several more years but eventually must have found the labor beyond his abilities. During this time events such as the Earl Butz growth era or the Jimmy Carter grain embargo were of little impact on the slowing operation of the Krueger farm. With no one to continue running the farm, Edgar, at eighty-nine, sold the land and herd and offered the personal property up for auction, ending the family’s one hundred and twenty years of operation in 1987.  

The story of the Krueger’s family farm is one of success, as the operation of any business for over one hundred years must garner respect. In a way, their history is the story of all Wisconsin family farms. As one reviews the activities of this family over the life of the farm, several points become clear as to what has transformed farming. In the early years the goals of the farm were to support the family’s needs for food, shelter, kinship, and community. The interaction of first William then August Alex and Edgar, with their community shows the interdependence that was

123 Ibid, 46.
important for survival in rural settings. They show their commitment to family and friends as they developed spiritual, political, and economic infrastructures that would bind them to one another. The farm acted as the anchor and economic engine from which their lives could be developed. The ability of the farm to support four generations at the turn of the century was not unusual. Two hundred acres was a large farm for that time period and it was able to produce their needs as well as the surplus to generate the capital to continue to improve and grow. In addition it generated enough surplus to support the retirement of the elder generation and the foundation for the next. As the years passed the ability of the farm to accomplish this task was decreased and the transition would take longer for each generation until it was no longer able to do so. By the time Bob made his decision to move on to a paying job, the farm was too small to allow the retirement of his father and still support the next generation.

This family farm had at its foundation a flaw that could not be repaired with subsidies or education or even a great market for their products. That issue was that as the technology allowed for greater productivity which in turns kept the prices low, the costs of doing business continued to rise, the profit squeeze that resulted forced farms like the Kruegers' to become ever larger to support the needs of a single family. This precludes the ability to support elders during the transition of the farm to the next generation. This opens the discussion of a completely new topic that this research is not prepared to encompass, that being the laws governing the transference of ownership of farms within the family. This is an issue worthy of its own research.

Inheritance, family corporations, partnerships and outright sales have been used to accomplish shared ownership or transfer of ownership within families. Each of these methods has a result of the loss of wealth included in the final conveyance, through taxes of all types or the mortgage incurred. Like any small business, in farming an aging owner is often dependant upon the finances of the farm for years beyond his ability to operate it. In the past it was the social norm that this dependence was accepted as part of the family’s responsibility. The growth of urban careers with pensions, social security, and personal retirement plans has lead to a change in this social norm. Retirement plans such as these tend to be difficult
replicate on the farm. Personal income is often lower than urban careers, or unreported in the case of a spouse, making social security income averages lower. Surplus income is often required to invest in the operation rather than personal retirement plans. The wealth accumulated in agriculture is often intertwined with the operation of the farm and any extraction of it impedes further effective operation. Many of these issues played out for the Kruegers and led to the demise of their family farm. Their experience was not unusual then nor is their story unusual today, as many farms are lost for the same reasons each year.

Four years prior to William Krueger’s arrival in Dodge County, John Caldwell left Ayershire, Scotland and made his way to the United States arriving in New York. The family traveled via the Great Lakes to Eastern Wisconsin where they took an ox cart to Columbia County, first settling in the township of Dekorra near the Wisconsin River. The early farm, rich with sediment soil, was located on the bend in the river now traversed by the interstate 90 bridge. There, John, his wife and five children began wheat farming. The Caldwells were part of a significant immigration of Scottish settlers to the area. Many set up their homes just to the north of the Caldwell’s farm, in the Caledonia Township located southwest of Portage City. The Scotch were noted for their hard work and commitment to civic duty, John Caldwell embodied these traits, as he and his family, having started their farm in a log cabin with no money to their name, were able to prosper in several business concerns. John’s youngest son Robert was born in Scotland in 1836 and had lived with his parents in Dekkora until 1861 when he married Elizabeth Caldow. The couple began their life on a tract of land on the Arlington Prairie by Elizabeth’s parents, located south of Dekkora on the edge of Columbia County adjacent to Dane County. 

Robert purchased eight acres for $11.00 an acre and spent the next two years working hard to accumulate the funds to buy a new farmstead. In 1863 Robert sold the original farm and purchased a two hundred and forty acre farm at a then record high price of $50.00 per acre. The new farm was on the county line in Arlington

Prairie as well, and would become the homestead that the next five generations of Caldwells would own. Robert and wife Elizabeth had eight children and became a prominent citizen in the Arlington, Lodi, and Morrisonville region. His interest would include support of the Presbyterian Church, Township politics, and with his father and brothers, the establishment of banks in Lodi, Arlington, and Morrisonville.126

The Caldwells focused on the production of grain, primarily wheat, and the raising of Clydesdale horses. Robert had a keen interest in the improvement of livestock through breeding and was the first in the county to raise this type of draft horse. Many in the state including the Schlitz Brewery out of Milwaukee sought the quality livestock developed on the Caldwell farm. Robert passed away in 1885 at the age of forty-nine. The cause of death was noted as hard work according to James Jones in his *A History of Columbia County, Wisconsin.*127 Robert’s sons continued the family tradition of community involvement and active farming, as did their cousins. Robert’s father, John Caldwell, had five sons that operated farms in the Arlington Prairie area. Many of these were adjacent to one another. Several of the generations that followed would take over these operations while others would find their fortune in careers outside of farming. Two of Robert’s sons Charles and Thomas (T.A.) would take different paths. Charles, after completing his public schooling in the area, went on to Northern Indiana Normal School and returned as a teacher in Leeds Center located southeast of Arlington. He later started a lumber business in Rio that expanded to Columbus where it is still in operation by his grandson. T.A. married Jessie Morrison, the daughter of the founder of Morrisonville, and the two took over the original family farmstead in 1904. Jessie’s father was a co-founder and board member of the Morrisonville State bank along with several members of the Caldwell family; he may also be credited with providing the land and funding for establishing the stockyards in the town. The Caldwells were major clients of the stockyards as they continued to develop meat animals along with beginning their dairy herd, and breeding Clydesdale Horses. T.A. had been farming

126 Ibid, 268.
127 Ibid, 269.
the land after his father died and bought the farm from his mother shortly after his marriage in 1904.\textsuperscript{128}

Figure 4. Caldwell Family properties

\textit{Source: 1899 Plat Map of Arlington Township, Wisconsin State historical Society image collection, figure 4.}

\textsuperscript{128} Ibid, 269.
Now, nearly reaching the one hundred and fiftieth year of family ownership, the Caldwell farm represents a true survivor. There are only six hundred farms in the state that can claim this type of longevity. The current owner and grandson of T.A., Jim Caldwell, granted this researcher an interview in April of 2013. Mr. Caldwell’s recollections will be used here to relate the activities of the family for much of the twentieth century.

The family had several parcels of land around the Arlington Prairie region, each owned by brothers and first cousins all with John Caldwell Sr. as their common grandfather. A search of the State Historical society records uncovered a plat map from 1899 that shows the parcels owned by the family (see figure 10). The largest of these was a three hundred sixty acre section owned by the Robert Caldwell estate. This was the property that T.A. took over by 1904. T.A. and Jessie had four children, two boys and two girls. Jim Caldwell’s father, Lyall, was T.A.’s second son born in 1907. Lyall and his older brother Ross worked the farm with their father up to and through much of the Depression. The farm was a typical southern Wisconsin operation for the period, growing hay, and grains and milking cows. Prior to the Depression the family accumulated more acreage in around the Arlington Prairie Township. T.A. had four brothers that were all in farming in the region. Their land was derived from those parcels secured by John Sr. and his sons Robert and William. By 1899, as seen in the plat map in figure 4 their holdings amounted to over one thousand two hundred acres (the highlighted section was Robert’s property and is the main focus of the Century Farm example discussed here). This was a significant accomplishment for the time period.129

The five sons continued to work the land and eventually their children joined in the operations as Lyall and Ross had with their father. According to Jim Caldwell, T.A. was very active in many aspects of the community; in fact, he was one of the founding officers of the Arlington Mutual Fire Insurance Company, and wrote the first policy on his own farmstead. He also was on the board of directors of the Wyocena Home for the elderly, as well as involved in the township board, the Board of directors for the Arlington and Morrisonville banks, and the County Extension

129 Interview with James Caldwell (April 10, 2013).
programs. Jim Caldwell explained that the current Caldwells still own portions of three of the original farms. Ross's son Ronald owns the property adjacent to Jim's farm and has the original farmhouse on it. The split of the original three hundred sixty acre Robert Caldwell farm occurred in 1938 when T.A. retired and moved into Arlington. Jim's property, which is as it was when Lyall took ownership, is two hundred forty acres.

Mr. Caldwell (Jim) related the events leading up to this split as he explained the impact of the Depression on the holdings of the Caldwells. This era had a much greater impact on the Caldwell family than was experienced by the Kreugers in Dodge County. Where they were able to weather the economic trials of the Depression with little change in their farm operations, the Caldwells, having expanded their land holdings and extended their influence into banking and stockyards, were more vulnerable in their non-farm income. The financial institutions controlled by the family were the first casualties, as the banks in Morrisonville, Arlington, and Lodi were all closed. Jim Caldwell tells of the depth of loss experienced as these institutions failed, explaining that the stocks held by the shareholders in the community were double par. This meant not only did they lose their money but were responsible for the losses of the depositors, and would have to make up those losses out of their own pockets. This hit the Caldwell clan harder than most as they held much of the stock. Jim Caldwell continued to relate that his father Lyall was given the task of going out during the 1930s to explain to the stockholders how they would be levied with this additional financial burden. Soon after the banks closed, portions of the farmland controlled by the family were lost.\footnote{Ibid.}

The family had grown their holdings in the Arlington and Morrisonville areas as well as properties in Dane County through a series of land contracts. Jim stated, "When the economy fell apart in the 1930s much of this land was lost". Through great effort the family was able to keep about half of the land they had prior to the crash. This was nearly evenly divided among the five families. Lyall maintained control of the two hundred and forty acres that Jim Caldwell holds today. Jim's father, unlike some of his siblings, was adverse to debt and this led him to having the
least difficulty in continuing with his operation in the face of the economic hard
times. This holds some parallels with the Krueger family. As related earlier, the
Kruegers had avoided becoming encumbered with debt, which enabled them to fair
better than most through the Depression. Lyall’s brother Ross was not as fortunate.
While he was able to hold on to the farm next to Lyall’s, he lost his other holdings.
This was a difficult period for much of Columbia County. Jim Caldwell offered a
bleak description of the Depression era in the Arlington Prairie area, as several farms
failed. Mr. Caldwell spoke of how the loss of these farms had an impact on other
aspects of the community. He told of the closing of the stockyards and the grocery
stores as the money dried up and the farm totals shrank. Beyond the economic woes,
a void in leadership developed, as once prosperous members of the community were
forced to focus on their own issues rather than the needs of the community. 131

As discussed earlier in this research the 1930s was a period of low milk
prices, specifically the price of B milk was less than production cost. Lyall
Caldwell’s dairy concern produced B milk, meaning it was destined for the
production of cheese and butter. B grade milk was given the lowest prices, which
was partially the cause of the 1933 milk strikes. Lyall chose not to participate in the
strike instead opting to diversify as he transitioned out of dairy. For the Caldwells,
the cost of upgrading their facilities to raise their output to grade A quality milk was
too high for the resultant difference in selling price. In the decade of the 1940s, Lyall
switched the farm operation over to feeder stock leaving dairy farming for good. 132

The feedlots on the Caldwell farm were constructed in the early 1940s by
German prisoners of war and were used through the 1980s. Aside from the feeder
business the Caldwells continued to raise and sell draft horses, selling many to
lumbering firms, and as stated earlier, even some to the Schlitz brewery. The switch
from dairy to feed lots was similar to many farms in Columbia County as they took
advantage of growing corn in the fertile lowlands of the river valleys and the higher
meat prices resulting from the war. The two brothers rented a portion of their land
out to the canning factory in Deforest and used the money to purchase and tear down

131 Ibid.
132 Ibid.
old buildings on neighboring farms that were then recycled as new barns on the Caldwell’s farmsteads. Jim Caldwell stated that these barns are still standing on his farm today. The feeder operation would continue into the 1980s. By 1943 Lyall’s son Jim was born and his two sisters followed in the next few years. Lyall continued to run the feedlots and grow grain through the 1940s and 1950s. He purchased trucks for hauling the feeder cattle and feeder hogs grown on the farm, and did contract transport for others. He discontinued breeding stock, opting instead to purchase young stock for fattening. As the 1950s ended some of the other branches of the John Caldwell family left farming for other parts of the state. Jim Caldwell spoke of the disappointment the family had when a relative sold one of the farms to the University of Wisconsin for its swine testing station in the 1950s. It had been his and his cousin Ronald’s hope that the land would stay in the family.133

Lyall and Ross had cooperated in their farming endeavors throughout the years and shared equipment and labor. The 1960s went on in this fashion while Jim went through school and Ross’s son Ronald entered the military service. When Ronald completed his active duty he returned and joined his father and uncle in farming while Jim moved to Whitewater where he would begin his career in banking. Of note here is that at the time, Jim was only slightly aware of the family history in the financial realm. By the 1970s Lyall and Ross were looking to step back from the daily operations, so Ronald began operating both farms and expanding the feeder cattle business while increasing the land he put under tillage. That was about the time that the grain deal was made with Russia and Earl Butz pronounced; “get big or get out”. Ronald was fully on board with the concept of getting bigger as, at one point he controlled over five thousand acres, much of which was under land contract or financed through the Farmers Home Administration. Ronald, as introduced in part three of this research, was the State Director of this government farm financial institution. The events suggest that history repeated itself in the case of the Ross Caldwell family, as his son would be faced with the same financial trials Ross had faced in the 1930s. Both experienced the issues of being over extended with mortgaged debt during economic turmoil. In similar fashion as his father, Ronald

133 Ibid.
ultimately was able to salvage ownership of the original farmstead but lost all other holdings, as the land price balloon popped in the 1980s.\(^ {134}\)

In 1973 Lyall transferred ownership of his farm to Jim who proceeded to lease the land out for grain production. For a period of time he also rented the farmhouse to tenants. In the 1950’s, Jim had left the farm to attend school and had made the decision he would not be taking up farming as a profession, though he had a great respect for the land and the importance of keeping it in the family. In 1974 he was employed by the First Citizens Bank of Whitewater as a Senior Vice-President and was promoted to President in 1979. In this role he had a front row seat to the destruction that befell Wisconsin farmers in the 1980s. The following is his description of the era:

That was a tough economy, I was in this business [banking] at the time and it was really… the rust belt and the farm belt. We called it the trunch, Milwaukee was devastated and our agricultural community was under great stress. You know part of it was, well maybe we over paid for some land out there, and also the economics was just not there. So we saw the number of farm operators dwindle, and it was very devastating to see that happen to families that had been in this thing for generations. Myself, our home farm, I had been renting it and of course the rents changed but we were not too badly affected, not being an operator. The whole notion is that those that got through had very little debt. That was the differentiating thing in those times.

By that time though we did not have those families to pull us through like we had in the thirties. It was a whole new deal, we had machinery and we had equipment, we had debt on that, we were productive… we were doing all the right things, but the economy fell apart. Some of the best operators failed, not because they were doing things badly, but the economics fell apart. We just got ahead of ourselves. There was the grain deal and we thought Earl Butz had solved all of the problems in the seventies; we were going to feed the world. There was a little bit of, my neighbor is doing it I better too.\(^ {135}\)

Jim Caldwell went on to state that the opportunity for easy money proved to be a downfall for many of the farms no matter the skill level of the operators. This easy money might even be seen as a method used by the government to goad farmers into accepting loans to enlarge, however in the end it was their decision. He likened the

\(^ {134}\) Ibid.
\(^ {135}\) Ibid.
situation to the purchase of Harveststore silos. These giant blue monuments to over indulgent spending may be seen across the countryside. Touted as miraculous inventions for better storage of animal nutrition, they were in fact unnecessary. The time period forage was harvested and the handling of its storage was of much greater importance than the vessel it was stored in. Though many understood this, if your neighbor had a Harveststore at the time, one felt conspicuous for not following the trend. The pressure to maintain your status as a top producer was at its peak during the heady times of the mid to late 1970s, and the money was available to allow farm landowners to spend what they deemed necessary to keep up with their competition. Mr. Caldwell put this issue in its simplest terms:

We are a people of greed, I mean that is how we are in America. When we see the neighbor getting that, we want it. There is a lot of that, that went on in the eighties... ‘if they can do it, I can do it. We can buy this machinery, we can’t handle it without adding any more equipment, we can just go out and buy the incremental.’ You know that is a pretty easy story to sell until the prices collapsed and then land values dropped, the cash flow wasn’t there and the house of cards fell in. They were up to seventy-five to eighty percent debt, today it has switched and those still in business are at about twenty-five to thirty percent debt. Agriculture learned its lesson and now the housing industry is learning its lesson.¹³⁶

In spite of the disruption the 1980s wrought upon the farm community in the form of low prices exasperated by the grain embargo, the loss of land value driven after the speculative 1970s, or the money crunch facilitated by the Federal Reserve policies, Mr. Caldwell views those days as an excellent lesson that should be revisited often to avoid such calamities.

After the economic issues of the 1980s the Caldwells discontinued the feeder cattle business, Jim rented the facilities for a period of time in addition to renting the cropland. Ronald farmed his land up to the late 1990s when he converted his ownership to a limited liability company (LLC) and then took on renters as well. The Caldwell’s neighbors, the Kellys currently are growing corn and soybeans on the farm as part of around six thousand acres that they own or rent. Neither, Jim or

¹³⁶ Ibid.
Ronald Caldwell are actively farming today, nor are any members of their family in the profession in Columbia County. Jim Caldwell, having married late in life, has three teenage children in whom he has attempted to instill the importance of the land. They however, are unlikely to take up the family operation. Ronald’s children are grown and have careers off the farm. For all intents and purposes the economic failure of the 1980s marked the end of the Caldwell farming institution in the county. Ronald still participates in some community activities and Jim Caldwell is very active in several civic responsibilities including his role on the Board of Regents for University of Wisconsin- Whitewater. 137

The story of the Caldwells must be viewed as a success, in fact an embodiment of the American ideal. This family started with nothing and in the face of many challenges, amassed, lost and rebuilt their dream in the Arlington area and has held it for one hundred and fifty years. Today they are not unlike a large number of farms in the Nation, going forward with absentee ownership. The Caldwells face a similar future as that which proved to be the ultimate end for the Krueger farm. With each generation the likelihood of the farm staying in the family diminishes as the interest in active farming wanes. Even in the case of Jim Caldwell’s family where the financial issues are of little concern, as the farm has no mortgage and he has other streams of income and a retirement secured, the desire of the next generation to operate the farm is not forthcoming. Without that desire, ownership of the land may stay in the family as an investment, but it is truly not a family farm.

In the stories of each of these families the themes of this research may be seen played out in very real terms. One must first recognize that these farms were the survivors, noted for their longevity and yet the pressures of the external and internal forces did, or predictably will, triumph over them both. The analysis of the impact of the loss of farms such as the Kruegers and the Caldwells reveals support for the assertions of this study. This researcher will discuss those assertions in order of their original proposition.

The first of these is that there are negative outcomes socially, economically, and politically associated with the loss of family farms. Socially, the farm

137 Ibid.
community was once a lively interwoven web of mutual support and nurture. The Kruegers and Caldwells showed this within their communities as they chose partners and associates and together developed communities, businesses, families, and farms. The interdependence needed to build these entities is self-evident and yet, even they could not hold out against the pressures within them and exerted upon them. The small communities of Arlington and Morrisonville, once healthy examples of rural commerce, are now but clusters of houses and empty store fronts. The larger villages of Lodi and Watertown, now still viable, owe that viability to urban sprawl from Madison and Milwaukee more so than the support of the rural acres that surround them. Economically, the farms are no longer the homes of the multiple families that once provided the clientele for local businesses. Now, absentee owners lease the ground to larger operators, which in turn are contracted with even larger corporations. Through this chain of events, wealth is pulled from the soil and transferred to larger entities most often outside the community. The results of these actions have led to vacant storefronts, closed local creameries and cheese factories, and the end of nearly ninety percent of all cooperatives in the home counties of these two farms. Politically the loss of influence provided by men like Robert Caldwell or August Krueger and their families have left a void too often filled, by virtue of the Supreme Court’s Citizen United decision that upheld first amendment rights of corporations, with orchestrated sound bite political advertisements.

Some of the causes for the decline of the farms explored in these two case studies have been discussed in the previous pages, specifically the challenge of maintaining generational stamina; however, other forces are, and were present that influenced the current disposition of these family farms. It is improbable that any one isolated cause may be credited with the demise of either of these farms, or any other operation throughout the country. Combinations of several factors that are often interdependent conspire to affect the resultant farm end. First and foremost, embedded in the issue of keeping youth on the farm to grow the legacy is directly impacted by the poor profit to effort ratio endemic in the profession. In a Nation obsessed with immediate reward, farming, as a career, offers little in the form of quick return. Even during the land value growth markets of the early 1900s, or the
speculative 1970s, one could not realize the profits without securing loans or selling the property. These gains were locked in the soil leaving only the profit from their operations as the operator’s sole support. Here, the labor requirements, often extending to a twenty-four hour, seven days a week standard, were not acceptable, based on the cash rewards available.

Mechanization and technological improvements were important for both the Caldwells and Kruegers, yet the outcome of each was greater investment that in turn demanded greater production to afford. In one case the diminishing family involvement perpetuated by less labor needed ultimately led to elder absentee ownership, and in the other case a slow decline and sale of the property. This occurred as the expenses of improvement required more years to payoff, which led to the older generations of both families continuing their role as primary operators longer. As discussed earlier, the lack of opportunity for the next generation drove them to seek employ elsewhere.

Corporate primacy of farm sales may be seen specifically in the Caldwell case. This farm exists today as leased land encompassed in a grain operation that farms five thousand acres. One must recognize in this format it is not a family farm, rather it is an asset placed in service for return. The operators of the grain production concern are working as an S corporation that is considered family owned. The next step in the puzzle is unknown, other than the fact that they sell the grain through an out of state broker. This group is clearly part of the sixteen-percent of farms that produce ninety-percent of the farm output addressed in the introduction of this work.

Government actions have been reviewed throughout this paper. In most cases between the 1860s and the present, these actions have had good intentions. Initially the goals were simply to secure a steady food source for the Nation. As technology and mechanization minimized that concern, two primary goals emerged. These were to maintain low consumer prices and attain income parity for the farm community, as compared to the urban work force. This researcher has questioned the compatibility of these two goals as they conflict. For the Caldwells and Kruegers government activity had positive and negative influence. The educational programs, such as the Extension Service, offered members of both households the knowledge to improve
their methods and ultimately their production. Subsidies in milk production assisted the Kruegers, and likewise grain supports profited the Caldwells. Both felt the negative influence of the post World War I market meltdown and the slow response to the Depression years. In the case of the Caldwells, the pressure to expand brought on by foreign policies in the 1970s, coupled with poorly regulated loan programs nearly ended Ronald Caldwell’s farm career. Within these examples one may see that government intervention in a free market often has unintended outcomes. The will of the free market ultimately regains control and the resultant adjustments are unpredictable. These adjustments were seen several times over the course of the historical review of both the Caldwells and the Kruegers.

The issue of family farm survival as seen with both the Caldwells and the Kruegers is a complex discussion. It goes beyond the economic hurdles, which are dictated by the poor profit to effort ratio of farming, and involves enduring generational commitment. The latter requirement is perhaps even more difficult to maintain than the financial ware withal to survive. This too, is more complex than the statement reveals, as finances and generational farm transfer, are forever entwined. Elder farmers are not often in the position to allow their children to take over operations without keeping a portion of the proceeds for their living expenses, as seen in the earlier generations of the two families reviewed here. Then too, the days when one may expect the selfless dedication necessary for the younger generation to remain in secondary roles well into their prime earning years in order to sustain the elder generation, ignoring the lure of opportunities that inevitably would return greater reward for their effort, have perhaps faded into the past. Perhaps there is greater pressure in a modern world to be the exploiter rather than the nurturer, as defined from the writings of the author Wendell Berry. One may assert, perpetuating the American ideal faces both external and internal obstructions that may only be delayed but not overcome.
Conclusion

A statement of findings.
This research began with two primary assertions: first the decline of family farms has had a negative social, economic, and political impact on rural communities in the central portion of southern Wisconsin, and secondly that the decline of the family farm between 1890 and 1990 is the result of several factors including the poor profit to effort ratio of farming, the increased productivity of mechanization, and the influence of government actions that actively or inadvertently favored larger more specialized agricultural pursuit. In order to ascertain the accuracy of these postulates, this researcher has provided a look at farming over the one hundred years between 1890 and 1990 from three perspectives: the historical accounts of recent authors, a review of statistical evidence specific to Wisconsin and Columbia and Dodge Counties, and the analysis of two family farms that endured through the years covered.

The loss of the family farm has left rural communities with a void of local political leadership. Based on the evidence presented here fewer farms controlled by larger entities had an impact on the volume of participation in political activities at the local community level. Individuals that had personal commitments to the health and welfare of their farm communities such as the Kruegers and the Caldwells are vanishing, replaced by absentee owners and corporate entities.

Social interaction is dependant on norms; these customary rules govern behavior in groups and societies. At the peak of family farm numbers the rural community was far from a composite of individualists working in isolation, rather it was an interdependent whole. The cooperative movements, the agricultural training offered through county extensions services, and the communal aspects of local creameries were all discussed in this paper. Each of these entities diminished, as the farms were lost. The loss of the support system offered by these organizations left the remaining small operators vulnerable to the forces of the market, often expediting their failure. The small towns that had been the points of congregation for the family farms became victims, both socially and economically, of the farm loss. The loss of rural population affected the decline in retail, the vacancy of farmsteads throughout the countryside, and a demographic change in these communities. The overall socioeconomic change to the rural landscape essentially drew an end to what was at
one time the largest economic sector dominated by family business. This may be likened to the demise of cottage industry as the assembly line moved to primacy.

At the onset of this paper three primary causes were assumed for the loss of farms; the poor profit to effort ratio of farming, the increased productivity of mechanization, and the influence of government actions that actively or inadvertently favored larger more specialized agricultural pursuit. The low return on effort afforded farm labor was perhaps the greatest cause for the decline in family farms. This issue was made clear in the review of the case studies of the Kruegers and Caldwells. The pull of better pay and fewer hours of work eventually led to the end of long standing farm operations in each case. The effects of mechanization on productivity and therefore the ability of fewer to generate greater output also caused an ever-increasing cost of reinvestment. The need to advance technologically became a non-negotiable requirement for farm success. This research has shown the cost of this advancement drove some to overextend their debt often to their own detriment. The review of government policies here has shown them to be based on a set of incompatible goals, the desire for cheap food, and the intent to affect income parity for farmers. By attempting to meet these goals, policy decisions created a dependency on subsidies that have most often benefitted the largest establishments.

The family farm between 1890 and 1990 might be seen as the story of the rise and decline of an American ideal. The psyche of the Nation is ever interwoven with the image of the independent citizen that, though pitted against nature, economic challenges, and hardships of all sorts, rises to success. The information developed and accumulated here suggests several obstacles must be conquered to succeed in farming ventures over time. The cost of start up, and the ongoing cost to be competitive, the luck and skills to endure the unpredictable nature of weather and market prices, the ability to evolve as the business requires, and the capacity to foster generational stamina to maintain production that can sustain multiple families, are all hurdles farmers must surmount.

The family farm is not likely to have a resurgence anytime soon. Since 1990 the farm total has continued on the decline, currently shrinking by five hundred operations per year. What the final count will be is unknown. What is known is that
the continued impact of this loss will forever change the landscape of America, Wisconsin and Columbia and Dodge Counties in a very physical sense with the removal of each fencerow.
The Rise and Decline of the Family Farm in Central Southern Wisconsin: 1890-1990
A Study of the Economic, Social, and Political Ramifications of the Loss of Family Farms On the Rural Communities of Columbia, Dodge, and Sauk Counties, Wisconsin

An Annotated Bibliography
Primary Sources


This publication offered the reader the statistical analysis of farming statewide as well as historic data pertaining to the number and characteristics of farms from 1935 to 1990. Comparisons of production with all states were available with additional information on farm sizes and numbers. The state information was then broken down by county showing specifics regarding debt to asset analysis.

The statistics available in this book were used as base data for the review of farm progress and profitability from 1935 to 1990. It may be accepted that as a state publication these numbers are as reliable as may be found for comparison over time.


This article offers statistical information on the number of bankruptcies in Wisconsin in the 1980s. This information was used to show the extent to which the crisis of farm prices impacted the family farms in the state.


The 1890 census of Agriculture enumerates the farms and farmer numbers for the Nation. It includes statistics of rented versus owner-operated farms. The production of all farm products are analyzed and calculated on a national and state-by-state accounting. This information was used as the basis of the current research from which the developments over the 100 years explored.


This document is a census of farm activity as prepared by the United States Department of Agriculture. It shows the number of farms and the farm output by category as well as the land use in the United States in statistical analysis. The 1992 census data was used to detail the definition and value of family farm output. The information lends accuracy to the historic comparison over time, as the definitions of farms, farmers and family farms changed in the post World War II era.


This farm cooperative journal reviews government policy and best farm
practices. This issue was used to document the prices realized across the Nation in 1978 and 1979 for liquid milk as it was adjusted for transportation. This process was put in place in the late 1960s. Coupled with the 1970s legislation it developed an incentive to produce milk further away from Wisconsin for higher prices.


Walter Ebling was the Senior Statistician for the State. In this article Ebling attempted to explain the reasons for the economic conditions of the farm community in the state. This explanation was used to develop a comparison of prices realized and those paid by farmers. Ebling’s article essentially accepts that the farmer is destined to live a lifestyle well below that of their urban counterparts.


In this edition of the Blue Book Walter Ebling offers a review of the farm developments from 1840 to 1940. This article lends insight into how the State views the farm community by 1940. The writing trends a bit optimistic but does offer that farmers may have had a difficult time in meeting their bills over the previous few years.


This report offers an expansive overview of the securities and assets of the Wisconsin State Banks. The information covers the first ten years of function of the Wisconsin State banking Department. The overview information lends statistical information for this research on the financial instruments available to the State's farmers.


This collection of papers documents four generations of a farm family in Dodge County, Wisconsin. It includes genealogical information for the family, correspondence, farm records, land sales, and purchase records. The records include descriptions of the family’s emigration from Germany and subsequent settlement in Dodge County. Additional records include records of the Town of Emmet School District.

The information contained in these records was used as a case study of a farm that operated from the mid nineteenth-century through the 1990’s. This study is one of the anchor family farms for the development of this research.

This article explains the operation and success of the Wisconsin Farmers' Institutes between 1885 and 1933. This information was used to discuss the activities of the State during the Depression years of the 1930s. The author lends insight into the role cooperative marketing played in keeping farms above water.


This article explains the issue of foreclosures in the state during the 1980s farm crisis. In addition the individual quoted in the article is a member of one of the of the centennial farms families used for a case study.


This article describes the self-sufficiency of the Pay family on a Wisconsin farm in 1933. The information from this article was used to explain part of the ideal that lured some back to the farm in the early 1930s.


This report, issued to the Department of Agriculture's Economic Research Service offers a detailed history of legislation that has been used to increase, decrease, and manipulate the flow of farm production over the period of years from the Great Depression to the mid 1970s. The information provided in this document served this research through its description of policies in near layman terms.


http://hdl.handle.net/2027/umn.31951d00291096f.

This report is one of the first to use data from the 1978 Census of Agriculture to observe how farms adapted to the changing economic conditions of the seventies. Those trends identified include; a decline in farm numbers, an increase in farm size (acreage), a decline in total farmland, and an increase in harvested cropland as a percentage of total farmland. However, some earlier trends actually reversed them-selves, so that now: The average age of farmers is declining instead of rising, the proportion of tenant farmers is rising instead of falling, the proportion of partnerships is rising for the first time since the sixties, the trend toward farm incorporation accelerated, the number of corporate farms nearly doubled between 1974 and 1978 to 47,800; but, corporate farms still amounted to just slightly more than 2 percent of all farms. The increase in farm incorporation does not mean that American agriculture is being taken over by the executive boardroom, nearly ninety percent of corporate farms are family operated. The census data also disclosed two important developments in farm size in the seventies: The number of very small farms with annual sales of between $2,500 and $9,999 rose slightly, especially in the West and the
northeast. Operators of these farms had non-farm income equal to the U.S.
median income. Such farms are clearly rural residences for people with full-time
jobs elsewhere.

This report offers a look at the character and structure of agricultural land
make-up as seen in the 1978 agricultural census. This information gave a
contextual basis to the current study and a historical snapshot of how the family
farm was viewed by 1982.

Swanton, Milo. "A New Frontier." *Wisconsin Council of Agriculture Co-Operatives

This newsletter article focuses on the new talents and skills required for the
family farm to prosper in the future. It specifically details that the hard working
individualism that had developed the farms in Wisconsin will not be sufficient to
provide future success. The author urges farmers to develop their business
management skills. The new frontier according to this account is an economic
frontier. The specific recommendations as seen in this article begin to show
where the tipping point for the decline of small family farms occurs. In the post
World War II era of technological advancement, the small farmer would need to
grow to compete.

Swanton, Milo. "Some Farm Figurin!." *Wisconsin Council of Agriculture Co-operative
Newsletter*, March 1949.

The Wisconsin Council of Agriculture Co-operatives Newsletter published
from the 1930's until it was consolidated with the Wisconsin Association of
Cooperatives. The Cooperative's mission may be seen here in a statement from
their final annual report in 1969; "Farmer cooperatives have long realized that by
coordinating their efforts they can accomplish goals that otherwise would be
unobtainable. The Wisconsin Council of Agriculture Co-operative was formed
with this reason in mind. Its primary concern is to promote the interests of
agriculture by seeking to create an economic and political climate in which farmer
cooperatives can function effectively and to provide individual farmers the means
to obtain greater economic strength in the market place." This article lays out the
issues of rising production costs facing family farms in March of 1949. The
article relates specifics regarding the costs associated with the completion of the
farmer's 1948 tax returns.

Swanton, Milo. "Farmers Race To Keep Even." *Wisconsin Council of Agriculture Co-

Relating the issues of a "cost-price race" faced by farmers in this issue of the
cooperative newsletter, the author presents a statistical case of investment
transition. Swanton compares the significant cuts in farm labor from 1949 to
1959 to the dramatic increase in capital investments for equipment and buildings.
He further develops this comparison with an analysis of the increase in cost for
those improvements based on the rise of industrial labor salaries. He offers that
due to these expenses, farm profits are sliding even in the face of farm labor cost
reduction.
The researcher may see that this comparison shows two causes of the family farm decline. The first is the improbability of small farm profitability. The second is the draw of increased industrial wages on the rural population.


This issue of the Blue Book offers data regarding the farm crisis in Wisconsin as well as the political party platforms from 1984. This information will be useful in describing the political attitudes toward farming in the mid 1980s. Additionally specific economic information on farms is included in the statistical portions of the book.


The 1923 Blue Book has the specifics of the federal census records for Wisconsin. This issue offers details of the mortgage rates and percent of farm debt. In addition this volume contains data on the number of farms and farm laborers, number of retail, manufacturing, mining, and trade establishments in the state. This information was used to account for the dramatic increases in prices and debt that occurred in the decade from 1910 to 1920.


Truppner, William. "State Statistics." In *United States census of business, 1948.* Washington: U.S. Bureau of the Census :, 195152. 248-260. This census covers the developments in all commerce through 1948. This material was used to develop an understanding of the impacts of both the Depression years and World War II. The information showed the concentration of retail after World War II into urban areas, as prosperity returned and mobility increased.


98
The 1923 edition of the Agricultural Yearbook offered this research a clear picture of the government's spin on the farming downturn of that decade. The reports included by Secretary Wallace on the growth of the industry and the focus the government was placing on production offered insight on the role the farmer played in the economic adjustments that would plague the economy for ten to fifteen years.

The Agricultural Census data was used to show the growth of farm production from 1910 to 1920. This information was important to show the effects of increased productivity and the growth market from international demand during the hostilities of World War I.

The Agricultural Census data will be used to show the track record of the number of farms from 1910 to 1935. This information is important to show the effects of the economic problems faced first by farmers and rural communities and then the Nation as the Great Depression developed.

The Agricultural Census data will be used to show the track record of the number of farms that used phones and electricity.

This report shows the comparison of farm numbers, production, and value to mortgage for the Nation, Wisconsin, and the counties covered in this research. These numbers were used to show the performance of agriculture during the World War II era.

This census was used to assess the level of farm acreage and number of farms over time from 1935 to 1987. This information showed the effects of improved productivity and will be compared to similar data before and after up to 1987.

This census offered the information regarding farm numbers, volume, and ownership type necessary to make comparisons for the time period this research will cover. The census includes highlights of the status of farms nationally within the state and for all counties.

Secondary Sources


The voting habits of landowners and non-landowners were explored in this article. This information was used to lend details and factual background to the discussion of political activism.


Barlett, through a long-term case study of family farms in Dodge County, Georgia, tried to make sense of the crisis faced by small farm operations across America. Written in 1993 the author sought to find the critical trends in farming, and their impact on the economic and social health of rural communities. Beginning with 156 farms Barlett documents the struggle and ultimate failure of one-third of the operations in her study. She utilizes her findings to make the connections to the rural experience across the United States. Her findings take an interesting stance that rural America was struggling as much against an industrialized society and its values as it was the economic realities of earning profit. She offers a stark image that with the loss of family farms there is also a knowledge loss within youth. She explains that real life experience in economics, labor management, animal science experience, work ethic, and cooperative values are all casualties of the departure of family farms. This may be seen vividly in her sociological look at the impacts in Dodge County.

The statistical analysis and the anecdotal information are key features for the current study. The historical documentation of these Georgia farms along with the author's comparative analysis with Midwest farms offered validity to the narrative of the current research.


Written originally as a critique of agriculture the author changed his goals to a simple review. There is little that is simple about how Berry addresses the concept of agriculture. He launches his exploration as an indictment of the character of man. Drawing a stark comparison between the exploitation and
ultimate subjugation of the American Indian and the common laborer. He proposes that each individual in turn may be the exploited and the exploiter. Tracing this repetition of chained events from colonial inhabitants' exploitation of natives to their own role as the victim under imperial jurisdiction Berry paints a paradox of intent versus actuality. He revises the labels from conquerors and victims to exploiters and nurturers. The latter designation befitting those that in the rush to extract wealth pause to set proposed roots and develop the land. He exposes the myth of staying upon the land as but a brief moment prior to the next revolution by an ever-changing class of exploiters.

This text was a corner stone in the historiography of the family farm. The author offered a unique perspective on the role of wealth and government in limiting the success and life of small agricultural communities.

This article gave an overview of the Farm Credit System and the financial instruments and institutions involved in farming nationally as well as in Wisconsin. This section assisted this researcher in placing the credit issues of the 1970s and 1980s in perspective.

The role of silos in the development of dairy farming cannot be over stated. Without the ability to store forage through the winter months it would not have been economically possible to maintain a herd year round drastically limiting the ability to make a living on a dairy farm in Wisconsin. Likewise as the smaller family farm has given way to larger farms with ever-growing herds of cattle, the silo has become obsolete and replaced with trench storage. This article added specific details to the story of both the rise and decline of family operated dairy farms.

Each entry offers the description of a farmstead that has been held and operated by members of the same family for one hundred years. The stories shared are both factual and anecdotal regarding the founding and operation of the farms by successive generations. This information was used for reference to determine the percentage of central Wisconsin farms honored with this distinction in 1984 that were still operating as family farms by 1990.

Conkin, Paul Keith. A Revolution Down on the Farm: The Transformation of American Agriculture Since 1929. Lexington, Ky.: University Press of
Kentucky, 2008.

Written in a loose autobiographical form, Conkin explores the developments of farming from shortly after the turn of the twentieth-century to about 2005. This author offers a counterpoint to many of the writings regarding the plight of the farmer. He takes the stance that improved methods and the efficiency developed over the century are and were inevitable outgrowths of the industrial age. He offers that the ability to grow and change with the times and needs of a modern world are a responsibility incumbent upon farmers. Those who do not survive are casualties to their own inability to adapt and meet the efficiencies required to compete.

The position of this author is important to lend balance to the current research. An overwhelming amount of information has been published regarding the "Farm Crisis" pinpointed in the last quarter of the twentieth-century. This author presented an opinion often left out of the story.


The author takes a sociological approach to the farm crisis of the late 1970's through the 1980's in this book based partially on a single village case study. Davidson posits the argument that the farm crisis is but another symptom in a much larger societal issue that has its roots as deep as the founding of the Nation. In this work the author explores the issue exploitation of the masses by those that would profit from their attempts to succeed.

This work offered the current research a sociological view on the time period to be covered, as well as a statistical and anecdotal material. The thesis of this book; that the farmers are one set of possible victims of a larger effort to exploit the work of the average citizen, is an interesting counterpoint to other works that take aim at internal structural decisions made by individual agriculturalists.


Dudley provides a case study review of the impact of the late 1970's-1980's agricultural economic down turn. Through interviews and observations she follows the social and economic impact on a rural Minnesota community. She explores the individual and collective response by the farm community to the dislocation and loss generated by unfavorable government an financial policies. The author compares the realities of rural life to the ideals associated with a romanticized pastoral mythos. Dudley discusses the paradoxical attitudes of protesting within farm constituency. Here the attitudes of individualism conflict with collective protest. She explains that only 2% of the affected farmers joined in protests of government policies, often incurring disdain from their fellow agriculturalists. This work offered the current research insight into the interactions of the farm community during what appears to be the depth of the family farm fall-out. The social and political angst discussed in Dudley's interpretation lends context to the current study.
These hardy immigrants represent a major constituency in the story of the rise of the family farm in Wisconsin. This role will be pivotal in the examination of agriculture between 1890 and 1990.


Fitzgerald covers the spectrum of causes for the ever-increasing pressure toward the consolidation and specialization of farming. Taking a comparative view of the "Farm Crisis" of the 1980's to the equally devastating effects felt by the post World War I farm community, the author draws stark similarities. She offers a composite view integrating the economists, sociologists, and historians’ explanations of the phenomenon experienced by American Farmers. The author then takes the reader through the developments in farming both through policy and competitive pressure that results in specialization. She offers an interesting puzzle that as the farms specialize in their production the consumers become more diversified in their consumption.

The current research used Fitzgerald's work in identifying the boom-bust syndrome that appears to repeat itself on the farm. In addition she offers a clear description of the industrialization of food production and the ripple effect it has on the individual farmers throughout the twentieth century.


This article examined the role government played in Wisconsin's agriculture in the 1980s and 1990s. The statistical information was used to add evidence to the impact of subsidies on the farm income and success.


Gardner takes the reader on an exhaustive economic look at the development of the agribusiness sector of the United States economy throughout the twentieth century. In this work he develops a theme of progress through mechanization and efficiency that allows for the number of active farmers to reach two percent of the level they were in the peak years of the 1930's. This description of productivity through technological advances and managerial designs paints a picture of farming success story that rivals any other business sector. The author goes on however to show the dark side or cost of this success. He follows the path government legislation proposed as family farm assistance that in reality becomes a boon for mega producers and corporate owned concerns. He tracks the New Deal legislations intent and modified results and the impact of trade balance measures at the expense of overproduction and lower profits.

Gardner's approach offered much evidence for the current research regarding the factors that created both the rise of the family farm and its decline from the peak 1930's to 1990. The author gathered ample amounts of economic data from which to build his case. This information offered this project a solid foundation.
for study.


Harvest of Hope offered a look into the lives of a farm family, often written in their own words. The book centered its attention on the Basin Spring Farm in western Kentucky. The description shared of the life working and surviving while faced with social, political, and economic challenges allowed the reader a firsthand perspective of farm life throughout the twentieth-century. As the name implies the book looked at the forces that though presented as hope for economic security, such as government programs and technological advancements are often accompanied by severe drawbacks.

Through anecdotal, and documented discourse the authors created a clear picture of the lives of farm families in Kentucky and the profession in general. The story lent context to the historical development of agricultural life in many parts of the Nation and offered an apropos comparison to the farming experiences documented throughout this researcher's study.


Gough weaves an interesting social history of eighteen northern counties of Wisconsin. His work chronicled the hope and tribulation of first and second-generation immigrants as they attempted to farm a once densely wooded northern Wisconsin. Their efforts to recreate their old world lives and claim new world prosperity were explored at the human level. He set about identifying the day-to-day issues in a social, economic and political language and allowed the reader a full grasp of the conflict of competing interests.

The information from this book offered a contrasting vantage point from which to observe the central Wisconsin experience. The early casualties of family farms developed on the fringe of quality land offered a foretelling of the hazards that would befall the small farmer in the more productive central portion of the State.


The 1933 Milk Strikes represented the closest Wisconsin came to open revolt from its agricultural community. The low prices experienced throughout the Depression came to a head in 1933 sparking a year of strikes that nearly crippled the milk product industry of Wisconsin and pitted its farmers against one another in a near civil war. This article lends this current research a look into the Desperation as it was felt by marginal farmers.

This exhaustive study on the origin and development of Columbia County offered a contextual background for the research at hand. Starting with the description of the Portage and its role as a trading center early in State history offers a glimpse at the area's future role as a center of commerce for the surrounding agricultural communities. Additionally, this work offered biographical information on the founding citizens of the county. The background of the Caldwell family is available within these biographies and acted as the foundational information of this family case study.

This work, having been written within 24 years of the beginning era encompassed in this research, lent insight into the early development of the diverse family farm. The early land usage in central Wisconsin, as documented in this work, was dominated by wheat production. The late 1880's may be noted as the transitional time period for the switch to dairy. This conversion gives rise to the more diversified family farm with dairy, meat stock, and crop production.


As the title of the book explains this publication deals with the early development of railroads in Wisconsin. The information was used to assist in the understanding of the role railroads played in the effective distribution of first wheat then dairy products as agriculture grew in the State.


Keyssar's explanation of the original expectation of land ownership as a prerequisite for suffrage was an important feature in the discussion of family farm importance. While the ownership of property is not a feature of the Nation's current voting restrictions, the tradition of citizenship in the United States still holds the "American Dream" in high regard. This research utilized this historic connection of property and citizenship as a point of reference in the role the family farm has played in the development and support of local communities.


The role of women on family farms is explored in this brief web article produced by the University of Wisconsin Extension office. The issue that became swiftly apparent is the declining number of women involved on the farm as they seek income off the farm and the opportunity to provide affordable health insurance for their family. The report was established as the researchers began to look for reasons that a program created for farm women during the 1970's had faltered and been discontinued due to lack of attendance. Upon completing their study the authors arrived at the conclusion that women were no longer available during the traditional weekday-meeting schedule. This may be seen as a function of the exodus from farm work to an hourly wage off the farm. The study uses the
statistical evidence and interviews to establish the social implications of the lack of contact farmwomen had with their counterparts. The research showed a significant increase in social isolation and discontent.

This data was used to show the marginalizing aspect for families on farms as it relates specifically to farmwomen. This segment represented a subtopic in historical analysis.


This special report of the 1992 Agriculture census highlighted the success of larger farms. These farms represent those concerns with $100,000 in products sold or more. They are also the recipients of 63% of all subsidies. The issue here was the inequity that the most profitable farms are receiving the largest amount of government assistance.


Lobao and Meyer explored the decline of farming from 1900 to 2000 documenting a population change from just over thirty-three percent to two percent. This change was then viewed through a three-part lens of macro-level transformation, community impacts, and household response. This three-part analysis offered insight into the social, political and economic fall-out resulting from the evolution of rural communities to vacant locals filled with corporate land use and void of community interaction. This scholarly work examined the studies of sociologists and economists, and blended their findings into a cohesive explanation of the abandonment of farming as a career strategy. The authors cite the significant role farming has played historically in sociological works such as those of Marx, Weber, and Durkhiem. In comparison at the time of the author’s work no significant study had included farming as its central component for twenty years. This omission was further emphasized by the choice of modernist sociologists to view society through the window of paid workers, manufacturing and service sectors. This choice relegates the farmer to one segment of an invisible population engaged in alternative livelihood strategies.

This work offered the researcher ample material upon which to develop both the study strategy and the theoretical development.


This book was developed using the Krueger family papers. The author was also able to get interview with the surviving family members at the time. The author’s interview with Bob Krueger is of particular use for the overview of the family history and the final years of the farm.

The Wisconsin Magazine of History, Fall 1978.

The article lends background information to the New Deal in Wisconsin. The 1935 Works Bill represents the New Deal in action in the State. The efforts of this legislation were primarily geared for the urban workers rather than the farm community. It shows the lack of proactive innovation available from the State government during the depression.


Written as a compilation of community records, this text offered primary sources on a small township in Columbia County, Wisconsin. The author gathered church, school, and township accounts along with individual farm records to create a history of the families, farms, and businesses that make-up this rural community from the late 1800's to the turn of the twenty-first Century. The book offered the researcher insight into the social, political, and economic trials and successes that led to the changing demographics of the section of central Wisconsin covered in this study. Their story identified the tenacious quality of the people to cling to community against the force of economic challenges to an area once dominated by small family owned farms, now evolved to a paid labor economy.


This one page article offered a bleak picture for Wisconsin Milk Producers in May of 1980. The issue discussed is the government milk supports in relation to shipping costs of Wisconsin's milk to markets in New York and Florida. Where it had cost under $2 to ship each hundredweight of milk in 1969, which fell within the transportation support, that cost had grew to over $2.78 in 1979. This differential created price issues that made shipping less appealing to these markets seeking closer sources, resulting in lost revenue to Wisconsin farmers.


In his statement to the Small Business: Family Farm committee Senator Pressler expressed his concerns over the significant loss of family farms. He cited the increased number of bankruptcies due to the expense of credit faced by small farms. He further issued a warning of the undo advantage larger corporate farms enjoyed in a tight credit economic period. Statistical evidence included in his statement showed that farms had declined from the 1935 peak of 6.8 million to the to 2.4 million in 1978. By 1978 the Nation saw the percentage of farmland owned by non-farm interests increased by 35 percent and rented land by 87 percent.

The information included in Senator Pressler’s testimony offered a stark indictment of the economic impact of the federal agricultural policies. This
research utilized many of the arguments forwarded by Pressler in describing the economic and political causes for the decline of family farms.

Raney offered an extensive history of Wisconsin from first inhabitants to World War II. He began his review with an excellent description of the physical attributes of the state. In this discussion he painted the image of an ideal agricultural environment. The author led the reader through the early history of French fur traders and the later arrival of logging and farm communities. With an ample growing season, a well-watered fertile soil and a criss-cross of navigable waterways the territory proved to be attractive to pioneers in search of farmland.

The focus of this book used for this study was in chapter twelve entitled, *A Century of Agriculture.* Here the author took the reader through the transition from wheat to diversified farms and the rise of the dairy industry. The author's discussion on the influence of William Dempster Hoard provided an excellent example of the power of education in agriculture.

Raup revealed an extensive history of corporate farming in the United States from the pre-revolutionary period to 1970. In his discussion he examined the early failures and explained the dynamics required for corporate farms to succeed. The author shed light on the idea that early corporate farms could not compete with small farmers due to availability of land and the expense of maintaining labor with ownership as a competing option. Workers would learn the skills and then leave to apply them for their own wealth development. This required a constant flow of new labor and continuous training of the work force. Only as the frontier closed did the corporate farm begin to hold competitive advantage.

According to Raup the first real attempt to segment corporate farms from the general category of agriculture did not occur until 1968. He reported that at that point these farms were only one percent of the total commercial farms. He looks at the economics of farming throughout the twentieth-century. Here he put the profitability of farming in context and showed the appeal of economy of scale combined with the technological growth mirrored the industrial model’s transition from cottage industry to assembly line.

The author's ability to trace the evolution of circumstances that ultimately created the atmosphere conducive for the rapid growth of corporate ownership was used as context for this study. When taken in concert with agricultural census records from 1970 forward, Raup's information took on more significance as one could see the growth of corporate farms as the family farms declined.

The authors utilized statistical analysis and census records to define the family
farm unit in multiple methods. This cross-reference methodology arrived at a
description of a farm as any land from which $1000 of farm production is
claimed. The person responsible for the production is then defined as a farmer.
This was further refined to limit those individuals who attain their earnings from
50 percent or more of their time in the occupation of farming. Farm laborers are
not included in this definition. Slesinger and Whitaker fine-tuned the resulting
definition by taking a sociological look at those claiming the title. Here they
found that family farmers often continue the profession out of a sense of value for
the lifestyle even in the face of no apparent financial gain and heavy workloads.

The structure in which the authors intermingle social observations with
statistical data gives the reader a well-rounded understanding of the family farmer
in Wisconsin. The study for which this article has been selected utilized much of
the definition work to validate anecdotal evidence gathered from primary sources
and written memoirs. The statistical evidence was used to verify the decline of
family farms.

_The Appeal (Saint Paul), "Wisconsin Lands," May 17, 1897._

This is a brief article that discussed the fliers used to entice would be farmers
to Wisconsin. This was used to support the historical reference to land sales
through advertising by the railroads.

_"The Voice of Agriculture - American Farm Bureau."_ The Voice of Agriculture
American Farm Bureau, Accessed October 25, 2012,

This website gave the background and history of the Farm Bureau
organization. The information showed the development of the Bureau as a
political force for farmers beginning in 1911. The evolution from a social
organization to one of the strongest voices in support of farm legislation is a
modern success story.

Begun by the Department of Agriculture's extension offices run through the
land grant colleges this group ultimately became independent as a national
farm advocate. The current research used the history of this organization to explain
the early 1900's cooperative effort to build commercial infrastructure to support
the marketing of farm products.

Thomas, Kenneth, and Michael Boehlje. "Farm Business Arrangements: Which One's
For You?." _North Central Regional Extension Publication_ 1, no. 50 (1982):
1-32.

This publication, distributed by the Minnesota Extension service, takes the
reader through the decision process for the form of business operation that would
best serve their needs. This information explained two reasons for the shrinking
of the number of farms. The first reason was the improbability of an individual
being able to start a new farm without the help of an existing farmer. This is
based on expenses and profit margins over time. The second dealt with the aging
of existing farmers and their inability under traditional family arrangements to
transfer ownership without significant costs and loss of elder security.

This site offered specifics in the developments of agriculture from the late 1700's to the present. The specific developments surrounding 1890 were key facts in the development of this research. The site chronicled the changes in land usage, machinery, education, transportation, and economy for agriculture across two centuries. These facts are offered in a timeline format with links to specifics regarding these developments. The context derived from this structure expands the scope of the specific changes and placed them in a more coherent picture.

This information was used to explain the choices of time frame encompassed by the current study as well as the impacts of these events on the evolution of farming and the specifically the family farm. When seen in a chronological order these changes and developments provide key insights in the social, and economic outcomes seen over time.


Ingolf explored the corporate take over of farmland Nation wide. The author documented the change in farm production ownership as having far reaching impacts economically, socially and politically. He offered 1981 statistics such as over one-fifth of the western grain fields being held in the hands of multi-million dollar agribusinesses. Ingolf explained the negative impact of this consolidation of production on the market and consumers as well. His research covered twenty years of family farm struggle and corporate buy-outs. He explained the pressure large corporate farms place on the small farm through economies of scale and abilities to undercut the production cost of cash strapped smaller units.

The author’s study offered the current researcher significant data regarding the economic impact of corporate farms in the late 1970's and early 1980’s. His work served as a foundational piece in this researcher’s review of other’s works on the decline of family farms.


This web site offers statistical evidence of voter turn-out based on the economic status of the individuals. This information compares landowners to non land owner voting habits.


This sixty-seven-page book offered a quick analysis of the German immigration to Wisconsin. The author cited that over fifty percent of the current population of the state consider themselves German. This cultural identification has had far reaching implications in the work ethic, farming style, and structure of agriculture throughout the history of the state. Citing three primary waves of
immigration, Zeitlin leads the reader through the agricultural, and the commercial, and urban influence felt by the State. The author explained how the State played a role in attracting immigrants by creating a Commission of Immigration. Given the task of promoting the State, the commission distributed pamphlets that extolled the advantages of the Wisconsin and gave directions on how to get to Milwaukee. From there the evolution of German farming started in the eastern wooded areas and then spread in the post-Civil War era to the central portion of the State.

The author's discussion of the time period from the late 1870's to the early portion of the twentieth-century had the greatest pertinence to this study. In this portion of the book specific details regarding the social, economic, and political involvement of the German peoples in the rural communities of central Wisconsin were shown in both historic translation and anecdotal accounts.