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A pretension of place: The industrialization of corn belt agriculture, 1940-1965

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A PRETENSION OF PLACE:
THE INDUSTRIALIZATION OF CORN BELT AGRICULTURE, 1940-1965

An Abstract of a Thesis
Submitted
In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

Philip Jeffrey Nelson
University of Northern Iowa
May 1992

ABSTRACT

This study concerns both the causes and effects of the industrialization of Corn Belt agriculture during and after World War II. Although industrialization is certainly a fully cultural phenomenon, with a multiplicity of competing and augmenting causal agents involved in its genesis, industrial processes are the most salient and identifiable bases of modern economies. In their application to the Corn Belt's agricultural structure, techniques of industrial farming revolutionized almost every aspect of the agricultural experience. Farm size, machinery, power sources, capitalization, supplies, and populations have all changed in response to an almost single-minded adherence and adoption of a mechanical-chemical based technological vision of what security, progress, and utopian ideals entail for American culture.

This study identifies and analyzes five capital inputs which were fundamental to the previously mentioned massive transformation of Corn Belt agriculture. First, the development of engine-powered machinery allowed farmers to fully manifest and implement endemic cultural drives to achieve larger output and greater control over the land.

Second, the application of substantial quantities of commercial fertilizers stimulated larger yields from the same amount of land. The ability to manipulate crops and the larger environment was enhanced and forced up production levels. Third, monocultural cropping patterns grew along with farmers' increasing capacity to

"mass produce" field crops. Agriculturalists generally countered rising pest and disease threats with synthetic pesticides discovered shortly before, during, and after World War II.

Fourth, crop technology itself changed with the emergence of hybrid varieties, especially corn and soybean hybrids, and caused some farmers to abandon livestock raising altogether. Specialization produced greater risks.

Fifth, the remaining livestock producers changed to intensive, high energy, chemically-laden factory methods. They sought total control over livestock environments and the animals themselves. Developments in breeding, feeds, animal drugs, and confinement structures drove this shift.

This study suggests a link between a whole host of problems and the adoption of the industrial farming system. It has exacerbated difficulties associated with the traditional "farm problem" and has created new problems such as polluted ground water and disrupted rural communities. Finally, it is felt that this system represents a mere pretense at place construction, and therefore is inherently unstable and destructive of agricultural social ecology.

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