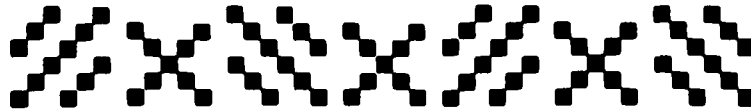


Agricultural Tenancy
in the Nineteenth-Century
Middle West: The Historiographical Debate

*Donald L. Winters**



The history of agricultural tenancy has attracted considerable attention and provoked wide disagreement among scholars. Some have seen tenancy as the unfortunate but entirely natural result of the retreat of the American frontier and the disappearance of unoccupied, arable land. Others have claimed that a misguided and ineptly administered federal land policy enabled evil moneyed interests to impose tenancy upon helpless farmers. Still others have argued that the institution was a rational and socially desirable adjustment to the conditions of a maturing agricultural economy. Not only was tenancy an unfortunate or cruel condition for poor farmers, according to its critics, it was also a situation from which few were able to extricate themselves. Those, on the other hand, who take a kinder view of the institution have held that it often served as a rung on an agricultural ladder leading to farm ownership. Some have asserted that the terms of rental agreements were arbitrarily dictated by landlords, while others have insisted that they were understandable and salutary responses to prevailing economic circumstances. Finally, the debate has encompassed the implications of tenancy for the economy as a whole. If some scholars have seen the institution as inherently inefficient and detrimental to economic growth, others have claimed that renters were as productive as their landowner counterparts and that tenancy in fact enhanced growth.

Although scholars have been concerned with tenancy throughout the United States, they have focused primarily on

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the South and Middle West. Several works dealing with sharecropping in the postbellum South have appeared over the past decade.¹ They offer provocative and often conflicting explanations of the increase in tenancy in the years following the Civil War, of the role of race in the implementation and development of the sharecropping system, of the relationship between tenant and landlord, and of the economic effect of farm renting. Harold D. Woodman has recently published a perceptive critique of these works.² A comparable attempt to deal with the literature on the Middle West seems in order.

Before the twentieth century, scholars took little notice of farm tenancy. Some, to be sure, called attention to its existence, but none sought to understand its causes and implications. However, the development around the turn of the century of the field of agricultural economics, with its emphasis on the systematic study of economic questions relating to agriculture, stimulated scholarly interest in the institution.³ Staff members in the agricultural colleges and experiment stations and in the Department of Agriculture's Bureau of Agricultural Economics (BAE) were concerned over the high incidence of tenancy, first reported by the federal census in 1880, and its meaning for American agriculture. This concern led to the publication of two studies of tenancy at the national level by members of the BAE and several state studies by economists in the agricultural colleges.⁴

A major objective of the agricultural economists was to understand the determinants of farm tenancy and its alarming

¹ Joseph D. Reid, Jr., "Sharecropping As An Understandable Market Response: The Post-Bellum South," *Journal of Economic History*, XXXIII (March, 1973), 106-30; Robert Higgs, *Competition and Coercion: Blacks in the American Economy, 1865-1914* (New York, 1977); Stephen J. DeCanio, *Agriculture in the Postbellum South: The Economics of Production and Supply* (Cambridge, Mass., 1974); Roger L. Ransom and Richard Sutch, *One Kind of Freedom: The Economic Consequences of Emancipation* (New York, 1977).

² Harold D. Woodman, "Sequel to Slavery: The New History Views the Postbellum South," *Journal of Southern History*, XLIII (November, 1977), 523-54.

³ Henry C. Taylor and Anne Dewees Taylor, *The Story of Agricultural Economics in the United States, 1840-1932* (Ames, 1952); Donald L. Winters, *Henry Cantwell Wallace as Secretary of Agriculture, 1921-1924* (Urbana, 1970).

⁴ E. A. Goldenweiser and L. E. Truesdell, *Farm Tenancy in the United States* (Washington, D.C., 1924); L. C. Gray et al., "Farm Ownership and Tenancy," U.S. Department of Agriculture *Yearbook, 1923* (Washington, D.C., 1924); William Bennett Bizzell, *Farm Tenantry in the United States* (Texas Agricultural Experiment Station Research Bulletin No. 278, College Station, 1921); Charles Leslie Stewart, *Land Tenure in the United States with Special Reference to Illinois* (University of Illinois Studies in the Social Sciences, Vol. V, no. 3, Urbana, 1916).

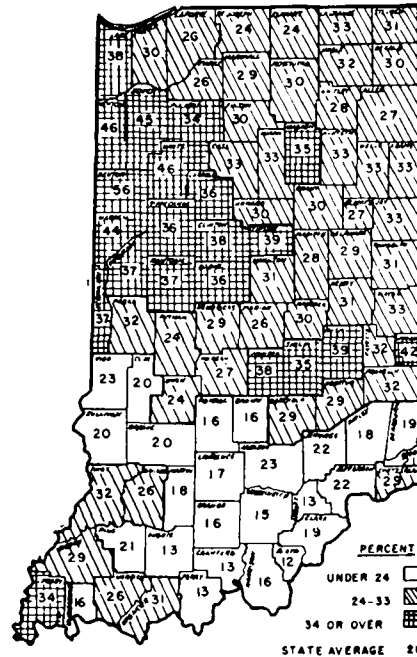
rise in the Middle West, long considered the preserve of the independent, landowning farmer. By 1880 the tenancy rate in this region had already reached 21 percent of all operators, and by 1920 it was approaching 30 percent. From analyses of published census data the economists concluded that tenancy was a recent development in American agriculture. They suggested that whatever renting there might have been during the earlier periods—they could only guess at its extent because of the absence of census figures for the time before 1880—could be attributed to unusual local circumstances and to the ineptitude of a small but unrepresentative group of operators. In light of the abundance of unoccupied land until near the end of the nineteenth century and of the federal government's liberal land disposal policy, the BAE economists reasoned that "there was little necessity for farmers to obtain land by renting it from others. . . ."⁵ Alluding to the Homestead Act, under which the federal government gave land to prospective settlers, they maintained that "the number and proportion of tenants doubtless remained small so long as free land was available."⁶ It was only with the disappearance of unoccupied, arable land and the attendant increase in land prices that tenancy became a common feature of American agriculture. This was a lamentable but wholly unavoidable and understandable development.

Beginning in the depression years of the 1930s and continuing into the postwar decade, a group of historians of the federal domain aggressively challenged the economists' explanation of the rise of midwestern tenancy. Paul W. Gates, the dean of the public land historians, has steadfastly contended over the past forty-five years that tenants appeared in large numbers in the Midwest well before the country's arable land was completely taken up.⁷ He argued that an "incongruous

⁵ Gray, "Farm Ownership and Tenancy," 507.

⁶ Goldenweiser and Truesdell, *Farm Tenancy in the United States*, 21.

⁷ See, for example, the following works by Paul Wallace Gates: "The Homestead Law in an Incongruous Land System," *American Historical Review*, XLI (July, 1936), 652-81; "The Role of the Land Speculator in Western Development," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, LXVI (July, 1942), 314-33; "Land Policy and Tenancy in the Prairie States," *Journal of Economic History*, I (May, 1941), 60-82; "Land Policy and Tenancy in the Prairie Counties of Indiana," *Indiana Magazine of History*, XXXV (March, 1939), 1-26; "Frontier Landlords and Pioneer Tenants," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society*, XXXVIII (June, 1945), 143-206; "Frontier Estate Builders and Farm Laborers," in Walker D. Wyman and Clifton B. Kroeber, eds., *The Frontier in Perspective* (Madison, 1957), 143-63; *The Illinois Central Railroad and Its Colonization Work* (Cambridge, Mass., 1934); *The Wisconsin Pine Lands of Cornell University; A Study in Land Policy and Absentee Ownership* (Ithaca, 1943). Several of Gates's articles are reprinted in his *Landlords and Tenants on the Prairie Frontier: Studies in American Land Policy* (Ithaca, 1973).



PERCENT OF INDIANA FARMS OPERATED BY TENANTS, 1940

Reproduced from G.G. Quackenbush and O.G. Lloyd, *Farm Tenure in Indiana By Type-of-Farming Areas* (Purdue University Agricultural Experiment Station Bulletin No. 488, Lafayette, 1943), 8.

land system” was the principal cause of the early introduction and rapid growth of farm renting in the nineteenth century. That system, by permitting unlimited purchase by a single buyer, encouraged speculators, land companies, and large landholders to buy up massive blocks of the national domain and to drive up land prices by withholding their property from sale. Even the free-land principle of the Homestead Act was perverted through incompetent and dishonest administration to the point that land monopolization was in fact enhanced. Huge grants to railroad and canal companies allowed them to follow similar practices.

Gates’s investigation of the operations of a number of large speculators and landholders convinced him that such tactics fostered tenancy in several ways. While withholding their land from sale, speculators and internal improvement companies normally rented it out to pioneer farmers, usually with the stipulation that the tenant pay the taxes and make specific

improvements. Secondly, once the original owners had forced up the price to a level that would produce the desired profit, many farmers could not afford the land and had to become or remain tenants. Finally, some large purchasers of government land retained their property and formed extensive tenant-operated estates. Clearly, according to Gates, "tenancy got its start in the Middle West as a result of the activities of land speculators and moneylenders."⁸ This was not a latter-day development: "It was apparent before 1880 that tenancy had already become [sic] fastened on the prairie States and was rapidly growing."⁹ A federal policy that enabled speculators, transportation companies, and large estate-holders to monopolize land, Gates charged, "bears its responsibility for this early appearance and rapid growth of tenancy."¹⁰

Gates also offered a companion thesis to his speculator interpretation. The increase in land values occasioned by land monopolization rendered farmers vulnerable to loan sharks and frontier bankers. To buy land at inflated prices, farmers had to go deeply into debt and pay the exorbitant interest rates demanded by lenders. Unable to meet their mortgage obligations—Gates calls them "usurious demands"—from the income of the farm, especially during recurrent periods of low agricultural prices, many found their "contracts cancelled and their equity confiscated." The only recourse for the victims of this unfair credit system, at least if they wished to remain in farming, was to accept tenancy. In this way, according to Gates, the land monopolists and moneylenders combined "to depress many farm owners into the tenant class."¹¹

For Gates, then, tenancy was not unavoidable, as the agricultural economists had claimed. Rather, it was the bitter fruit of an unwise land policy that failed to realize its intended purpose—a democratic system of landownership. Commenting on the operation of the federal land system in Indiana, Gates charged that it "had not established democratic farm ownership but had produced a system much at variance with American democratic ideals."¹² The intrusion of land speculators between the government and actual settlers had undermined the goal of creating a class of independent, landowning farmers. Had the

⁸ Gates, "The Role of the Land Speculator in Western Development," 327.

⁹ Gates, "Land Policy and Tenancy in the Prairie States," 80.

¹⁰ Gates, "Frontier Landlords and Pioneer Tenants," 205.

¹¹ Gates, "The Role of the Land Speculator in Western Development," 327; "Frontier Landlords and Pioneer Tenants," 205.

¹² Gates, "Land Policy in the Prairie Counties of Indiana," 26.

government made it more difficult for moneyed interests and easier for settlers to acquire federal land, the incidence of renting would have been insignificant in the nineteenth-century Middle West.

The Gates thesis has attracted a number of ardent and capable proponents since the 1930s. Historians Ray Allen Billington, Yasuo Okada, Roy M. Robbins, and Fred A. Shannon, and agricultural economist William G. Murray, among others, have echoed Gates's pronouncements on midwestern tenancy. In the bibliographical essay of his book, *The Farmer's Last Frontier*, published in 1945, Shannon commented approvingly: "more intelligent comment than is to be found elsewhere on land policies since 1860 is contained in a number of scattered articles by Paul Wallace Gates."¹³ Like Gates, he saw foreclosure tenancy as the cruel fate of pioneer farmers who responded to "brief periods of prosperity" by moving west and investing hard-won money in land and equipment only to become "victims of the land monopolists" with the inevitable price decline that followed.¹⁴ Although more balanced than some in their assessment of the land speculator, Billington and Robbins, also writing in the 1940s, reserved for him the lion's share of the blame for the increase in midwestern tenancy. Reflecting on the failure of the land policy to check the excesses of speculators, Billington remarked in his classic book on westward expansion that "half a billion acres were surrendered to monopolists in an era when orators boasted the United States was giving land free to its poverty-stricken masses!"¹⁵ Most recently, Okada, the last Gates doctoral student at Cornell University, defended his mentor's interpretation in a careful study (published in 1971) of the settlement and early history of Gage County, Nebraska. If Okada's land speculator was not as villainous or as one-dimensional as Gates's, he still was "clearly responsible for the introduction of tenancy into the county."¹⁶ Murray's contribution to a volume commemorating Iowa's centenary in 1946 took issue with his fellow economists of a generation earlier, maintaining that despite the grand objectives of the federal land policy, tenancy arrived soon after

¹³ Fred A. Shannon, *The Farmer's Last Frontier: Agriculture, 1860-1897* (New York, 1945), 388.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 146.

¹⁵ Ray Allen Billington, *Westward Expansion: A History of the American Frontier* (New York, 1949), 701; see also Roy M. Robbins, *Our Landed Heritage: The Public Domain, 1776-1936* (Princeton, 1942), 268-71.

¹⁶ Yasuo Okada, *Public Lands and Pioneer Farmers: Gage County, Nebraska, 1850-1900* (Tokyo, 1971), 100-104; quotation from page 104.

initial settlement: "Strange as it may seem, landlords and tenants made their appearance in parts of the state while virgin prairie was to be had for a nominal sum in other parts."¹⁷ Further in agreement with Gates, Murray held that the "usual sequence" accompanying agricultural depressions in the nineteenth-century Middle West was the "foreclosure of mortgage by the lender and the change of the previous owner into a tenant."¹⁸ It is not an exaggeration to say that the Gates interpretation became the conventional wisdom on the question of tenancy in the Middle West for a generation of land and agricultural historians.

Just as Gates disagreed with earlier scholars on the causes of farm tenancy, so he has more recently attracted his own challengers. As early as 1950, Thomas LeDuc urged historians to "put aside the easy generalities about the diabolical forces that got the better of the honest farmer. It will be more helpful, perhaps, if we attempt to connect the growth of tenantry with the fundamental changes wrought in plains farming in the late nineteenth century."¹⁹ Theodore Saloutos, while agreeing with Gates that tenancy was an unwanted and unnecessary institution, argued that "it would be misleading to make [land policy] the doormat for everything that ailed agriculture."²⁰ In his methodologically innovative work on Trempealeau County, Wisconsin (published in 1959), Merle Curti "found very few large speculators among new settlers and no evidence that there were at any time in this county the big estate builders that have been found elsewhere by others." Trempealeau County's tenancy rate in 1880 was only 4.3 percent, and from this Curti concluded that renting must have been virtually nonexistent during the years of settlement.²¹ Moreover, mortgage foreclosure was rare (about 2 percent of all contracts from 1855 to 1880) and could not have contributed significantly to tenancy.²²

¹⁷ William G. Murray, "Struggle for Land Ownership," in *A Century of Farming in Iowa, 1846-1946* (Ames, 1946), 12.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁹ Thomas LeDuc, "The Disposal of the Public Domain on the Trans-Mississippi Plains: Some Opportunities for Investigation," *Agricultural History*, XXIV (October, 1950), 203; see also "Public Policy, Private Investment, and Land Use in American Agriculture, 1825-1875," *Agricultural History*, XXXVII (January, 1963), 3-9.

²⁰ Theodore Saloutos, "Land Policy and Its Relation to Agricultural Production and Distribution, 1862 to 1933," *Journal of Economic History*, XXII (December, 1962), 459.

²¹ Merle Curti, *The Making of an American Community: A Case Study of Democracy in a Frontier County* (Stanford, Calif., 1959), 143-44, 444-45.

²² *Ibid.*, 161.

Margaret Beattie Bogue and Allan G. Bogue, both of whom studied under Gates at Cornell University, have likewise questioned, at least by implication, the conclusions of their teacher. In *Patterns from the Sod*, published in 1959, Margaret Bogue maintained that land policy, whatever its role elsewhere, was not the reason for tenancy in central Illinois: "Nonresident ownership established by federal and state land disposal practices in the frontier period was . . . of scarcely enough significance during the last quarter of the century to merit mention."²³ More importantly, even though farm renting increased in the late nineteenth century, it performed a useful function in the developing agricultural economy by enabling young men with limited capital to enter farming.²⁴ Allan Bogue wrote in the preface of his excellent book on farming in the nineteenth-century Midwest, published in 1963, that tenancy was one of the "vital parts of the midwestern agricultural system." Conceding that its causes were complex, he suggested that "lack of capital was the basic reason for the institution of tenancy in the prairie triangle during the nineteenth century. . . ." Tenants rented "because they did not have the funds with which to purchase a farm for themselves, or in some cases the means to develop their own small holdings rapidly enough to insure an income in their first years' residence in a new community."²⁵ He also played down the importance of mortgage foreclosure as a cause of tenancy: "farmers did lose their land to the moneylender in the years when pioneering difficulties were sternest or in depression years, particularly the 1870's. Such men represented a very small percentage of all farmers, but they did exist, and, no doubt, some of them became tenants."²⁶ In addition, he demonstrated an effective method of using the manuscript census records to estimate tenancy rates for the years before the federal government began collecting land tenure data in 1880.²⁷

The most sustained assault on the Gates thesis, however, has come in the past decade from those who have been

²³ Margaret B. Bogue, *Patterns from the Sod: Land Use and Tenure in the Grand Prairie, 1850-1900* (Springfield, Ill., 1959), 168-69.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 161-62.

²⁵ Allan G. Bogue, *From Prairie to Corn Belt: Farming on the Illinois and Iowa Prairies in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago, 1963), 56; and "Farming in the Prairie Peninsula, 1830-1890," *Journal of Economic History*, XXIII (March, 1963), 26.

²⁶ Bogue, *From Prairie to Corn Belt*, 57; see also his "Foreclosure Tenancy on the Northern Plains," *Agricultural History*, XXXIX (January, 1965), 3-16.

²⁷ Bogue, *From Prairie to Corn Belt*, 63-65.

called—sometimes derisively, sometimes pretentiously, but always inappropriately—the “new economic historians.” They have flatly rejected Gates’s explanations of the introduction and increase of midwestern tenancy and challenged his contentions about the extent and degree of rural distress in the nineteenth century.

Robert P. Swierenga, who was a doctoral student of Allan Bogue at the University of Iowa, offered the first frontal attack on Gates’s interpretation in his 1968 study of land speculation in nineteenth-century Iowa. He found little evidence that heavy investors in federal land rented out their property to farmers. In fact, they preferred to keep their holdings free of encumbering leases that might impede sale. Furthermore, Swierenga refuted Gates’s assumption that large speculators withheld land from sale for extended periods to force up prices and enhance profits. Employing economic theory and quantitative techniques, he demonstrated that their rates of return were inversely proportional to the length of time between purchase and disposal of property. Speculators responded accordingly by selling their land after holding it an average of less than three years. Swierenga suggested that since speculators often provided land credit to farmers, they probably reduced rather than increased the incidence of tenancy on the Iowa frontier.²⁸ Whatever their objective, according to some authors, with the vast amount of land available, speculators would have found it impossible to gain the monopolistic control necessary to influence prices.²⁹

Seddie Cogswell’s doctoral dissertation on tenure and nativity in Iowa agriculture, begun under Allan Bogue and published in 1975, carried further the argument against Gates. Like Gates, he discovered that tenants appeared in significant numbers in eastern Iowa during the pioneer stage of settlement, well before federal land had vanished from the state, much less from the territories farther west.³⁰ But this had little if anything to do with speculators. Using Swierenga’s data on

²⁸ Robert P. Swierenga, *Pioneers and Profits: Land Speculation on the Iowa Frontier* (Ames, 1968), 177-78, 190n, 192-205, 218-19, 225, 226-27n; see also Robert William Fogel and Jack L. Rutner, “The Efficiency Effects of Federal Land Policy, 1850-1900; A Report of Some Provisional Findings,” in William O. Aydelotte, Allan G. Bogue, and Robert William Fogel, eds., *The Dimensions of Quantitative Research in History* (Princeton, 1972), 411-19.

²⁹ See, for instance, Fogel and Rutner, “The Efficiency Effects of Federal Land Policy,” 416.

³⁰ Seddie Cogswell, Jr., *Tenure, Nativity and Age as Factors in Iowa Agriculture, 1850-1880* (Ames, 1975), 23.

the incidence of speculation and tenancy-rate estimates generated by employing Bogue's method, Cogswell found no association between farm renting and speculative activity.³¹ Clearly, the cause had to be found elsewhere. Rising land values, which resulted from farm improvements and supply and demand factors rather than from speculator manipulation, made it difficult for farmers, especially those just entering farming, to purchase land. Investments in livestock and equipment necessary for profitable commercial farming on the prairie compounded the problem. These increasing costs created a barrier for those wishing to pursue a career in agriculture. Tenancy, Cogswell concluded, provided a "gateway through that barrier, and with each decade increasing numbers of young farmers passed through it."³² Farm renting, then, was not forced upon defenseless farmers, nor was it a sign that they were economically distressed. Rather, it offered a way for them to adjust to the changing conditions and demands of midwestern agriculture.

My own book, *Farmers Without Farms*, published in 1978, reached somewhat similar conclusions. Also focusing on nineteenth-century Iowa—which has received a disproportionate share of the revisionists' attention—I found, as had Gates and Cogswell, that tenancy came early to the state and that it increased steadily to the end of the century.³³ Evidence drawn from the manuscript and published censuses, county records, and Swierenga's work indicated, however, that the speculator was not the cause. There was no association between tenancy and land speculation, and there was hardly any evidence connecting landlords with large-scale speculative activity. Moreover, the incidence of foreclosure tenancy was negligible.³⁴ My evidence suggested that pioneer renters chose tenancy because they wished to evaluate an area before purchasing land, were reluctant to farm virgin land in their first year or two after arriving, or were short of investment capital. Furthermore, the increase in Iowa's farm land values in the last half of the nineteenth century explains much of the concurrent growth of tenancy. In large measure, the increment in land prices was

³¹ *Ibid.*, 25-27.

³² *Ibid.*, 153.

³³ Donald L. Winters, *Farmers Without Farms: Agricultural Tenancy in Nineteenth-Century Iowa* (Westport, Conn., 1978), 14. Iowa is an excellent state for investigating middle western tenancy: its early agricultural development was typical of that of several other prairie states, and most Iowa counties have rich and exceptionally well-organized local records.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 15-18, 27-28.

attributable not to land monopolization but to improvements that made farms more productive. But it also resulted from the tendency, especially common in developing areas, for the market price of land to advance more rapidly than its productive potential as owners added part of an expected rise in land value to the current price. That is to say, the price was not determined solely by current returns; it also included a component to capture some of the anticipated appreciation. This was an important factor in understanding the growth of tenancy in nineteenth-century Iowa, for it meant that land prices outstripped capitalized values based on productivity and therefore that the current money return to land fell short of the prevailing mortgage interest rate. Because of the higher downpayment requirements on land mortgages and the impossibility of meeting mortgage interest payments from current returns to land, many operators found it made economic sense to rent rather than to purchase farms. Thus, tenancy's early appearance in Iowa and its growth from 1850 to 1900 were rational adjustments to the demands of a new frontier and to the changing conditions of prairie agriculture, not the unfortunate results of speculator and moneylender machinations. In short, the institution served a useful and necessary function.³⁵

The mounting attack of the past two decades has apparently persuaded Gates to moderate his position. "Surely we have gone too far in pillorying government land policies by concentrating so largely on the errors, the weaknesses, the dishonest administrators, and the greedy speculators," he wrote in 1964, "while neglecting the fact that a democratic pattern of farm ownership was being established in such states as Illinois and Iowa, notwithstanding notable exceptions."³⁶ He conceded that tenancy, at least in some areas, "seems to have been largely the result of ownership passing from one generation to another."³⁷ "If Jefferson could have seen the results of the public land system," he wrote in 1973, "he would have been convinced that despite the compromises he had been obliged to make (sales instead of free grants) with his pure agrarian preferences, the policy had worked reasonably well."³⁸ And yet there is ambivalence in Gates's recantation. The latter com-

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 18-26.

³⁶ Paul W. Gates, "The Homestead in Iowa," *Agricultural History*, XXXVIII (April, 1964), 74.

³⁷ Paul W. Gates, *The History of Public Land Law Development* (Washington, 1968), 372.

³⁸ Gates, *Landlords and Tenants on the Prairie Frontier*, 12.

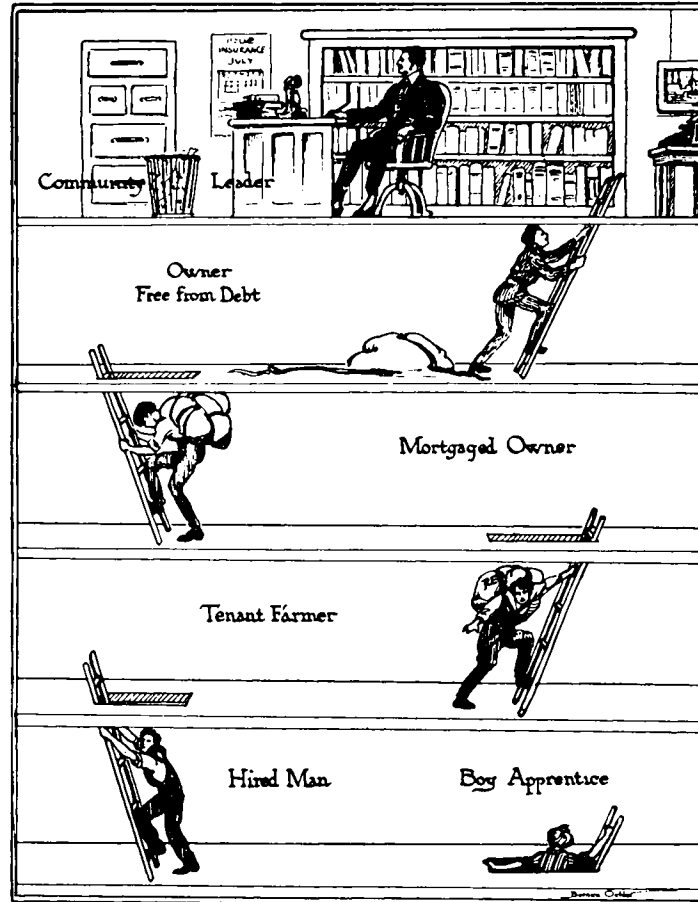
ment came in his introduction to a collection of previously published essays—a book devoted to describing the “malfunctioning of an intended democratic system of land disposal.” And in the same introduction he harkened back to an old theme with a stinging indictment of federal policy and of those responsible for its administration: “Much malfunctioning of the land system might have been prevented by more careful drafting of legislation, by congresses more sensitive to the problems of the pioneers, by administrators and judges more concerned with the intent of the land laws and less willing to recognize every loophole in them, and by land seekers less ready to perjure themselves in their greed.”³⁹

Although most of the debate over farm renting in the Midwest has centered on causes, it has also dealt with other questions. One is the agricultural ladder thesis, which posits that tenancy served as a rung on an economic ladder that enabled farmers to move from laborer to tenant to encumbered owner and, finally, to unencumbered owner. From surveys of practicing farmers at the township and county levels, first-generation agricultural economists concluded that although the process of acquiring land in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was more varied than the ladder thesis suggests, tenancy was nonetheless a stage through which many farmers passed on their way to ownership. Charles L. Stewart, for instance, claimed that for Illinois “advancing years tended to replace share with cash tenancy, tenancy with ownership, and encumbrance with freedom from mortgage debt.”⁴⁰ For many, according to these scholars, the rental years were a time for accumulating the financial and human capital necessary for owning and operating one’s own farm.⁴¹

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Stewart, *Land Tenure in the United States*, 112.

⁴¹ W.J. Spillman, “The Agricultural Ladder,” *American Economic Review Supplement IX* (March, 1919), 170-79; E.D. Tetreau, “The Agricultural Ladder in the Careers of 610 Ohio Farmers,” *Journal of Land and Public Utility Economics*, VII (August, 1931), 237-48; William Ten Haken, “Land Tenure in Walnut Grove Township, Knox County, Illinois,” *Journal of Land and Public Utility Economics*, IV (February, 1928), 13-24; *ibid.* (May, 1928), 189-98; Carl F. Wehrwein, “The ‘Agricultural Ladder’ in a High Tenancy Region,” *Journal of Land and Public Utility Economics*, VII (February, 1931), 67-77; Carl F. Wehrwein, “The Pre-Ownership Steps on the ‘Agricultural Ladder’ in a Low Tenancy Region,” *Journal of Land and Public Utility Economics*, IV (November, 1928), 417-25; George H. Von Tungeln, “Some Observations on the So-Called Agricultural Ladder,” *Journal of Farm Economics*, IX (January, 1927), 94-106; George H. Von Tungeln et al., *The Social Aspects of Rural Life and Farm Tenantry* (Iowa Agricultural Experiment Station Research Bulletin No. 217, Ames, 1923).



Climbing the Agricultural Ladder

A VIEW OF THE AGRICULTURAL LADDER

Reproduced from Llewellyn MacGarr, *The Rural Community* (New York, 1922), 165.

Later historians were more skeptical. While providing little supporting evidence, they reasoned that the mounting capital costs of prairie farming must have made it impossible for growing numbers of farmers to move up the ladder. "Swiftly rising land values made it difficult, if not impossible," Gates remarked, "for a man to climb the ladder of ownership from laborer or tenant to part owner and full owner—a fact that agricultural economists and some historians took long years to

learn."⁴² The high incidence of foreclosure tenancy, moreover, meant that the institution was frequently a refuge for bankrupt farmers on the way down rather than a rung for enterprising farmers on the way up. If the ladder worked for some, Gates maintained, it "worked in reverse for many others who, unable to meet the mortgage interest, lost their farms to the banker, the insurance company, or the local money lender."⁴³ LaWanda Cox echoed this assessment, noting that "historical studies of the economic conditions of the western farmer suggest that backsliding may have been a major factor in many localities."⁴⁴

More recently, scholars have once again recognized validity in the agricultural ladder thesis, though they have been more guarded in their assessment than were the agricultural economists. Margaret Bogue's study of central Illinois conceded that the "ladder to agricultural success was not scaled with ease," but maintained that many tenants eventually moved up to the ownership ranks.⁴⁵ In his book on prairie farming, Allan Bogue noted that for many successful farmers tenancy was a "step up the tenure ladder, which carried them from their original status as hired men to positions where they not only owned their farm homes but often rental property as well."⁴⁶ Cogswell's analysis of eastern Iowa revealed that after the pioneer stage of settlement, rental became increasingly associated with younger and ownership with older farmers, the pattern one would expect if the ladder were operating properly. He was cautious, though, about concluding that tenancy played an important role in upward mobility.⁴⁷ In my study of the entire state, I uncovered renter and owner age structures similar to those found by Cogswell. By tracing tenants from one manuscript census in subsequent censuses and in county tax lists, I also discovered that about a fifth of them eventually became owners in the counties in which they had previously rented farms; how many moved on to become owners elsewhere was impossible to determine. Although the precise proportion of successful tenants can never be known, my evidence confirmed that a sizable number of Iowa operators did indeed use the

⁴² Gates, *Landlords and Tenants on the Prairie Frontier*, 7-8.

⁴³ Gates, "Frontier Landlords and Pioneer Tenants," 206.

⁴⁴ LaWanda Fenlason Cox, "Tenancy in the United States, 1865-1900: A Consideration of the Validity of the Agricultural Ladder Hypothesis," *Agricultural History*, XVIII (July, 1944), 100-101.

⁴⁵ Bogue, *Patterns from the Sod*, 102-103, 162-65.

⁴⁶ Bogue, *From Prairie to Corn Belt*, 56.

⁴⁷ Cogswell, *Tenure, Nativity and Age as Factors in Iowa Agriculture*, 30-41.

institution of tenancy to acquire the capital needed to purchase and maintain farms. With rising land prices, higher downpayment requirements, and a widening margin between the current returns to land and the mortgage interest rate, this function apparently became more and more important as the nineteenth century progressed.⁴⁸

Another important question, the determination of tenure choice, has received relatively little attention from historians of midwestern tenancy. Unlike the literature on postbellum southern sharecropping, which carefully analyzes why tenants and landlords chose one form of tenure arrangement over alternative forms, studies of the prairie states have given short shrift to this subject. Despite a body of theoretical knowledge developed by agricultural economists to explain tenure selection and to account for the division of responsibilities for farm inputs, historians have usually been satisfied to observe without explanation that rental arrangements differed from place to place and from time to time.⁴⁹ In several of his essays, Gates briefly described typical agreements and implied that they were conditions landlords imposed upon tenants.⁵⁰ Allan Bogue outlined a number of arrangements in frontier Illinois and Iowa, noting only that "share leases probably were always more common than cash leases."⁵¹ Margaret Bogue gave somewhat fuller attention to the variety of contracts in central Illinois and speculated about possible explanations for the variation. Like Gates, she placed the major emphasis upon landlord preference and interests.⁵²

My study of nineteenth-century Iowa addressed this question directly. I found, just as the theories developed earlier by the agricultural economists would suggest, that division of risk from uncertainty was the principal factor affecting tenure

⁴⁸ Winters, *Farmers Without Farms*, 79-88, 91.

⁴⁹ Stevens N. S. Cheung, *The Theory of Share Tenancy; With Special Application to Asian Agriculture and the First Phase of Taiwan Land Reform* (Chicago, 1969), 30-61; Earl O. Heady and Earl W. Kehrberg, *Relationship of Crop-Share and Cash Leasing to Farming Efficiency* (Iowa Agricultural Experiment Station Research Bulletin No. 386, Ames, 1952); C.F. Holmes, *Relation of Types of Tenancy to Types of Farming in Iowa* (Iowa Agricultural Experiment Station Research Bulletin No. 214, Ames, 1923); Joseph D. Reid, Jr., "Sharecropping and Agricultural Uncertainty," *Economic Development and Cultural Change*, XXIV (April, 1976), 549-76; Reid, "Sharecropping as an Understandable Market Response," 106-30.

⁵⁰ Gates, "Frontier Estate Builders and Farm Laborers," 156; "Land Policy and Tenancy in the Prairie States," 74; "Frontier Landlords and Pioneer Tenants," 152-88.

⁵¹ Bogue, *From Prairie to Corn Belt*, 60.

⁵² Bogue, *Patterns from the Sod*, 99-101, 165-69.

choice. Under share arrangements the landlord participates in the risks of capricious weather and poor market conditions, while under cash arrangements the tenant bears them alone. Therefore, the greater the perceived risk, the greater the tenant preference for share contracts and the greater his willingness to pay the higher rents demanded by landlords to assume a portion of the risk; conversely, the smaller the perceived risk, the greater the tenant preference for the cheaper cash contracts and the greater his resistance to paying the share-rent premium.⁵³ During the early stages of settlement in Iowa, when farmers were uncertain about the productive potential of the new lands and unfamiliar with their most profitable uses, the ratio of share to cash contracts was relatively high. Over time, as operators became more familiar with their farming areas, there was a corresponding decline in the risk from uncertainty accompanied by a drop in the ratio of share to cash contracts. Clearly, tenants in the early stages were paying their landlords to accept some of the risk from frontier uncertainty; but with the lessening of risk as settlement progressed, tenants became increasingly reluctant to pay for the higher share contracts. Moreover, areas of the state with a relatively high incidence of crop damage from adverse weather or poor drainage and those with more of their improved acreage in wheat, a comparatively risky crop for Iowa farmers, had proportionately more share renting. Tenants in these high-risk areas apparently chose share arrangements in part to gain greater certainty even though it meant lower income.⁵⁴

Although of less importance than the allocation of risk, type of farming was also a factor in tenure choice in nineteenth-century Iowa. For a variety of reasons, cash-grain farming is better suited to share renting than is grain-livestock or dairy farming. Thus, according to conventional economic theory, tenants and landlords in grain regions tend to prefer share contracts and those in livestock regions, cash contracts. I found, as this postulate would suggest, that share-to-cash ratios were relatively low in meat-animal and dairy areas and relatively high in specialized grain areas.⁵⁵

Landlords in nineteenth-century Iowa offered a full range of tenure arrangements from exclusively share contracts to a wide variety of share/cash combination contracts to exclusively cash contracts at rents differing largely according to the divi-

⁵³ Cheung, *The Theory of Share Tenancy*, 63-64.

⁵⁴ Winters, *Farmers Without Farms*, 59-61.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 64.

sion of risk. In some cases, tenants selected from the alternatives guided by their perceptions of whether the gain from avoiding risk was worth the increased costs. In others, tenants and landlords chose arrangements that seemed appropriate for the particular type of farming operation involved. Some scholars have suggested that landlord preference played a crucial role in tenure choice, with absentee landlords favoring cash contracts because they provided greater convenience in rent collection and local landlords favoring share contracts because they provided greater opportunity to participate in the management of the farm. These factors, however, were of small importance in explaining contract selection in Iowa.

The evidence from Iowa supports the hypothesis that tenure choice, like the causes of agricultural tenancy, can best be explained as a rational response to the conditions of prairie agriculture in the nineteenth century. Rental arrangements were the product of purposeful rather than random or arbitrary decisions. They expressed the objectives and interests of tenants and landlords alike and reflected the adaptation of both groups to the economic circumstances of a particular place at a particular time.⁵⁶

Finally, the earlier agricultural economists contended that tenancy—especially share tenancy—failed to provide farmers with incentive to use land, labor, and capital to maximum efficiency. Because of the uncertain length of their tenure on a particular farm, renters tended to concentrate on short-term production systems and to employ soil-depleting practices. Their aim was to maximize personal income over the expected period of occupancy (usually one year), even though an alternative production system might have yielded higher social returns in the long run. Moreover, since tenants were frequently short of money and, in the case of share tenants, had to divide with the landlords any increase in output from capital expenditures, they invested relatively less in fertilizers and labor-saving equipment than owners did. Landlords, for their part, were reluctant to build and maintain the structures necessary for the most efficient utilization of their land because of tenant resistance to the higher rents that such investment required. Tenant behavior and landlord behavior, therefore, tended to be mutually reinforcing and, according to the agricultural econo-

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 64-67.

mists, resulted in destructive land use and inefficient farming.⁵⁷

Historians who see tenancy as a sign of economic malfunction and of rural distress accept, without question, the inefficiency thesis. They assume, quite naturally, that if tenancy was undesirable for those upon whom it was forced, it must have been detrimental to society as a whole. Gates observed that "speculator ownership and tenancy did not always result in the best use of the land. . . . [It] forced farm practices which depleted the soil, produced erosion, and diminished land values."⁵⁸ He summed up a detailed investigation of the William Scully estate in central Illinois by concluding that "Scully's tenants and their farm practices were probably no worse than those on most other rented farms."⁵⁹ Even scholars who hold a more benign view of tenancy often take the position, at least by implication, that it fostered less productive operations than those of owners. Some of the data in Cogswell's study suggest, for instance, that Iowa renters were not necessarily inefficient, but he does not question the traditional view.⁶⁰ Interestingly, despite his strong attachment to the Gates thesis, Okada had to concede that in light of his Gage County evidence on farming efficiency, "the advantage of tenant farming was probably beyond dispute."⁶¹

Although the Bogues have not dealt directly with the question of relative efficiency, they have taken exception to the claim that tenants were more soil exploitative than owner-

⁵⁷ Rainer Schickele, "Effect of Tenure Systems on Agricultural Efficiency," *Journal of Farm Economics*, XXIII (February, 1941), 185-207; Howard W. Ottoson, "The Application of Efficiency to Farm Tenure Arrangements," *Journal of Farm Economics*, XXXVII (December, 1955), 1341-53; Michele De Benedictis and John F. Timmons, *Identification and Measurement of Inefficiencies in Leasing Systems* (Iowa Agricultural Experiment Station Research Bulletin No. 490, Ames, 1961); Harald R. Jensen, Earl O. Heady, and Ross V. Baumann, *Costs, Returns, and Capital Requirements for Soil-Conserving Farming on Rented Farms in Western Iowa* (Iowa Agricultural Experiment Station Research Bulletin No. 423, Ames, 1955); William Bennett Bizzell, *Farm Tenantry in the United States* (Texas Agricultural Experiment Station Research Bulletin No. 278, College Station, 1921); P.K. Bardhan and T.N. Srinivasan, "Cropsharing Tenancy in Agriculture: A Theoretical and Empirical Analysis," *American Economic Review*, LXI (March, 1971), 48-64; Heady and Kehrberg, *Relationship of Crop-Share and Cash Leasing to Farm Efficiency*; Cheung, *The Theory of Share Tenancy*, 30-61.

⁵⁸ Gates, "The Role of the Land Speculator in Western Development," 328.

⁵⁹ Gates, "Frontier Landlords and Pioneer Tenants," 189.

⁶⁰ Cogswell, *Tenure, Nativity and Age as Factors in Iowa Agriculture*, 132-51.

⁶¹ Okada, *Public Lands and Pioneer Farmers*, 125.

operators were. After noting evidence of destructive agricultural practices among renters, Margaret Bogue cautioned that "poor farming techniques, run-down buildings, and declining soil fertility should not, however, be associated exclusively with tenant-operated land. Undoubtedly many an owner-operated farm also became shoddy under the pressure of paying mortgage indebtedness, or as a result of individual misfortune, or simply because the owner knew he could sell his land at a profit and push on to a new frontier and a newer and larger farm."⁶² Allan Bogue agreed, claiming that "owners as well as tenants were careless of the soil in nineteenth-century Illinois and Iowa. There were few of either who seriously utilized soil-conservation practices before the 1880's."⁶³

My own research pointed, admittedly somewhat tentatively, to a similar conclusion. Tenants, to be sure, often engaged in land-intensive farming systems, especially cereal cultivation, which were more soil-depleting than livestock husbandry. Also suggestive of renter negligence were the frequent and elaborate clauses in rental leases defining how the tenant should use and care for the land and providing the landlord with sanctions to enforce them. Yet there is no evidence that renters were more inclined to mine the soil or less inclined to follow land management programs than owner-operators were. For instance, it was rare to find members of either group who practiced crop rotation or applied commercial fertilizers. Farmland in the nineteenth-century Midwest, no matter who was cultivating it, apparently suffered from exploitative practices.⁶⁴ More importantly, I found that Iowa tenancy was not inherently inefficient. Comparisons of production records from the tenant and owner sectors led to the conclusion that there was no significant difference between the two groups. Although they engaged in types of farming different from those of their landowner counterparts, renters, whether share or cash, were as productive as owner-operators. Thus, tenancy did not undermine agricultural development and slow economic growth; in fact, by placing land at the disposal of those who would put it to productive use, it probably enhanced both.⁶⁵

Since midwestern agricultural tenancy began attracting the attention of scholars some seventy years ago, historiography on the subject has gone through three identifiable stages,

⁶² Bogue, *Patterns from the Sod*, 180-81.

⁶³ Bogue, *From Prairie to Corn Belt*, 62.

⁶⁴ Winters, *Farmers Without Farms*, 53-55.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 92-105.

ranging from the argument that farm renting was an unfortunate but inevitable development, to the argument that it was the product of speculator conspiracy and dishonest administration and therefore avoidable, to the argument that it was economically rational and therefore socially desirable. These changing views reflect in part the tendency for each generation to reinterpret the past. But there is more to it than that. The assumptions and purposes with which scholars approached their subject and the environment in which they wrote also contributed to the differences in interpretation.

The young agricultural economists of the early twentieth century saw their discipline as a policy science. They believed that systematic and objective investigation of the economic aspects of agriculture would enable governments at the national and state levels to formulate effective programs for dealing with farm problems. They were particularly bothered by the increase in tenancy, not only because they thought it was inefficient, but because it violated the great American ideal of a class of independent, landowning farmers. Despite their strong commitment to improving agricultural conditions, however, they did not feel the indignation at the plight of the farmer that would consume the next generation of scholars. Thus, they were interested in the history of farm renting only insofar as it could inform policy makers on how the disturbing trend in tenancy rates might be reversed; they were not interested in using it to assess blame. To accomplish their purpose, they carried out extensive, though fairly unsophisticated, analyses of data drawn from the published censuses and interviews with practicing farmers. Their conclusion that a vanishing frontier and the attendant rise in land values were the root causes of the tenancy problem suggested the appropriate policy: government assistance in securing long-term credit for purchasing farms. The creation of the federal land bank system in 1916 and the establishment of several agricultural credit programs in the 1920s were the result.

The historians who began reassessing land policy and tenancy in the 1930s worked in a changed political, social, and economic environment. The depression that gripped the country in that decade inflicted upon American agriculture, already hit by post-World War I adjustment problems, a seemingly insoluble catastrophe. The new federal land historians, possessing a deep sense of social justice, were appalled at the farmers' desperate situation. Allan Bogue revealed much about his mentor's frame of reference when he noted that Gates was "profoundly moved by the foreclosures, the dispossession of farmers, low

agricultural prices, and the erosion of farm lands, which were so integral a part of the great depression. . . . ”⁶⁶ Like many of the politicians of the period who were searching for scapegoats for the country’s current economic crisis, the land historians began looking for someone to blame for the country’s long history of rural distress. Politicians and historians discovered the same culprit: moneyed interests. Convinced that the land speculator, estate owner, and moneylender had taken advantage of the “monstrous errors” of the government in the distribution of the public domain, just as big business had taken advantage of the economic favoritism of the administrations of the 1920s, these historians indicted moneyed interests as the principal cause of tenancy, as well as almost everything else that ailed agriculture. It was the shock of the Great Depression that for the first time brought agrarian problems into perspective. “Not until the depression of the 1930s,” Gates maintained, “did the United States realize the errors it permitted to develop in . . . [its] land use pattern.”⁶⁷

The new land historians, influenced by the progressive strain of American political tradition, cast their interpretations in an anticapitalist, proagrarian mold. They consciously adopted the rhetoric and employed the images of the agrarian and land reformers of the nineteenth century. Large-scale dealers in public land became “land monopolists,” bankers became “loan sharks,” mortgage interest became “usurious demands,” foreclosure became “confiscation of equity,” and unfortunate or inept farmers became “victims of the land monopolists” or deprived members of the “poverty-stricken masses.” Revealingly, Gates recalled in 1973 that one of his main objectives in studying federal land policy had been to discover what “methods were used to establish the great holdings of timber, mining, grazing, and agricultural lands that have long troubled Populists, Progressives, trust busters, antimonopolists, conservationists, and advocates of single-family farms.”⁶⁸ He and the generation of historians over whom he had so much influence clearly identified with the long strand of political reformers that stretched back from the 1930s into the nineteenth century. Their sympathy for reformist causes, both of their own and of earlier times, dictated in large measure the

⁶⁶ Aydelotte, Bogue, and Fogel, *The Dimensions of Quantitative Research in History*, 52.

⁶⁷ Gates, *Landlords and Tenants on the Prairie Frontier*, 48.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 1-2.

questions they asked, the approach they took, and the conclusions they drew.

Not only did these historians reject the agricultural economists' explanation of the emergence of tenancy, they also found fault with their methodology. They maintained that analysis of quantitative data could not reveal the essence of history. In studies relying on this type of evidence, Gates insisted, "individuals disappear in the flood of statistics and history becomes the mere barebones of the past, sterile and uninterpretable."⁶⁹ The only way to understand the past was to deal with real people, not with statistical abstractions. Historians of the public domain, therefore, supported their generalizations, not with aggregate data drawn from censuses and interviews, but with intensive examinations of individual large-scale land and financial operations selected because they fit preconceived notions about the causes of rural distress.

Reacting to the emotional tone of much of the literature on land policy and agricultural tenancy, Thomas LeDuc charged in 1959 that "most historians seem to have been so deafened by the noise of agrarian politics that they have never taken a hard and disinterested look at the economic realities in a swiftly changing enterprise."⁷⁰ A number of historians of the past two decades have attempted to correct this weakness by taking a more dispassionate approach than that employed by the previous generation. They eschew value judgments about whether tenancy was good or bad, democratic or undemocratic, fair or unfair. They are careful not to let personal feelings influence either their procedures or conclusions. In place of emotionally charged references to speculators, moneylenders, and landlords are analyses of the roles played by the principal historical participants. In place of an uncamouflaged sympathy for agrarian causes is a clearly stated analytical structure. In place of assessments of blame are attempts to explain. As a result, recent historians have done much to eliminate the ideological bias that colored earlier writing on tenancy.

Change in the economic environment has doubtless contributed to change in the way scholars have viewed agricultural tenancy. With the depression of the 1930s a dimming memory and the United States enjoying unprecedented prosperity in the postwar years, recent historians have been

⁶⁹ Paul W. Gates, "Research in the History of American Land Tenure: A Review Article," *Agricultural History*, XXVIII (July, 1954), 123.

⁷⁰ Thomas LeDuc, "Recent Contributions to Economic History: The United States, 1861-1900," *Journal of Economic History*, XIX (March, 1959), 51.

primarily interested in the country's long-term economic growth and development. For them, the economy of the nineteenth century was dynamic and expanding, not manipulated and malfunctioning. Farmers, to be sure, suffered periods of financial distress, but so did other groups in society. Economic hardship and dislocation were not, however, the results of conspiracy among powerful moneyed interests; they were the unfortunate yet unavoidable price of economic development and participation in the market economy. Still, notwithstanding some inevitable financial distress, per capita income in rural America was rising and farmers were participating in the growing prosperity. As undesirable as agricultural tenancy may have seemed to some nineteenth-century farmers and to later scholars, it was, according to the new economic historians, an appropriate response to what LeDuc called the "economic realities in a swiftly changing enterprise" and one of the myriad adjustments required to bring improvements in the country's economic welfare.

There is also a methodological dimension to the interpretive departures of late. Recent historians have employed theories, models, and concepts from the field of economics to guide the selection of data, to formulate hypotheses, to explain the meaning of evidence, and to inform their conclusions. Swierenga used a rate-of-return model in his study of land speculators. Although Cogswell was not explicit in his use of theory, he did employ economic concepts in his analysis of the causes of tenancy and its function in prairie agriculture. I drew heavily upon agricultural economic theory in my examination of the causes of tenancy, of the factors influencing tenant farming systems, of the determinants of tenure choice, and of the efficiency of tenancy.

The central role of economic theory has important implications for the findings of the new economic historians. Their theories and models rest on the assumptions that tenants and landlords understood, at least in a general way, the economic conditions affecting agriculture in the nineteenth century, that they perceived with reasonable clarity the relationship between possible responses to those conditions and their respective results, and that they chose responses calculated to maximize their incomes. When interests clashed, as they often did, no group had the power to impose its will on the others; market forces were the final arbiter. Tenants competed with each other in seeking farms to rent, and landlords competed with each other in offering farms to rent. Supply and demand determined

the levels of tenancy, the amount of rent, the types of tenure arrangement, and the respective obligations of tenants and landlords. Recent historians thus view the decisions and actions of the historical participants as economically rational and as taking place within a relatively free market system. Clearly, this is far different from the implicit model of the historians of the public domain, a model in which speculators had the power to set land prices, moneylenders the power to manipulate interest rates, and landlords the power to dictate rental conditions, while tenants were powerless against all of them.

In addition to the explicit use of theory, the new economic historians also rely heavily on quantitative data and deal with functional groups rather than individuals. Instead of concentrating on the operations of a few large speculators or landlords, as the land historians tended to do, they draw their evidence from as broad a base as possible, subject of course to the constraints of time and expense. They reject the idea that one may generalize from a group of hand-picked examples, preferring instead to rest their conclusions on the analysis of whole populations or representative samples. Swierenga dealt with speculators from a sample of counties across the state and Cogswell with all tenants from a six-county area of eastern Iowa. Whenever possible, I took my evidence from the entire state; whenever necessary, I took it from a representative sample of counties or townships. Allan Bogue's method for estimating tenancy rates from the manuscript census not only provided, as noted above, previously unavailable data on the levels of farm renting before 1880, it also made it possible to identify the tenant subgroup within the farming population. I was therefore able to examine the agricultural systems and efficiency of tenant farmers and to determine the frequency with which they moved up the agricultural ladder, questions that could not be addressed through exclusive focus on large estates. Likewise, by analyzing hundreds of farm leases from a group of sample counties, rather than abstract the model contracts of a few wealthy landlords, I was able to show and to explain the diversity in rental arrangements. Although the new economic historians' approach is similar to that of the earlier agricultural economists in type and treatment of evidence, recent refinements in statistical techniques and advances in computer technology have allowed a much more sophisticated analysis than was possible seventy years ago. In sum, the use of economic theory and quantitative techniques has introduced greater analytical rigor and resulted in fewer impressionistic

conclusions than were found in the work of previous generations.

The revisionism of the 1960s and 1970s has not swept all before it. There are still those who find Gates's conspiratorial interpretation more satisfying than the new economic historians' dispassionate explanation. They are critical of the revisionists on several counts. First of all, according to the detractors, their story is incomplete. By concentrating narrowly on economic questions relating to growth and development, the revisionists ignore important social and political questions essential to a full understanding of agricultural tenancy. More serious, just as the earlier historians' tunnel-vision focus on rural distress distorted historical reality, so too does the new economic historians' blind faith in economic progress. "The school," opines Reginald Horsman, "poses the danger of replacing the incongruous land policy, rampant speculation, and oppressed farmers of an earlier group of historians with a western Arcadia, in which speculators, moneylenders, farm-owners and tenants happily press onwards into the glorious sunlit uplands of a successful market economy."⁷¹ The critics also have dusted off the old charge that the use of quantitative data dehumanizes history by ignoring individuals and have applied it to the new economic historians. Worse yet, the unfeeling revisionists have their hearts in the wrong place. According to Horsman, the "economic history of the new economic historians has a curious lack of interest in individual human beings, in their strivings, their failings, their successes, and their dilemmas."⁷² The most unsettling feature of the new history, in the eyes of its critics, is that it has replaced the progressive orthodoxy of the 1930s and 1940s with a conservative orthodoxy of its own. Why the revisionist interpretations are conservative is not entirely clear, but presumably it is because they appear to some as apologies for capitalism. In any event, the critics apparently consider this the ultimate heresy.

The attack on the new economic historians has been wide-ranging and has addressed methodological as well as substantive issues. Like the interpretations of the 1930s, these arguments have a certain intuitive logic and an emotional appeal. What is more, they pose a number of bothersome ques-

⁷¹ Reginald Horsman, "Changing Images of the Public Domain: Historians and the Shaping of Midwest Frontiers," in *This Land of Ours: The Acquisition and Disposition of the Public Domain* (Indianapolis, 1978), 79.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 80.

tions with which the revisionists will have to come to terms. Social, cultural, and political factors may indeed have been more important in shaping the institution of tenancy than recent historians have been willing to admit. Interestingly, though, neither Cogswell nor I found any association between the socioeconomic backgrounds of farmers and tenancy rates, types of rental arrangements, or amount of rent. Still, this question should be on the agenda for future research. Further investigation of the economic welfare of middle western farmers relative to other groups will help to determine if revisionists have in fact treated too lightly the matter of rural distress. More importantly, scholars must test the interpretations of the new economic historians in different places and at different times. It may be that the conspiratorial view of tenancy accords more closely with the facts in states other than Iowa or in regions other than the Middle West. Perhaps speculators, moneylenders, and large estateholders were more important as agents of tenancy in Indiana than they were in Iowa. Perhaps the incidence of foreclosure tenancy was greater in the plains than it was in the prairies. Perhaps southern tenancy served as an institution of labor exploitation and social control rather than as a vehicle of economic mobility. Not only will such studies go a long way toward resolving the interpretive differences between the public land historians and the revisionists, they will also help to determine which model best approximates the nineteenth-century rural economy: a manipulated one in which moneyed interests dictate economic conditions or a competitive one in which market forces shape them. Those responding to Horsman's call to "revise the revisers" will therefore have virgin soil to work; whether they can fruitfully cultivate it remains to be seen.⁷³

⁷³ *Ibid.*