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Hal S. Barron. *Mixed Harvest: The Second Great Transformation in the Rural North, 1870-1930*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997. xiv + 301 pp. \$27.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-4659-9; \$59.95 (library), ISBN 978-0-8078-2354-5.

Reviewed by Robert Swierenga (Harvey Mudd College)
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Mixed Harvest is a sparkling reinterpretation of northern agricultural history that compares with Warren Susman's *Culture as History* (1973) and John Shover's *First Majority-Last Minority* (1976). Both wrote of great "transformations" in the twentieth century that changed America from traditional to modern; Susman portrayed urban America in the interwar period and Shover described rural life after 1945. Hal S. Barron, a specialist in American rural history and professor of history at Harvey Mudd College and the Claremont Graduate School, uses a similar framework in this study of rural life in the years 1870 to 1930, but with a twist. Barron's concept of the great transformation is multidimensional. He shows that farmers opposed the new order in some regards, even while welcoming integration into it in other ways.

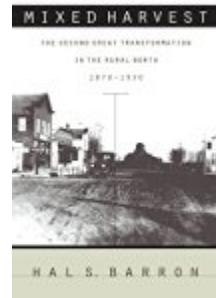
In Barron's view, the transformation was not progressive, as modernization theory held, or regressive, according to the Populist paradigm, but a "hybrid" of change and continuity (p. 15). Farmers enjoyed neither a full harvest nor suffered a dismal harvest; rather, they reaped a "mixed harvest." Farmers simultaneously gained and lost because of the new technologies and organizational structures. This explains why farmers rejoiced and resisted at the same time. The contradictory response is an "enigma," Barron confesses, yet it reflects reality (p. 11). Rural America remained pastoral in the Jeffersonian tradition, at the same time as it was becoming capitalist in the Hamiltonian tradition.

Barron's earlier book, *Those Who Stayed Behind: Rural Society in Nineteenth-Century New England* (1984), which is set in the context of rural life in Chelsea, Vermont, laid out these sociological themes and readers

would do well to review it. There we find the dual nature of the rural response to modernity described as a "puzzle" (*Mixed Harvest* substitutes the word *enigma*). There the enduring nature of Jefferson's vision is stressed while farmers became ever more capitalistic. There is the call to keep the focus on rural life rather than on the rural-urban continuum. And there, both Marxian and "agrarian transition" theories are rejected in favor of a consensus interpretation of familial adaptation that portrays a gradual process of backing and filling.

Mixed Harvest is an ambitious work. Barron seeks to describe how and to what extent the rural North, stretching from New England to the Dakotas, adapted to the "second great transformation" that moved a nation "born in the country" into the city, thus continuing a process begun before 1870 during the first transformation. The transition occurred in fits and starts, however, because "Jefferson cast a long shadow" (p. 14). It took the Great Depression and New Deal to complete the process of undermining rural localism, individualism, and agrarian fundamentalism. Despite a relatively few bonanza farms, Barron correctly notes that most farms were not high tech factories in the fields but small operations worked with family labor. And he views rural communities primarily as collections of farm owners and their families.

To get his arms around a very broad subject, Barron wisely adopted the "post-hole technique" of the cultural archaeologists. After classifying farmers according to their roles as citizens, producers, and consumers, he selected salient issues to study each role. As citizens, farmers took an active interest in roads and schools, as producers they organized milk and grain cooperatives, and as consumers they bought from mail-order catalogs



and from town merchants everything from cars and electric appliances to radios and movie entertainment. These topics provide the organizational structure of the book and one chapter is devoted to each. Barron casts an eye on the mundane and the prosaic, in the belief that the markers of change are best revealed in events of everyday life. He finds examples in numerous out-of-the-way places randomly spread across the Northeast and Midwest. Two maps of these regions cleverly identify each locale mentioned in the text, so readers gain a sense of the wide geographic scope of the study.

Sources include the local press, reminiscences and diaries, "home-grown" histories, oral accounts, regional farm newspapers, and government reports. Barron admirably succeeded in his object of capturing the voices of "more ordinary rural folk," and of finding "nuggets of information" that might reveal larger trends (p. 287). There was the woman, for example, who collected over three hundred mail-order catalogs from neighbors and friends over a three-county area in hopes of winning fifty dollar in a local contest, only to lose the prize and then watch in horror as the sponsor burned the catalogs in the street, thereby forcing her to buy three hundred replacement copies from Montgomery Ward. Such were the hazards of the new consumerism.

The title captures the book's main theme; some northern farmers reaped thorns and others sheaves. Some resisted and others accommodated, some changed and others held on. Many did both at the same time in different aspects of their lives. But at the end of the period of study, in 1930, rural northerners "still enjoyed a significant measure of distance from the new order as well as an alternative point of view" (p. 244). They got their farm to market roads but did not have to fund state highways, they stymied efforts to consolidate their revered country schools, and they resisted the consumer-driven blandishments of modern advertising. Nevertheless, their relationship to the rest of the nation changed. As producers, they had, almost inadvertently, become an organized interest group. The Farm Bureau now represented the Farm Bloc, who looked more and more to government to solve their problems. As farmers became consumers of cars and radios, they blurred the cultural distance between the countryside and the cities.

Although Barron strongly rejects class conflict interpretations, in both books he dipped into that black pot. In *Those Who Stayed Behind*, for example, he interpreted the religious revivals of the Second Great Awakening in Chelsea as economic determinism run amok,

following Paul Johnson's *Shopkeeper's Millennium* (pp. 115-17). The introduction in *Mixed Harvest* is sprinkled with conflict terminology—farm communities were "battlefields," farmers struggled with "hotly contested" public policy issues, they faced "tensions" in dealing with "outside forces (p. xi), etc. Barron also repeated Olivier Zunz's pejorative description of corporate moguls as the "minions" and their "ilk" scheming in the "belly of the beast" (pp. 10, 11). A similar question mark arises from the author's decision to include a long chapter on the history of the New York Dairyman's League, which originated among milk producers nurtured in Granger ideology, who staged brief strikes in 1883 and 1916 against New York dealers. By 1930, the spirited militancy of the farmers' League against the middlemen had evolved into a monopolistic corporation that dominated the New York milkshed and fixed prices at will. The story of this capitalistic takeover of a regional farm organization with populist roots adds to the litany of class conflict, but it adds little to our understanding of changes in the rural way of life.

Problematic, too, is the central concept of the "rural way of life" and its distinction from city ways. Barron never defines either and is prone to offering the stereotypical views. Urbanites are "bicycling enthusiasts—the late-nineteenth-century equivalent of present-day yuppies" (p. 28), "comparatively wealthy" (p. 33), and "pleasure riders" in "devil wagons," in the words of a rural critic. Cars were mere consumer toys for urbanites but work vehicles for farmers, who condemned "reckless chauffeurs" on their country lanes. Hence, even though a much higher proportion of rural folks owned cars, in Barron's view, farmers were somehow morally superior consumers (p. 195). Rural historians may question whether farm families used their cars for pleasure any less than did city dwellers. And urban dwellers likely disapproved of unsafe driving as much as did farmers.

Readers may also wonder if Barron's marks of rurality are truly unique to rural folk. Various, he describes these marks as a spirit of independence and wariness of the state; the primacy of the local community; a producers' ethic that takes pride in actually growing and making things; belief in the superiority of the rural way of life; sharing Jeffersonian, non-economic, agrarian "sensibilities"; having a cooperative bent; and keeping the family at the center of everything. But are these characteristics necessarily rural? City folk also valued family and locality (the neighborhood), and they too took pride in being self sufficient by gardening and canning, sewing their own clothes, and repairing and even building their own

homes. Many urbanites also disliked big government and high taxes, and joined numerous associations, societies, and business partnerships. They presumably lacked only Jeffersonian agrarian sensibilities.

Despite these minor quibbles, *Mixed Harvest* offers many new insights. For example, rural folk resisted calls for modern roads only until the states agreed to fund them with user fees rather than land taxes. Taxes not roads were the issue. The story of rural schools has been told well by Wayne Fuller, but Barron recounts the reform efforts and shows that farmers resisted consolidation of country schools except when they saw that closing smaller schools would save money. It is unfortunate that, along with schools, Barron did not explore the rural church and the role of religious beliefs in shaping rural society and life. The chapter on grain elevators is a gem for explaining the social and ideological bases of this quintessential rural economic hub; farmers disliked middlemen, be they grain dealers or railroads! By the 1920s, over two million farmers owned cooperatively ten thou-

sand grain elevators nationwide. The author mentioned, but did not elaborate on, the importance of the numerous cooperatives in homogenous ethnic colonies that gave expression to group solidarity (p. 123). Neither are live-stock auctions, threshing rings, and other forms of shared labor mentioned. The history of mail-order buying and the inroads of consumerism are effectively summarized here for the first time in two lucid chapters. In a clever and effective touch, Barron opened each chapter with an epigraph or two from the Old Testament, from which he also crafted the chapter titles.

In sum, this tightly-packed work advances the field of rural history by offering an interpretative framework and a practical methodology that can serve as a guide for future research. Every student of rural history will need to consult it.

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