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Robert Gough. *Farming the Cutover: A Social History of Northern Wisconsin, 1900-1940.* Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1997. viii + 295 pp. $40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7006-0850-8.

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Driving across northern Wisconsin between the cities of Marinette and Superior, the modern traveler catches glimpses of a vanished way of life. Along the highways and partially hidden among the trees are deserted cabins and barns, one sees vestiges of failed farmsteads of the Cutover region of the Great Lakes state. Robert Gough in his bok *Farming the Cutover* examines the settlement and subsequent decline of farm life in the northern third of Wisconsin.

Gough gives us a sensitive and empathetic portrait of early twentieth-century pioneers who broke much of the twelve million acres of mostly cool-climate forest soils in the region. On the sidelines were agricultural economists, rural social scientists, and the press who first cheered, then maligned the settlers. In the course of this study, Gough explores important themes, such as how by words and actions people transform their surroundings into different places. He also investigates how a once-promising land turned into an agricultural "problem area" and how its residents became near colonial dependents of greater American society. Finally, Gough explores what it means to be a "yeoman farmer" in the twentieth century and why Cutover settlers failed while previous generations triumphed.

Historians are familiar with the story of commercial forestry in northern Wisconsin in the late-nineteenth century. By the 1890s intensive lumbering left parts of the region resembling a war zone of debris and tree stumps. Tree cutting also left the Cutover uncertain of its future, so the local press, merchants, and bankers promoted the area for farm settlement around the turn of the century. Gough describes how farmers coming to the area sought both to alter the landscape and redeem it from the damage that timber companies caused to the area.

Between 1900 and 1920, thousands of settlers moved into the region to carve out new farms from the cut forest land. Cutover settlers were often European immigrants who eschewed work in America's mines and factories for work on the land. Others were young families from the Midwest and Great Plains. Comparatively cheap prices and favorable credit terms from lumber companies allowed these families to own their farms. However, the Cutover land was not prime farm land. For example, removing tree stumps and native rock to begin cultivation was expensive and frustrating labor. Gough cites one farmer who spent as much on dynamite to clear away tree stumps as he did to purchase the farm. Because of the expense of extracting stumps and rocks, many farmers simply did not attempt to clear their land. Instead, they scraped by through hunting, fishing, and working off the farm, together with limited dairying and growing of potatoes. The value of these small farms, usually only ninety acres and often not completely cleared, averaged only half that of Wisconsin farms as a whole.

Gough emphasizes that these were "yeoman" farms, which he defines as "relatively small-scale and diversified, based on family labor, linked to, but not dominated by the market, economically and socially dependent on other farmers in the community" (p. 148). Even though these were twentieth-century farm families, Gough writes, they sought a rural ideal from the previous century. They sought an independence based on sharing a community with others of like values and backgrounds. These were not avaricious land owners. Cutover farmers' economic success was moderated by obligations to become "integrated with the community expectations rather than to escape them" (p. 38). Through family labor, work exchange, use of cooperatives and off-farm work, Cutover farmers tried to survive.

Fate and farm experts were not kind to this way of life, however. The prosperity of the 1920s eluded most northern Wisconsin settlers. Because of this, academics such as Richard Ely of the University of Wisconsin changed their minds on the Cutover. Ely was a champion of Cutover farm opportunity in the 1890s, but by the 1920s he suggested that these farmers were backward, immoral, and dangerous. By the 1930s, according

to Gough, the national press also portrayed the Cutover as a magnet for criminals, welfare dependents, the unemployed, and the rural poor.

Through its relief and resettlement projects, the New Deal sustained many Cutover farmers during the Great Depression. However, Gough criticizes the New Deal agricultural program, which was designed to bolster the "well-established, demonstrably commercial farms" (p. 190) unlike those of the Cutover. New Dealers–and Americans in general–no longer envisioned the Cutover or other areas such as the Great Plains as the prosperous new frontiers promised earlier in the century. The economy, government policies, rural zoning, and park formation drove many struggling farm families off the land throughout the thirties.

Robert Gough has written a fine history of northern Wisconsin's Cutover and the attempts to convert it into the poor man's Eden. Although the Deep South and the Great Plains have been studied extensively, historians have thus far ignored this particular "problem area" of American agriculture. Gough's work combines solid research, consistent arguments, and a balance of data and narrative to reveal the moral implications of farming the region. He deftly uses interviews and personal accounts to flesh out a substantive portrait of the region and its farmers.

Gough has a perceptive critical approach toward government policy in the area. The work is especially welcome for its penetrating analysis of supposed farm "experts" who helped transform the region's image from one full of promise for the beginning farm family in 1900, to a "problem area" in the 1920s and 1930s. The history of the Cutover frontier, which passed from the primary industry of lumbering to agricultural development back to forest land again, refuted Wisconsin's own Frederick Jackson Turner and his frontier thesis. Later critics of Cutover settlement discerned not pioneer settlers but "marginal farmers," "objects" to be rehabilitated or removed from the land. Gough redeems the area's reputation by showing the human aspects of Cutover agriculture.

As much as I appreciated this work, I can't agree with all of it. For the sake of discussion, I disagree with the use of the term "yeoman farmers" for Cutover settlers. Edward and Frederick Schapsmeier in their *Encyclopedia of American Agricultural History* define a yeoman farmer as "a free and independent landowner in colonial and early American frontier days, and considered a basic ingredient to Jeffersonian Democracy." I would add that the idealized yeoman farmers were unencumbered by economic and social fetters, making them perfect citizens who are above party and special interest politics. I have doubts whether early twentieth-century Cutover farmers remained free of the economic obligations and consumer aspirations that both enriched contemporary farm families and tied them to general society. Two examples suggest my case. First, Gough cites that a small 7 percent of Cutover farmers ran "subsistence" operations in 1930 (p. 65). Since the remaining farms were commercial ones, the goals of community and independence probably took a back seat to market concerns. Second, when Gough cites the budget of a Cutover farm family, it appears they were devoted consumers. The Meier family, which depended heavily on money from off-farm work and timbering, spent quite a bit on groceries, other merchandise, and even an automobile (p. 81).

The $637 question (the price of the car) is, Can a yeoman farmer own an automobile? In other words, Can a farm family committed to commercial agriculture and modern consumer spending truly be as free as the Jeffersonian yeoman farmer? Respectfully, I would answer no. Gough suggests that, through marketing cooperatives and community interdependency, Cutover farmers could milk success from their land given time and government support. Unfortunately, modern American farming, particularly a type that provides an income to match modern consumer tastes, requires larger and larger amounts of capital, fertile land, and technology. This undercuts nineteenth-century community and subsistence values. Furthermore, large amounts of fertile land, capital, and technology weren't available to most Cutover farmers before the Second World War. Despite hard work and cooperation among neighbors, the scale of farming outgrew their means.

The epilogue to *Farming the Cutover* presents a cautionary tale to those who offer facile plans to return large parts of the northern Wisconsin, as well as the Appalachians, Ozarks, and the Great Plains, to their "natural" states as a solution to the regions' social and economic problems. As Gough notes, original plans to reforest the area, transform it into park land, and rake in tourist money did not help Cutover society. The parks neither attracted new people nor offered long-term residents adequate income. Much of the Cutover population, writes Gough, "resembled … economically dependent and culturally subservient population[s] of tourist destinations" (p. 227). Such observations make *Farming the Cutover* worthwhile reading for those not only concerned with the rural Great Lakes area, but those interested in the environmental, economic, social, and ideological considerations of rural development in the United

States and Canada.

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