

Introduction

The Problem Itself

The farmer is endeavoring to solve the problem of a livelihood by a formula more complicated than the problem itself. To get his shoestrings he speculates in herds of cattle. With consummate skill he has set his trap with a hair spring to catch comfort and independence, and then, as he turned away, got his own leg into it. This is the reason he is poor; and for a similar reason we are all poor in respect to a thousand savage comforts, though surrounded by luxuries.

—Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (1854)

For Thoreau, “the problem itself” was obvious. Rural America, and by extension the rest of the nation, had made a deal with the devil. Rather than trust themselves to grow their food, fabricate their clothes, maintain their homes, and find spiritual and moral sustenance in their self-sufficiency, planters aspired to a “livelihood” that promised tangible proof, in the form of wealth, that supposedly exemplified these transcendent strengths. The profession, also known as commercial farming, required ceaseless speculation about an uncertain future, intense and often illogical specialization, competition with one’s neighbors, and dependency on a host of insatiable suppliers, most of whom knew that the farmer was incapable of stocking even his own “shoestrings.”¹

To Thoreau, the willful entry of rural America into the cash-market economy was akin to renouncing a birthright of virtue and enlightenment. The famed essayist’s greatest concern, however, was the permanent loss of the United States’ independence from the forces of capitalism. The agrarian ideal was not a simple abstraction to his generation. Obligated to reconcile natural rights with slavery, Western imperialism, and a growing industrial proletariat, Thoreau and others looked to the countryside as a refuge for simpler, more equitable answers to modernization. The “Puritan-republican” values espoused by Thoreau sought individual redemption through group harmony. Commercialization, therefore, not only threw

Americans out of paradise but threatened to destroy the only means of restoring grace.²

Before the end of the century, writers such as Hamlin Garland openly questioned this consummate faith in the countryside. In *A Son of the Middle Border*, his autobiography on rural Midwestern life from 1864 to 1893, Garland cautioned “those who think of the farm as a sweetly ideal place” might find time to consider the “disturbing” reality of child labor, family disintegration, misogyny, and rampant materialism. To Garland, neither farm living nor the pastoral “beauty of nature” had any positive effect on the moral fiber of the nation. Commercial farming had already installed a cultural thralldom to the marketplace; attempts to build rural solidarity or strengthen communal expression, such as the Patrons of Husbandry, in which his father actively participated, were pointless, he felt, because of the grinding realities of farmers’ chosen “livelihood.” As Garland somewhat caustically noted, “There [is] no escape even on a modern ‘model farm’ from the odor of the barn.” Garland found his personal salvation in the busy streets of Boston and devoted much of his life’s work to debunking the rural mythology.³

Thoreau and Garland grappled with some of the most vexing questions facing rural Americans in the nineteenth century. Central to their analysis was an understanding of how farmers maintained a sense of community while meeting the challenges of market capitalism. To Thoreau, the conservation of precapitalist social values was paramount. To Garland, farmers instead ought to concentrate on progressive reforms of their provincial culture. To both, the consumption of goods was a pivotal factor in the ultimate success or failure of their quest. Consumerism, whether expressed only as a simple desire for “shoestrings” or through the creation of a complex and “modern ‘model farm,’” provided a clear gauge that measured the countryside’s connection to the marketplace.

The link between consumption, community, and traditional republican values in the United States is well established. Republicanism formed the backbone of America’s civic religion by cherishing incorruptible simplicity, equality of opportunity, economic independence, commonweal, and citizenship. To early critics, such as Thoreau and most notably Thomas Jefferson, consumerism destroyed community through rampant individualism, created economic dependencies through rising consumer debt, and fostered large and threatening corporate bureaucracies. Later reviewers, such as Thorstein Veblen, claimed that the black art of modern advertising was manipulating the isolated purchasers. Moreover, Veblen’s

influential 1899 work *The Theory of the Leisure Class* highlighted the extremely unproductive nature of “conspicuous consumption” (Veblen’s phrase) as practiced by families of more than moderate means. Sheltered by their considerable assets, these individuals were blind to the larger needs of the community, he claimed. Their fashionable purchases drained capital away from the mass production of goods desired by the vast majority of Americans, thereby increasing unit costs and stultifying the economy. To Veblen, this prodigal behavior squandered a rare evolutionary opportunity for the capitalist order to progress. He held out little hope that the organic nature of U.S. society or a harmony of economic interests might correct these disruptive practices.⁴

Yet many people in the United States did not see materialism as a threat to republican values. Consumption, properly harnessed, could be a powerful and useful tool in supporting communal goals. In his novels *Looking Backward: 2000–1887* (published in 1888) and *Equality* (1897), Edward Bellamy predicted that the United States would realize economic justice and true republican virtue. The author’s socialist vision, termed “Nationalism,” was expressed most directly in his predictions regarding future consumer practices. In Bellamy’s twenty-first century, all interest in fashion and elitist luxuries were excised from material goods. For example, women were freed from the gendered clothing, jewelry, and cosmetics that constituted their earlier cultural prisons. Further, retail outlets for the general consumer consisted of “public stores” that offered a wide variety of low-cost and guaranteed goods. As with gendered products, these changes liberated patrons from their dependency upon the modern distribution network. To Bellamy, consumption aided Americans in their attempt to regain self-control and resulted in a population that again cherished simplicity and utility. Significantly, in his sequel, *Equality*, Bellamy recognized that the changes to industrial capitalism and individual materialism could not transpire without a revolution. Incited by farmers who rejected the high-priced technology needed for their craft, Bellamy saw the agrarian unrest of 1873 as the “beginning of the final or revolutionary period of the pseudo-American Republic which resulted in the establishment of the present system.”⁵

These impressions were supported by the active consumption practiced by the nation’s farmers, particularly those of the Midwest. As a young man working for the trade journal *Agricultural Advertising*, the writer Sherwood Anderson suggested in 1902 that many contemporary retail suppliers overlooked the consumer élan of their neighbor farmers.

Anderson noted that only recently had “big, general advertisers” become aware that rural journals were “tucked up close to the hardest reading, best living class of people in the World, the American farmer.” Driving home the point in later contributions to the journal, Anderson asked, “Don’t you remember how your old daddy used to settle himself down before the fire . . . and spend long hours pouring over the advertising columns of the farm papers?”⁶

Oddly, given the concern over rural consumption at the turn of the century, little attention is evident in the modern historiography. The contemporary study of materialism in the United States developed rapidly once David Potter, Marshall McLuhan, John Kenneth Galbraith, Daniel Boorstin, and several others reanimated the debate in the 1950s. Intent on finding a unified “national character” within the postwar opulence, many of these early studies impatiently surveyed the austere countryside before turning their full attention to the cities. By and large, more recent studies have continued this trend while splitting the analysis of material abundance into three broad patterns. The first seeks to explain, much as Thoreau, the ideology and normative values associated with growing consumption. Jackson Lears, Roland Marchand, James D. Norris, and, most recently, Pamela Walker Laird look to unbundle these mores from the complexities of modern advertising. William Leach, Leigh Eric Schmidt, and Lendol Calder have studied department stores, holidays, and consumer credit, respectively, in a similar fashion. As a category, these works tend to revise or refute Warren Susman’s claim that modern consumer culture replaced the Puritan-republican values of the nineteenth century for ones that supported industrial capitalism and justified the pursuit of personal gratification. But they also support the contention that individualism alone, not collective action, is the primary measurement of a modern consumer ethos.⁷

A second general pattern is evident today in the examination of the infrastructure that brought about mass marketing. An offshoot of the research by Samuel P. Hays, Robert Wiebe, Alfred Chandler Jr., and Carl Degler, these works explore the organizational changes to business practices and manufacturing processes that set the parameters for modern consumer culture. David Hounshell, Olivier Zunz, and Timothy Spears, for example, explore the fundamental transformations that manufacturing, corporate management, and distribution underwent in the late nineteenth century. This approach concedes that the suppliers of the retail

economy controlled, as much as was possible, the pace and direction of change. In short, the maturing distribution network of the Gilded Age reached out and transformed the local customer into the national consumer. This method, potentially more deterministic—and certainly so, if misappropriated—contends that modern consumerism requires an infrastructure that largely was not in place in the United States until the close of the nineteenth century.⁸

Finally, some current studies look to local communities in an effort to register the actual consumption practices of the typical modern shopper. From Roy Rosensweig to more recent works by Lizabeth Cohen, Andrew Heinze, and Dana Frank, these sophisticated and detailed works have done much to substantiate the claim that consumerism significantly altered American society. By giving voice to the individual consumer, this breed of analysis has increased our awareness of the profound choices open to many urban shoppers. Driven by recent changes in the history of organized labor and urban ethnicity, most of these works are concerned with how class affects an individual's status as consumer. Still, each work shows how the determined efforts by a motivated population to direct the nature of consumerism was possible by the twentieth century.⁹ Taken together, these three strands confirm that modern consumer culture was growing in importance from 1865 to 1930. Augmented by stable business platforms, armed with a motivated sales force, made accessible through rail, credit, and mail links, and backed by enticing advertisements, this new fashion of cultural expression made profound and rapid changes to the accepted social practices and beliefs systems of many Americans.

Yet what of rural America and the fears expressed by Thoreau and Garland? As noted, political and economic historians before 1970 generally ignored rural consumers and instead focused on a seemingly straightforward progression from frontier settlement to commercial stability in the countryside. Quick to identify benefits and barriers—posed by industrialization, the transportation and financial revolutions of the midcentury, urbanization, and the expanding global demand for U.S. food products—most inquiries sought only to find out who won and lost in the high-stakes contest over commercialization. While few early rural historians even stopped to consider the social costs associated with consumption, their work was neither insignificant nor in vain. Based on a mountain of early research, contemporary historians like David B. Danbom can now

readily conclude that nineteenth-century U.S. farmers “might choose to be in the market a lot or a little, but they could not choose to be out of it completely.”¹⁰

The market assumptions underlying these initial works came under intense criticism by “New Rural Historians” who rejected the conclusion that all rural Americans had an instinctive desire to participate in capitalism. By focusing on the smaller, interpersonal changes to rural society, recent historians have revitalized the questions and warnings first posed by Thoreau, Garland, and a multitude of others. They assume nothing was determined and ask whether and how the various communal and domestic links of transplants, persisters, and transients affected and addressed the growing materialism of farm individuals and families. The new paradigm interjects complexity and contingency on material and political change. Again, Danbom speaks for a large sentiment of contemporary scholars when he observes that “Agriculture, rural culture and society, and agrarian politics are so intertwined . . . that separation of them is misleading and excessively artificial.”¹¹

It is here, I believe, that agrarian consumerism emerges as a significant and largely undervalued component to both rural history and materialism in the United States. Only relatively recently have historians even addressed the changing purchasing patterns of rural consumers. In particular, William Cronon and Hal Barron have both helped to reestablish the central role that nineteenth-century farmers had in the formation of modern U.S. society and culture. In the process, both rely on extensive treatments of rural consumerism to support their theses. In *Nature's Metropolis* (1991), Cronon establishes a clear connection between the structural changes described above and buyers in the rural hinterland. Yet as the market economy took hold, most farmers lost their ability to identify the source of their economic ills. In Cronon's words, the market “concealed the very linkages it was creating . . . making it harder and harder to keep track of the true costs and consequences of any particular product.” Cronon's depiction of Midwestern planters buying pancake mix (consisting largely of wheat grown in their own fields) from Chicago mail-order firms suggests that rural consumers were poorly prepared to come to terms with the forces of modern consumption. By contrast, Barron does show, in *Mixed Harvest* (1997), that farmers possessed a unique understanding of these changes but that their localism and small-businessman perspective prevented most from articulating, much less enacting, any viable organized response. In both texts, rural consumption is

finally posited not as a deterministic backlash to urban change, but rather an integral part of this transformation.¹²

The central thesis of this book builds upon and revises this historiography by arguing that Midwestern farmers, between 1820 and 1900, consciously took advantage of the evolving modern consumer culture in order to better compete in the marketplace. At the same time, they protected what they believed to be vital notions of community. This population of commercial planters did not assume that they needed to discard communal ideals for the sake of individual gain, nor that market participation undermined rural solidarity. Rather, farmers' responses as consumers to the challenges of modernization were rooted in their traditional, vocational activities—behaviors shared by most of their rural contemporaries. In this way their collective consumer ethos was actually sharpened by modernization. As farming was transformed by the spread of railroads, urban centralization, currency retraction, middlemen, rising debt, modern advertising, and new technologies, so too did rural consumer strategies evolve and refine. As a result, Midwesterners expressed one of the earliest and most forceful modern consumer sensibilities of any population in the United States. Farmers not only intended to survive these changes, but thrive by them. They believed that collective consumer reform provided both the best method by which to succeed within the new economic order and, more importantly, the means to control and direct change to their own advantage. This doctrine was much more than an odd assemblage of shopworn credos and slogans; rather, it was a unique and highly modern ideological construct. Finally, *Sowing the American Dream* contends that rural Americans developed bold and active institutional strategies to bring about the required adjustments to the nation's consumer economy. While these organizations ultimately proved incapable of maintaining the delicate mix between communal and individual values, their failures were due more to operational and systemic errors, or timely adaptations by the private sector, than to a rejection of modern consumer culture by Midwestern farmers. In this way, rural consumerism directly molded America's early consumer economy in profound and long-lasting ways.

The consumer practices of Midwestern farmers are important for a number of other reasons. Most notably, the population under discussion was large and commercially active. By 1870, the four states most closely examined in this study—Illinois, Iowa, Indiana, and Wisconsin—encompassed more than five million rural citizens. This subset of men and

women represented almost a greater number of like-minded planters from neighboring states and territories. In the same enumeration, Illinois alone claimed more than two hundred thousand farms, valued at \$750 million (not including livestock), that produced 30 million bushels of wheat, 130 million bushels of corn, and 43 million bushels of oats. The leading farm institution for the region and era, the National Grange of the Patrons of Husbandry, claimed more than 858,000 dues-paying members, with savings from their collective consumer practices estimated in the tens of millions of dollars per year. Midwestern commercial farmers were neither a marginal group nor without economic means. Their collective consumer vision represented a powerful voice of dissent over the emerging purchasing practices in this country.¹³

In addition to the size of the population, its economic bearing was overwhelmingly capitalist. While families migrated west for a variety of reasons, following the Civil War few Midwesterners practiced subsistence agriculture. Even before this time, as Andrew R. L. Cayton and Peter S. Onuf recently noted, “The idea that [regional] settlers were ever fully self-sufficient is now generally discredited.” By the 1850s, most planters were thoroughly aware that distant market conditions, the cost of money, productivity enhancements, and the extended distribution network were key components of their bottom line. Barron, Winifred Barr Rothenberg, and Christopher Clark, for example, show how many eastern farm communities were split earlier by the lure of market participation.¹⁴

By and large, those who remained to farm the Midwest had few of these divisive doubts about participation. Most had to pony-up more than a thousand dollars, usually by means of credit, even to begin working their stake in the Old Northwest. These were not protocapitalists or reactionaries hoping to arrest the cash economy, but rather knowledgeable planters searching for competitive strategies to provide themselves with the greatest degree of control over their lives. Their awareness ensured neither consensus nor success. Opinions varied as to how little or how much market participation was desirable. Many dissenters moved on. The history of the region’s consumer campaigns is generally one of frustration and ultimately defeat. Yet the contest between commercial farmers and the market was played out using rules with which all were familiar. While they may not have been capable of sustaining their own local consumer outlets or urban supply houses, Midwestern farmers generally understood the financial reasons for such an effort. Their singular status as experienced capitalists supports the notion that their purchasing strategies were also novel.