
**Review: *A Revolution Down on the Farm:
The Transformation of American Agriculture Since 1929***

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Paul K. Conkin
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Born in 1929 and raised on a small farm in eastern Tennessee, Paul Conkin, Distinguished Professor Emeritus of History at Vanderbilt University, provides an accessible work on the development of agriculture in the United States over the last 80 years. Conkin is neither an apologist for American agriculture nor a critic. Perhaps he might best be described as an *interested bystander* who has observed that “agriculture has been the most successful sector in the recent economic history of the United States” (p. x). Since 1950, the productivity of American farms has increased at least tenfold, an advance which never fails to astound Conkin. This balanced and partially biographical work is a good place to begin to understand how farming and rural life has changed in the latter half of the 20th century.

Broken chronologically into eight chapters with two parenthetical chapters recounting the author’s personal experience, Conkin merges a historian’s attention to detail with the memories of one who lived a rural farm life before electricity and internal combustion engines. The parenthetical chapters, two and four, are welcome interruptions in a narrative that can become overly detailed at times. In the first chapter, Conkin describes the changes in American agriculture from colonial times to about 1930. Although there was some improvement in farm productivity over these centuries, the efficiencies were modest. In 1800, one farm family could support one additional family, but by 1930 one farm family could raise enough food for ten families. This increase was primarily due to new tools and equipment that promoted labor efficiencies, but readers will also discover the significant role of government policy in promoting and disseminating agricultural research and developing credit markets necessary for farm stability.

In Chapter 3, this history is extended into the maze of new programs that attempted to address the impact of the Great Depression on American farms. President Hoover’s Farm Board attempted to organize producers in a manner that would strengthen their market power in specific food commodities, but failed due to global price declines. In comparison, farm policy during Roosevelt’s administration was less ideologically driven and less consistent. Although rooted in the farm price crisis of 1921, the multi-year price instability of the 1930s laid the foundation for a variety of federal programs with one ultimate aim—to stabilize prices so that farmers would receive a fair price for their products. The perennial problem was over-production. Without a means to regulate the quantity of agricultural products produced, and in the face of the relative inelasticity of demand for food products after a certain level of

consumption, there is little that the invisible hand of the market can do but penalize the farmer if supply exceeds demand. The cooperative marketing and foreign dumping efforts of the 1920s gave way to *de facto* price supports and domestic allotments (quotas) in the 1930s. The base acreage associated with land parcels due to these allotments became an enduring feature of American agriculture with various forms of farm payments being determined on this base. Despite these and other policy changes—new forms of credit, removal of acreage from production, land purchases—the agricultural surplus generated in the 1930s and the resulting low prices were not resolved until the Second World War.

Following World War II, the productivity gains in American agriculture were unprecedented. “In one generation, from 1950 to 1970, the workforce in agriculture declined by roughly half, while the value of the total product increased by approximately 40%” (p. 98). In Chapter 5, Conkin argues that this productivity explosion was due to new machinery, rural electrification, chemical inputs (fertilizer and herbicides), and plant/animal breeding. In Chapter 6, his attention returns to government policy with a focus on production controls and price supports, the farm crisis of the 1980s, and international agreements impacting American farms. Although the farm problems during this period seem to parallel the 1930s, over-production of food products and decline in global demand, the price support mechanisms enacted were significantly more costly in terms of public support and resulted in consolidation of smaller farms into massive concerns so that 89% of total farm output was produced by roughly 15% of farms.

Chapter 6 also discusses federal programs through the passage of the 2008 Farm Bill which continues to direct federal agricultural policy today. This legislation increased federal nutrition expenditures by \$10 billion so that two-thirds cost of this Farm Bill went for food aid and converted the food stamp program into the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP). Only minor adjustments were made in domestic food programs, conservation efforts, land retirement schemes, ethanol subsidies, and agricultural research. Attempts to limit commodity payments to individual farm operators with adjusted gross income in excess of \$200,000 a year was firmly rejected by Congress. Despite the high publicity associated with Michelle Obama’s garden and child anti-obesity initiative, the Obama administration has only recently addressed farm policy. In negotiations for the pending 2012 Farm Bill, Obama has recommended over \$30 billion in cuts, primarily through decreases in direct payments to farmer operators, higher premiums for some forms of crop insurance, and moderation in conservation programs. As Conkin so well documents in earlier farm policy discussions, it remains unclear whether Obama’s proposals and Congressional intent to reduce federal spending will be strong enough to overcome rural senator opposition to USDA budget limitations. Accordingly, I believe that Conkin remains relevant to contemporary discussions of farm policy.

Chapter 7 provides demographic profiles on American farms in 2002 describing the owners, farmworkers, products, revenues, costs, incomes, and overwhelming consolidation that has taken place. Critics of the contemporary agricultural oligarchy are provided some voice in this chapter, yet the critical tone remains somewhat subdued. Both the externalities associated with farm production (environmental threats) and other victims (farmworkers, abused animals) are acknowledged, but within a framework that seems to give precedence to farm productivity. It is easy to imagine Conkin asking, “How else can we feed 6.5 billion people?” The

alternatives to the present system are discussed in Chapter 8, but in a way that clearly demonstrates that they are unlikely to make a significant impact. When religious minorities (Shakers and Hutterites) provide exemplars alongside contemporary alternatives like sustainable agriculture and organic initiatives, the overall impact is to trivialize all alternatives. Conkin ends this history with a reflective Afterword that expresses his concerns about over-population, potential food scarcity, the questionable applicability of free market economics to agriculture, and the end of cheap oil.

This book is a primer on American agriculture, federal farm and food policy, and the significant changes that took place in rural America in the 20th century. As such, I can recommend it to social work academics and practitioners who may be transitioning from an urban or suburban to a rural context. While it is unlikely that Conkin will answer all of your questions about the differences between urban/suburban and rural life, the background information in this book is invaluable in helping the reader develop an appreciation for the farmer's attachment to the land and a deeper understanding of the complex policy issues interwoven into rural life.

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