

SOCS 649, Fall 2016

Farming in America

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From the Whiskey Rebellion to the Farm Bill, populism to contemporary food politics, colonial handbills to today's pickup truck ads and campaign speeches, farming and rural life have figured prominently in U.S. cultural, political, and economic discourse. But although the independent farmer has long been given pride of place in the national narrative, the American ideal of the family farm has often been at odds with the realities of rural life in the United States. Why is it that this agrarian ideal persists in a nation where only two percent of the population lives on a farm, food comes from the supermarket, and some of the most valuable arable land in the nation is owned by corporations and investors?

This course explores the historical role of rural landscapes, people, and livelihoods in the life of the United States from the nation's beginnings to the present day. Reading a mix of primary and secondary sources, we will consider how Americans past and present have answered such questions as: Who should own the land and who should labor upon it? Is rural life inherently virtuous? Is there such a thing as a family farm that is distinct from other kinds of agriculture, and, if so, do we have an obligation to save it? Can we have democracy without landowning farmers? What is the relationship between agriculture and the rest of the economy? Are agriculture and industry oppositional or complementary? Should government be involved in setting farm policy, and, if so, what should be its aims?

In our readings, discussions, and written work, we will examine the meanings Americans have attached to farm life and the work of producing food and fiber. We will explore the changes that have taken place in the physical processes of farm production and animal husbandry, from the stone walls of New England to today's controversial genetically modified organisms, and uncover the effects of these shifts on rural places, people, communities, and economies. We will trace the development of the government's involvement in agricultural policy and the institutionalization of agricultural research, and corresponding changes in farm structure, economics, labor practices, and land tenure. Throughout, we will consider how Americans have used farm policy and rural reform to advance an array of political, social, economic, and environmental agendas.

This is designed to be an introductory course and requires no previous knowledge of the subject. The instructor and the assigned readings will offer both a survey of the history of farming in America and ample opportunity for students to tailor the subject matter to their own interests, whether those be along the lines of food politics, agricultural policy, environment and landscape, science and technology, gender and the family, plants and animals, migrant labor, rural health, economics and markets, or any other topics relating to the course's broad themes. A list of supplemental resources and background reading is available from the instructor.

Readings and Texts

Two texts will together offer an overview of U.S. history through the lens of rural life: David Danbom's *Born in the Country*, which gives a broad survey of U.S. agricultural history and important context for the subjects we will discuss, and the edited collection *American Georgics*, an anthology of agrarian writings across time that will help us understand what Americans at different moments were thinking and saying about issues relating to the farm. Both will be on order at Broad Street Books, and are also available at most online retailers. We will not necessarily be reading these books exhaustively; rather, they will provide an important framework for us and serve as useful resources as we explore the history of farming in America.

David B. Danbom, *Born in the Country: A History of Rural America* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995; 2006). [Either edition is fine; used copies are widely available.]

Edwin C. Hagenstein, Sara M. Gregg, and Brian Donahue, eds., *American Georgics: Writings on Farming, Culture, and the Land* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011).

Additional readings—such as articles or chapters by others scholars, or primary sources that will give you further opportunities to practice the work of history by analyzing documents from the past—will be available in a course reader, on the course web site, or otherwise distributed in advance.

Aims and Expectations

Attendance, Participation, and Engagement (20%)

This is a discussion-based seminar—a semester-long extended conversation about farming in America. You must come to class prepared and on time, contribute meaningfully to discussion, be engaged and attentive, and participate fully in our common inquiry.

Weekly Thoughtpieces (20%)

Each week, you will compose a thoughtpiece (equivalent to no more than one single-spaced page of text, or about 500 words) that synthesizes the readings and draws out what you see as a significant theme or issue. This should be a piece of critical thinking and analysis that makes connections among the readings for the week or across the weeks of the course. It should demonstrate that you are thinking deeply about what you are reading and that you are condensing the most salient or compelling points into a brief piece of well-crafted writing. Occasionally I will give you prompts for your thoughtpieces; more often, they will be self-directed. Our thoughtpieces will ensure that each member of the group has come to class with a set of points, ideas, or questions to share with the group, thereby serving as a starting point for our discussions. They will also offer each of us a chance to practice turning a set of observations about primary and secondary sources into a rough historical argument.

Gallery Essay (20%)

Farming, agriculture, and rural life have long been important components of American visual culture. The aim of this assignment is to get you to pay attention to representations of farming,

both past and present, and to think deeply and analytically about how agrarian imagery has been mobilized historically and how it figures in our culture today. In an essay of 1,000 to 1,500 words (approximately 4–6 double-spaced pages), you will do a close reading of one to three images that depict or otherwise relate to farming and/or husbandry. Your essay should discuss the meanings that your chosen representations attach to farming, and the reasons for those meanings, as informed by the historical material you are encountering in the course. The gallery essay is not a typical history essay with images to illustrate or provide window dressing. The argument of your essay will derive *from the images themselves*. We will be reading examples of gallery essays from the journal *Environmental History* as models for how to approach the assignment.

Final Paper (40%)

The central assignment of the course is a substantive paper (10–15 pages) on a topic of your choosing that relates to the central themes and questions of the course. The final paper can take one of many possible forms: an original research paper based on primary sources you have identified; a historiographical essay or review of scholarly literature in the field; a critical historical treatment of an issue in which you are interested using sources drawn from the assigned readings; an analysis of a work or works of fiction or nonfiction relating to farming; the list goes on. What I am mainly interested in is that your final paper (a) relates to the central themes and questions of the course, and (b) is historical in nature. You will select your topic in consultation with me; I am happy to provide suggestions on possible topics or approaches to the assignment if you wish more guidance. There will be several benchmarks for your final paper—including a prospectus, a bibliography, and opportunities for peer review on drafts—to ensure that you are making good headway on the project throughout the semester. I will be asking everyone to identify a topic early on and to share their progress with the class on an ongoing basis as a part of our discussions.

Course Plan

Because no previous knowledge of American or rural history is required, the course will unfold in two parts. We will devote the first half of the semester to learning the contours of agricultural change in America over the past several centuries, moving chronologically and relying largely upon our two main texts. Once we have a common basic understanding of the history, we will move into a thematic treatment of the material, in which we will look at important issues across time. Together we will select a set of six topics that are of greatest interest to the members of the class to explore in the second half of the course, and I will pull together some interesting sets of primary sources to help us navigate each subject. Possible topics include (but are not limited to):

Agriculture and the State	Nature and Environment
Farming and War	Economies and Markets
Food, Health, and Nutrition	Land Tenure
Labor and Migration	Farm Politics and Policy
Gender and the Farm Family	Science and Technology
Plants, Animals, and Other Organisms	Race, Class, and Rural Reform

Schedule of Topics and Readings

The following is intended as a general guide to our subject matter for the semester. However, we may wish to change our focus or adapt our topics to suit the interests, strengths, and projects of the group, particularly during the second half of the semester. Any changes to the syllabus will be announced at least one week in advance. Readings are due on the day they are listed.

Part I: Farming and the Agrarian Impulse

In this first half of the course, we will use our two central texts to anchor our understanding of American agricultural history, broadly conceived, drawing out key episodes, eras, and moments of change. Together we will develop a better understanding of the broad sweep and general contours of the history of farming in America.

Week 1—Introductions

REQUIRED READING:

American Georgics, foreward and introduction, pp. xiii–xvii, 1–6.

Jared Diamond, “To Farm or Not To Farm?” and “How To Make an Almond,” chapters 6 and 7 in *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies* (New York: Norton, 1997), pp. 104–130.

Born in the Country, preface, pp. ix–xii

RELEVANT BACKGROUND AND SUPPLEMENTAL READING:

Born in the Country, chapters 1 and 2, “Rural Europe and Pre-Columbian America” and “The Rural Development of English North America,” pp. 1–38.

Week 2—Rural Producers in a New Nation

REQUIRED READING:

American Georgics, chapter 1, “Shaping the Agrarian Republic, 1780–1825,” pp. 9–55.
Focus especially on the Crèvecoeur, Hamilton, Taylor, and Madison primary sources.

RELEVANT BACKGROUND AND SUPPLEMENTAL READING:

Born in the Country, chapters 3 and 4, “Maturity and Its Discontents” and “Agriculture and Economic Growth in the New Republic,” pp. 39–85.

Week 3—Farming and American Development

REQUIRED READING:

American Georgics, chapter 2, “A Nation of Farmers: The Promise and Peril of American Agriculture, 1825–1860,” pp. 57–103.

Mark Fiege and Stephen Mihm, “On Bank Notes,” *Environmental History* 13 (April 2008), pp. 351–59.

RELEVANT BACKGROUND AND SUPPLEMENTAL READING:

Born in the Country, chapters 5 and 6, “Rural Life in the Young Nation” and “The Unmaking and Remaking of the Rural South,” pp. 86–131.

Week 4 — Farming and Industrial Progress

REQUIRED READING:

American Georgics, chapters 3 and 4, “The Machine in the Garden: The Rise of American Romanticism” and “Agriculture in an Industrializing Nation, 1860–1910,” pp. 105–197. Focus especially on Peabody, Alcott, Cooper, and Thoreau in chapter 3, and on King, Hyde, Garland, Cather, Polk, and Donnelly in chapter 4.

Benjamin R. Cohen, “On Three Peasants on Their Way to a Meal: ‘The Gleaners,’ Macaroni, and Human Intervention in Nature,” *Environmental History* 14 (October 2009), pp. 744–752.

RELEVANT BACKGROUND AND SUPPLEMENTAL READING:

Born in the Country, chapter 7, “Rural America in the Age of Industrialization,” pp. 132–160.

Week 5 — Agriculture in the Machine Age

REQUIRED READING:

American Georgics, chapters 5 and 6, “Agrarians in an Industrial Nation, 1900–1945” and “Southern Agrarianism,” pp. 199–297. All the sources in chapter 5 are worth your time; in chapter 6, focus on the pieces by Twelve Southerners and Cobb.

RELEVANT BACKGROUND AND SUPPLEMENTAL READING:

Born in the Country, chapters 8, 9, and 10, “Prosperity and Its Discontents,” “From the Best of Times to the Worst,” and “The New Deal and Rural America,” pp. 161–232.

→ *One page on your final paper topic due in class*

Week 6 — Whither Farming in America?

REQUIRED READING:

American Georgics, chapter 7 and conclusion, “Back to the Land Again, 1940–Present” and “American Agrarianism in the Twenty-first Century,” pp. 299–376. You can give the Hanson piece a miss in chapter 7.

RELEVANT BACKGROUND AND SUPPLEMENTAL READING:

Born in the Country, chapters 11 and 12, “The Production Revolution and Its Consequences” and “Agriculture and Rural Life at the End of the Twentieth Century,” pp. 233–270.

→ *Gallery essay due*

Part II: Issues in Agricultural History

In the second half of the course, we will shift our focus from major episodes and eras in American agricultural history to key issues we've encountered in our reading and research that cut across time. As we move through the first half of the semester, we will work together to decide what we'd most like to focus on.

Week 7 —Open Topic

Week 8 —Open Topic

→ *Final paper prospectus and bibliography due in class*

Week 9 —Open Topic

Week 10 —Open Topic

Week 11 —Open Topic

Week 12 —Open Topic

→ *Peer review of final paper drafts (precirculated) in class*

Class Discussion Guidelines

The academic world is essentially a bunch of learning communities. Each of the disciplines is a group of people who talk to each other about how to practice the discipline well. This seminar depends on the active participation of all of its members. It's our job to be ready with ideas and questions each and every day. So what's good history in conversation? In many ways the answer is the same as that for "what's a good conversation?" Because conversation is a form of communication, a good discussion is also like good writing.

There are lots of ways to participate productively in class conversations, both through speaking and listening and through writing, and both in class and on Moodle. You can ask questions to get things started. You can offer opinions or explanations (an opinion plus evidence). You can provide information, citing material in different kinds of sources. You can make connections to earlier reading or conversations, or to things you've learned in other courses. You can review or summarize the different interpretations that are on the table. You can synthesize, interpret, or integrate, pulling together the threads of one conversation and getting ready to weave another. You can offer leadership by suggesting fruitful directions for discussion.

How can you evaluate class contributions? At one level of participation, people offer frequent and appropriate contributions, which pose good questions for the group, or use relevant reading material to answer particular questions. They invite others to contribute information or interpretations to the discussion, and they build on the comments of others, sometimes by repeating what they understood, sometimes by restating the argument for more clarity. They admit confusions, and ask for clarifications. They synthesize facts and concepts in integrative statements or interpretations. They try out explanations, offering opinions (sometimes personal) with evidence (sometimes contemporary). They offer reviews, summaries, and a sense of closure at appropriate times, as they help to direct the discussion. They don't worry about silences, as long as people are thinking. They ask questions. And they let other people talk, too.

At another level, people offer regular contributions that are not so integrative or interpretive, contributing discrete facts and some new information. Contributions are single sentences or phrases rather than more complex formulations. There is less attention to the conversation as a whole, and less connection with other participants in conversation. There are no errors of fact or interpretation.

At yet another level, people speak only a few times, offering just a little information. They offer ideas, but the ideas are vague or relatively unformulated; sometimes they are unsubstantiated opinions or educated guesses; sometimes they are unconnected personal stories. Sometimes they just repeat what other people have already said.

Other people are present but participate only minimally; sometimes they say nothing. Sometimes they speak without having done the reading, and they offer information with factual errors, or comments that lead the discussion off the topic.

Finally, a few people are not present at all, so they do not add to the conversation.

Courtesy of Jim Farrell