

Grant Wood and the Visual Culture of Agribusiness

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Art historians rarely think critically about farming, let alone consider how the concept of agribusiness might help us to understand rural imagery. Nonetheless, if it is our goal to recover the reasons why this art was created and enthusiastically consumed, it is useful to consider such concepts. Agribusiness has become a buzzword in the twenty-first century press. In this context it often means big, technologically intensive, corporate-owned, vertically integrated, transnational, and environmentally unsustainable food production. Although rarely historicized, popular accounts imply that these businesses are the result of the Green Revolution of the 1940s and began to thrive after World War II. Often the press also highlights an older lifestyle that agribusiness replaced, which was small, labor-intensive, family-owned, isolated, and sustainable. While this dichotomy is not entirely wrong, it is deceptive because it affirms a contemporary understanding of farming while ignoring the fact that large farms existed during the late nineteenth century. With the exception of transnational production, all of the hallmarks of agribusiness listed above were present at that time.

Given the widespread historical confusion over the concept of agribusiness, using the term intellectually could be a slippery task. Cultural familiarity, however, is also what makes the concept a useful starting point for building a critical framework around images of farms. Rather than relying on the vague definition of agribusiness mentioned above, I will break it into several overlapping meanings and treat them as parts of a family tree of ideas: the first meaning refers to economies of scale—huge farms are agribusinesses; the second refers to an economic “systems analysis” of food production; the final meaning refers to a mindset that privileges “business” over “tradition.” To demonstrate how these definitions can be meaningful to art historians, this article is analytically anchored on two paintings by Grant Wood.

As a case-study in the art-historical tradition of scrutinizing specific objects, *Dinner for Threshers* from 1934 and *American Gothic* from 1930 will be brought to the forefront (Figures 1 and 2). To rely on what Grant Wood said about these paintings leaves scholars with the impression that he uncritically and unequivocally endorsed rural culture. During the 1920s, for example, he declared colloquially that “I’m going to paint those damn cows and barns and barnyards and cornfields and little red schoolhouses and all those pinched faces and the women in their aprons and the men in their overalls and store suits and the look of a field or a street in the heat of summer or when it’s ten below and the snow piled six feet high.”¹ By comparing the paintings with the visual culture of American agribusiness during the early twentieth century, however, they can be shown to be part of visual conversations about farming. Through such comparisons Wood emerges not simply as making quaint pictures of rural life, but as engaged in a critical practice that drew attention to injustices in the rural economy. On a biographical level this research shows us that Wood sympathized with the small farmer and evoked visual conversations about agribusiness, but it also helps us to understand the history of rural American art as a whole.

Wood is particularly appropriate to examine in this way because he scrutinized imagery widely and experimented with numerous media. Indeed, the study of clippings, dishware, and garbage were part of his artistic practice. Although best known for easel painting, the creation of nearly all types of visual material, including advertisements, furniture, jewelry, junk sculpture, domestic architecture, dishware, a chandelier, a moving panorama, magazine covers, book jackets, illustrations, interior decor, theatrical sets, stained glass, and collage were all parts of his set of skills.² Germane questions can be logically raised, then, about the material. Did these

¹ Quoted in Steven Biel, *American Gothic: A Life of America’s Most Famous Painting* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2005), 72. There have been several monographs published about Grant Wood, of which Wanda Corn’s is considered the most definitive. My work, however, is the first to consider him in terms of agribusiness. Wanda M. Corn, *Grant Wood: The Regionalist Vision* (New Haven: Minneapolis Institute of Arts and Yale University Press, 1983); James M. Dennis, *Grant Wood: A Study in American Art and Culture* (New York: Viking Press, 1975); James M. Dennis, *Renegade Regionalists: The Modern Independence of Grant Wood, Thomas Hart Benton, and John Stuart Curry* (Madison:

University of Wisconsin Press, 1998); Jane C. Milosch, ed., *Grant Wood’s Studio: Birthplace of American Gothic* (Cedar Rapids and New York: Cedar Rapids Museum of Art and Prestel, 2005); Thomas Hoving, *American Gothic: The Biography of Grant Wood’s American Masterpiece* (New York: Chamberlain Brothers, 2005).

² Examples of his work in all of these media are contained in the monographs by Corn and Dennis as well as the catalog of Wood’s decorative arts by Milosch.

images and media convey information about agribusiness? Assuming that the answer is yes, was Grant Wood familiar with them? Assuming again that the answer is yes, did he care about their operation?

Wood knew farms. He did not view them from the periphery as an outsider, and he no doubt had strong opinions about farm life. Given these experiences, we should understand his well-known statement from 1936 that “all the really good ideas I’d ever had came to me while I was milking a cow” as more than facetious. It affirmed his identity as a farmer. He was raised on a farm near Cedar Rapids from 1891 until 1901, at which time his father died. For a year he ran the operation with his mother and siblings. They raised goats and chickens, milked cows, and worked the harvest. When the steam thresher was running, he served as the water boy. The family then moved to town, and although Wood never farmed again, his family owned a cow there. He lived in Cedar Rapids for most of his life and likely gained some new understanding of agriculture there, but scholars unanimously agree that his rural experiences during the 1890s were the foundation of his knowledge. *Dinner for Threshers* is no exception to Wood’s Victorian sensibility. Wanda Corn believes it was intended to represent the year of Wood’s birth—1892—which is painted at the peak of the barn, but there are references to a later era as well, such as dresses in 1930s styles. Given this dating of the content, it is appropriate to view the painting as a late 19th or early 20th century farmer would have done.³

The first definition of agribusiness is industrial-scale food production, and this was a major concern in Wood’s lifetime. Indeed, Wood is precisely the type of person who would be suspicious of industrial farming and the labor practices that accompanied it. Because he grew up poor, he would not identify with the investors who owned large-scale “bonanza” operations. Furthermore, small farmers tended to emphasize the community spirit achieved through helping neighbors to thresh, while frowning upon the broken social bonds of large harvests. These realities of industrial labor help to explain why Wood created such a vehemently positive image of clean-cut neighborly affection in *Dinner for Threshers* rather than showcasing the transient labor force.

Instead of depicting the labor in progress, Wood rendered the calm hiatus. This might seem strange until one understands that the actual work was extraordinarily taxing. Indeed, threshing was one of the harshest, most uncomfortable, and deadly endeavors undertaken in modern American farming. Small farmers used steam threshers rather than combine harvesters: operating them is dangerous, hot, and dirty. The boiler has the potential to explode. The mechanism is driven by long belts without safety guards—sometimes 100 feet in circumference—that vibrate violently as they threaten to snap and maim. Pulverized splinters of straw fly away from the workers, but the slightest breeze sends the matter back toward sweaty skin. Attempting to wipe away the clinging debris causes an itchy rash, as the needle-like bits of chaff dig in. *Dinner for Threshers’* smiling men, seated around a table as a woman brings in a bowl of mashed potatoes held triumphantly aloft, can thus be understood as reframing the act in a positive light.⁴

This reframing was an important issue because, although harvesting is a necessary task, the mode of threshing was controversial. Sometimes groups of neighbors formed “threshing rings” in which they harvested each others’ crops communally, while other times farmers hired migrant harvest workers. Each practice was defended by its adherents. The visual evidence in *Dinner for Threshers* indicates that we are witness to a group of neighbors. Hired laborers were usually in their late teens or early twenties, but neighbors were of all ages. The average age in *Dinner for Threshers* might be thirty or thirty five. None is bald or gray or has the slender physique of an eighteen-year-old. A drawing of hired harvest workers representing industrial farming operations reveals the opposite extreme from the harvesters at the self-reliant family farms. Titled *Types of Harvest Hands*, it was created by William Robinson Leigh in 1897 to illustrate an article in *Scribner’s* (Figure 3). The article was part of a series on great businesses, and today it is considered one of the best sources of information on the gargantuan bonanza farms of the nineteenth century. Some of these operations were huge even by twenty-first century standards—25,000 acres or more. The editor sent Leigh to Mayville, North Dakota, to do research, so the illustration is well-informed.⁵

³ Corn notes that Wood was actually born in 1891, but that he frequently confused his birth year. Corn, *Grant Wood*, 104. For a discussion of his contributions running the farm, see Nan Wood Graham, John Zug, and Julie Jensen McDonald, *My Brother, Grant Wood* (Iowa City: State Historical Society of Iowa, 1993), xv, 1-8. The quote about milking was originally published in “Iowa Cows Give Grant Wood His Best Thoughts,” *New York Herald Tribune*, January 23, 1936, 17.

⁴ I have seen this type of equipment in operation at the annual Western Minnesota Steam Thresher’s Reunion in Rollag. Such demonstrations of antiquated farm equipment are popular forms of historical reenactment today, often coupled with activities typical of county fairs. For anecdotal stories about the dangers of steam threshers, see the bimonthly publication geared toward enthusiasts of steam-driven farm machinery *Steam Traction* (Topeka: Steam Traction Society. Available online: <http://www.steamtraction.com/>, 1951-2004). Scholarly studies

of these machines include J. Sanford Rikoon, *Threshing in the Midwest, 1820-1940: A Study of Traditional Culture and Technological Change* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988); Thomas D. Isern, *Bull Threshers and Bundlestiffs: Harvesting and Threshing on the North American Plains* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1990).

⁵ The illustration was published in William Allen White, “The Business of a Wheat Farm,” *Scribner’s Magazine* (November 1897): 594. The best source on W. R. Leigh is June DuBois’s biography, which drew heavily on Leigh’s memoir from 1952, *My Life*, which remains unpublished in a private collection. On his work for *Scribner’s*, see June DuBois, *W. R. Leigh: The Definitive Illustrated Biography* (Kansas City: Lowell Press, 1977), 47-49. The book which remains the best resource on bonanza farms is a careful study of Cass, Richland, and Trail Counties in North Dakota by Hiram M. Drache, *The Day of the Bonanza: A History of Bonanza Farming in the Red River Valley of the North* (Fargo: North

Despite superficial similarity—both are arrays of laborers displayed on a horizontal band—Leigh’s men are as pathetic as Wood’s are exalted. While Wood shows the well-fed, Leigh emphasizes the gaunt. Wood depicts contentedness and Leigh frustration. Wood shows clean-shaven faces, but Leigh depicts bushy mustaches. Wood renders smooth skin—Leigh wrinkles. While Wood shows the clean, Leigh offers the unkempt. Wood emphasizes nice clothes and Leigh ragged fabric. Wood includes bare heads, but Leigh opts for crumpled hats. Wood shows impeccable posture, but Leigh’s laborers are slouching. Wood arranges men conversing with each other, although Leigh’s confront the viewer. Wood renders a well-maintained house, but the Leigh background is a well-worn fence. While Wood includes both men and women, Leigh includes only men. Wood focuses on an interior and Leigh the outdoors. Overall, Wood’s men seem valuable to society, but Leigh’s discarded. The Leigh message is that these types of men are emotionally alienated and socially segregated while Wood’s message is that the men are content and enmeshed in a supportive community.

Such visual observations about Leigh’s drawing are in accordance with the historical realities of migratory harvesters who travelled annually from the southern United States up to Canada as the wheat crop ripened. The U.S. Commission on Industrial Relations noted in 1914 that many farmers believed them to be “strange,” “unclean,” and “diseased.” One newspaper accused the laborers of being “vagrants” expelled from cities “with the strict injunction to keep moving until they hit the harvest fields.” Few farms had bunk houses, so laborers often slept in sheds, barns, or even chicken coops. Because public transportation was poor the laborers hopped moving freight trains that sometimes took their lives. Burying the mangled corpses in unmarked graves beside the tracks was the norm in order to avoid the inconvenience of contacting coroners.⁶

Given the hardships of these men’s lives, we might wonder who supported this system of labor and why they would do so. To answer that question we must turn to two meanings of the term agribusiness—a dichotomy of business and tradition and a systemic analysis of food production. To understand their impact art historically, it is useful to look at *American Gothic*, which is less straightforward than *Dinner for Threshers* but equally enlightening. *American Gothic* shows a woman and man frontally posed before the façade

of their house with a framing device of a second-story, carpenter-gothic window. The man is holding a pitchfork and the woman has her hair pulled back tightly in a bun. The image has been parodied so often that any individual element is recognizable. The models were Wood’s sister Nan and his dentist, and it is often assumed to be a satire. Ostensibly Wood’s goal was to paint the house with the unusual window and the people whom he imagined might live there. His explanation of the painting is thus simple, and viewers interpreted it intuitively. Understanding this intuition today, however—seventy eight years after its creation—is no longer easy. To do so requires delving into the visual tropes that people encountered in their day-to-day lives.

One such trope is the dichotomy between a “business” and a “traditional” approach to farming that was conveyed through political cartoons. Cartoonists such as John Miller Baer used stock characters to convey their messages, and their cartoons’ effectiveness depended upon those characters’ identities being immediately recognizable. Baer illustrated a newspaper for a radical farmers’ organization, The Nonpartisan League, and although it has fallen from the collective memory of Americans, it was prominent during Wood’s lifetime. The League was founded in North Dakota in 1915, and its goal was to socialize flour distribution and milling. It quickly spread throughout the Midwest with chapters in nineteen U.S. states and two Canadian provinces. The League endorsed political candidates who adhered to its goals regardless of party affiliation. Baer himself was one such candidate elected to the U.S. House of Representatives because of League endorsement, and he is notable as the only professional cartoonist to have ever served in the U.S. Congress. One of his cartoons has even been credited with coining Franklin D. Roosevelt’s phrase “The New Deal” in 1931. Wood would have been aware of the League because it was discussed in the national media, and his personal friend Sinclair Lewis was a prominent League supporter. Indeed, Lewis scattered references to the League throughout his Nobel Prize winning novel *Main Street* from 1920, and Wood illustrated a special edition of the book sixteen years later. One of these illustrations is of a Nonpartisan League sympathizer—*The Radical*.⁷

If we look at Baer’s cartoons it is apparent that both farmers and businessmen were conventionally represented in clothing that referenced their identities. Small farmers

Dakota Institute for Regional Studies, 1964). For information on the northwestern states, especially Washington and Oregon, see the trade book by Kirby Brumfield, *This Was Wheat Farming: A Pictorial History of the Farms and Farmers of the Northwest Who Grow the Nation’s Bread* (Seattle: Superior Publishing, 1968). Insightful primary accounts of the bonanzas are by John Lee Coulter, “Industrial History of the Valley of the Red River of the North,” *Collections of the State Historical Society of North Dakota* 3 (1910): 529-672; White, “Business of a Wheat Farm,” 531-48; Poultney Bigelow, “The Bonanza Farms of the West,” *The Atlantic Monthly* 24, no. 267 (January 1880): 23-44.

⁶ On the beliefs of small townspeople about harvest workers, as well as facts about the transportation of these people, see Toby Higbie,

“Indispensable Outcasts: Harvest Laborers in the Wheat Belt of the Middle West, 1890-1925,” *Labor History* 38, no. 4 (1997): 399-401, 404-06. Quotes are from Higbie, whose original sources are William M. Duffus, “Labor Market Conditions in the Harvest Fields of the Middle West,” in *Report to the U.S. Commission on Industrial Relations, Record Group 174, U.S. National Archives, Washington D.C.* (December 1, 1914), 7; “Sins of the City,” *Webster (South Dakota) Reporter and Farmer as reprinted in Aberdeen (South Dakota) Daily News* August 1, 1913, 2.

⁷ The definitive history of the Nonpartisan League is Robert L. Morlan, *Political Prairie Fire: The Nonpartisan League 1915-1922* (1955; repr., St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1985). The career of John

were often presumed to represent or negotiate a “traditional” lifestyle in opposition to the interests of the businessmen who owned, managed, or financed bonanza operations. Small farmers wore bib overalls, while businessmen wore suits. In a portrait from 1916 Baer is shown surrounded by his characters—including a small farmer on the left and a businessman on the right (Figure 4). Similarly, a cartoon from 1916 shows a farmer in overalls placing one arm around a suit-wearing businessman and the other arm around a laborer in a long tunic (Figure 5). Still another from that year shows a farmer in his undergarments trying to fill the suit pants of an overweight businessman while his overalls lie on the floor (Figure 6). While a few of these images from the agricultural press are sympathetic towards good businessmen, the majority demonstrate animosity.⁸

Conflation of clothing is one of the reasons why *American Gothic* became controversial, and why it has been read in two major ways. The man in *American Gothic* is wearing a business shirt without the collar, under farmer’s overalls, beneath a business jacket. By combining the wardrobes of these two types of men, Wood cleverly causes us to ponder the differences in identity between businessmen and small farmers, and he evokes the social issues described above. Wood is able to lightly mock the two people portrayed—who are shown absurdly rigid, the woman wearing out-of-date rickrack and the man a similarly out-of-date collarless shirt—while at the same time he makes his mockery ambiguous. Farmers can prefer to think that Wood is scoffing at businessmen and vice versa: this is precisely how the painting seems to have been interpreted. When it was published under the erroneous title *Iowa Farmer and His Wife* Wood was harshly criticized by farmfolk, some of whom went so far as to threaten violence. Recalling the reaction of farm wives, for example, he noted that “One of them actually threatened over the telephone ‘to come over and smash my head.’” When he claimed that he meant the painting to be a townspeople, Wood noted that farmers liked it very much. Apparently, they were quick to reframe it in terms

of conflict with large business, as made familiar through cartoons and novels.⁹

Wood himself nudged viewers in each of these directions by first suggesting that the man is a farmer and later suggesting a businessman. In 1933 he noted that “the cottage was to be a farmer’s home.” Later, in 1941, he wrote to an Iowa woman that

“The persons in the painting, as I imagined them, are small-town folks, rather than farmers. Papa runs the local bank or perhaps the lumberyard. . . . In the evening, he comes home from work, takes off his collar, slips on overalls and an old coat, and goes to the barn to hay the cow.”¹⁰

These two ways of reading the image are believable. After all, farmers often wore worn-out clothing to do chores—including discarded Sunday suits. Conversely, townsfolk who kept a cow and a few chickens in their backyards could plausibly don overalls.

A further layer of meaning can be added to our understanding if we consider the legacy of *American Gothic*. Specifically, the farmer in business clothing became a metaphor for both the food system as a whole and that system’s analysis. This understanding was also prefigured by cartoons. To John Baer, for example, the man in a business suit was often also an allegory for the exploitations of the “grain combine”—meaning the elevator, auction house, and miller—reaping huge profits through collusive deception. In one cartoon the businessman is shown grading poor quality “D” grade wheat into high quality “A No. 1” for his own benefit (Figure 7). Such criticisms of the entire food system originated in the nineteenth century with the Populists, but they were not intellectually codified until the mid-twentieth century by economists.¹¹

An early scholar to study the League, Ray Goldberg, was the Harvard economist who coined the term “agribusiness.” For Goldberg, agribusiness refers to a concept that takes every stage of the food system into account, which is how he

Miller Baer merits more scrutiny, but information can be gleaned from several sources: “John Miller Baer,” in *State of North Dakota Legislative Manual*, ed. Thomas Hall (Bismarck: Bismarck Tribune Company for the State Printers and Binders, 1919), 556; “Baer, John Miller,” in *Bio-graphical Directory of the American Congress 1774-1971* (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1971), 538; Bill G. Reid, “John Miller Baer: Nonpartisan League Cartoonist and Congressman,” *North Dakota History* 44, no. 1 (1977): 4-13. On the origins of “The New Deal” slogan, see Baer’s obituary by David Vienna, “Cartoonist John Baer, 83, Dies, Coined FDR’s ‘New Deal’ Slogan,” *The Washington Post*, February 25, 1970, B8. Wood’s illustrations were for Sinclair Lewis, *Main Street*, Special ed. (1920; repr., New York: Limited Editions Club, 1937). *The Radical* has never been interpreted in terms of the Nonpartisan League. Nonetheless the illustrations as a whole have been studied twice: Lea Rosson DeLong, *Grant Wood’s Main Street: Art, Literature and the American Midwest* (Ames: Exhibition catalog from the Brunner Art Museum at Iowa State University, 2004), David Crowe, “Illustration as Interpretation: Grant Wood’s ‘New Deal’ Reading of Sinclair Lewis’s *Main Street*,” in *Sinclair Lewis at 100: Papers*

Presented at a Centennial Conference, ed. Michael Connaughton (St. Cloud, MN: St. Cloud State University, 1985), 95-111.

⁸ Cartoons by Baer published in *The Nonpartisan Leader* on August 31, 1916, page 18; September 7, 1916, page 13; and June 15, 1916, page 13.

⁹ Wood quoted in Hoving, *American Gothic*, 65.

¹⁰ First quote is in Biel, *American Gothic*, 49. Second is in Corn, *Grant Wood*, 42. See also Hoving, *American Gothic*, 97-98. On the class-based history of suits in the nineteenth century, including farmers who wore them in the fields, see Diana Crane, *Fashion and Its Social Agendas: Class, Gender, and Identity in Clothing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 26-67.

¹¹ Cartoon published in *The Nonpartisan Leader* on December 21, 1916, page 3.

along with John Davis examined the farm economy in 1957. They traced money from seed house to farmer to auction house to miller to grocery store to consumer. Concurrently, Davis worked with a journalist to popularize their ideas, and the result was the best-selling *Farmer in a Business Suit*—that evokes *American Gothic* in a literal way. When considered in the light of Goldberg's and Davis's ideas, *American Gothic* takes on a new meaning that Wood never intended. Given that *American Gothic* was the most well-known painting of rural America at the time, it is probable that the title is derived from Wood's work. Indeed, it makes the image a *double entendre* in which viewers can interpret the man as either "a farmer in a business suit" or a businessman in a farmer suit—along with the newfound conceptual baggage.¹²

In light of the fact that Wood's paintings quickly became some of the most recognizable and celebrated art of the

twentieth and twenty-first centuries, their relevance lives on. To the extent that art historians contextualize fine arts by means of the logic of the era in which objects were created, examining the intellectual history of farming is a necessary road to understanding Wood's work. As scholars of art have increasingly recognized, the significance of objects continues to speak to successive generations. Americans continue to view images of farming from the 1930s and in the current era to search for an ethical, profitable, and sustainable food system. Thus, the concerns that Wood struggled to come to terms with in *Dinner for Threshers* and *American Gothic* are worth pondering decades later.

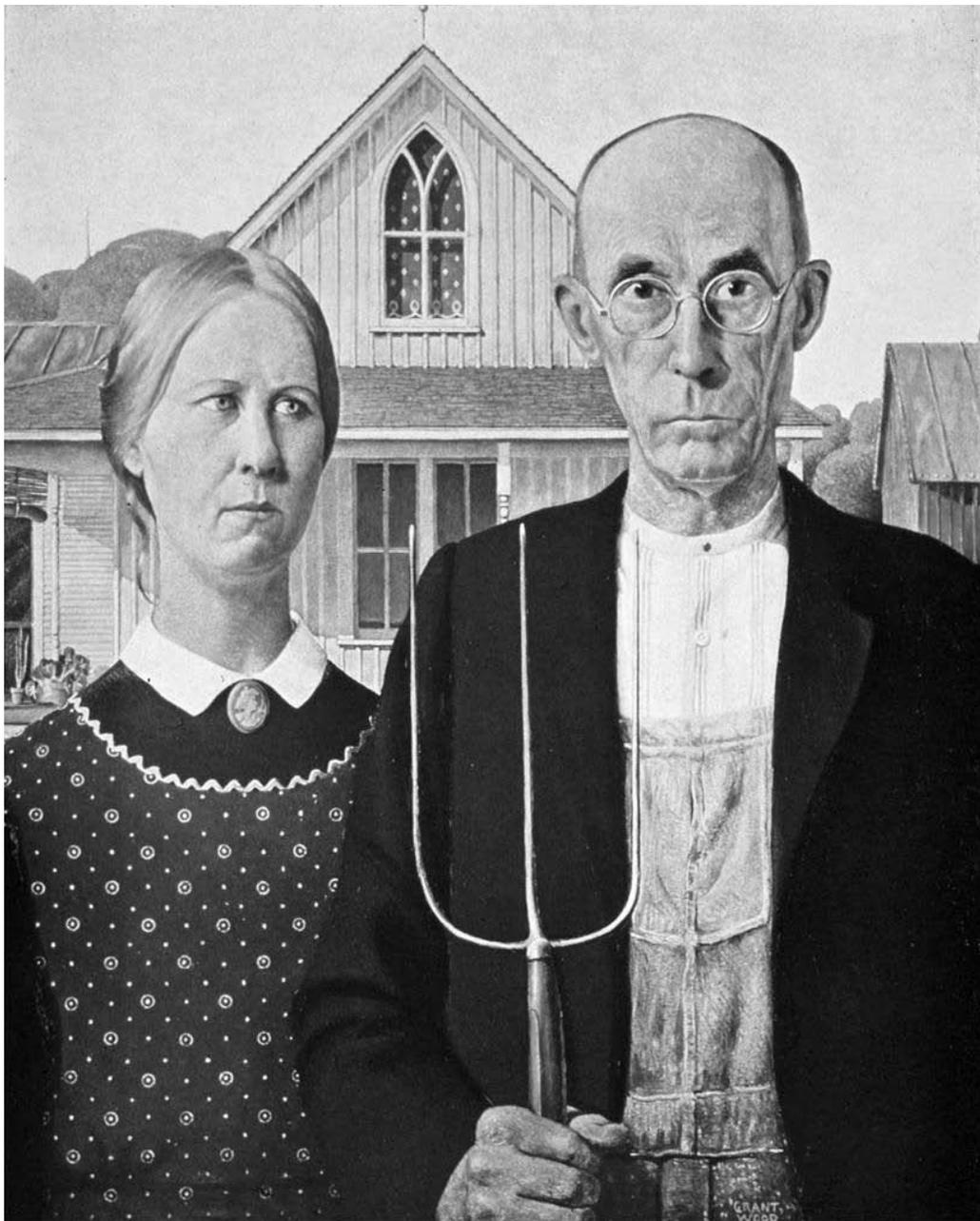
University of Pittsburgh

¹² John Davis and Kenneth Hinshaw, *Farmer in a Business Suit* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1957); John Herbert Davis and Ray Allan Goldberg, *A Concept of Agribusiness* (Boston: Graduate School of Business Administration, Harvard University, 1957); Ray Goldberg,

The Nonpartisan League in North Dakota: A Case Study of Political Action in America (Fargo: Midwest Printing and Lithographing Company, 1948).



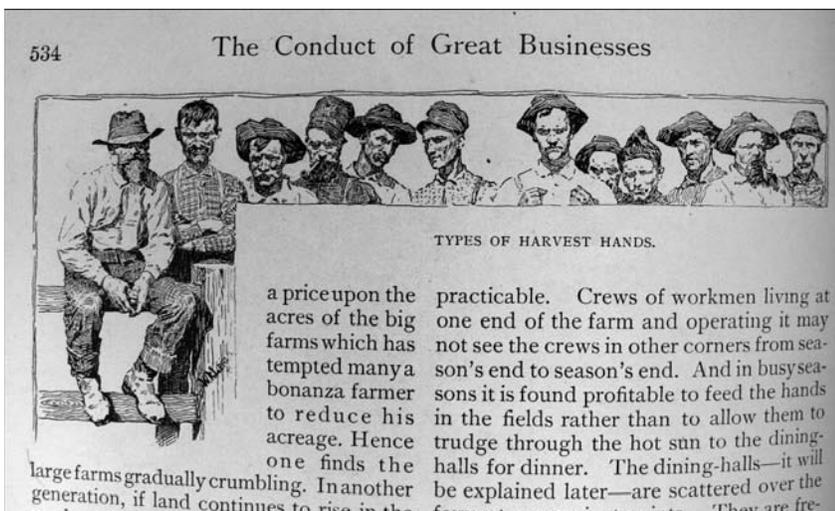
Figure 1. Grant Wood, *Dinner for Threshers*, 1934, oil on hardboard, 49.5 x 201.9 cm, Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco. Art © Estate of Grant Wood/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY.



[left] Figure 2. Grant Wood, *American Gothic*, 1930, oil on beaverboard, 74.3 x 62.4 cm, The Art Institute of Chicago. Art © Estate of Grant Wood/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY.

[bottom left] Figure 3. William Robinson Leigh, *Types of Harvest Hands*, published by Scribner's in November 1897. Image is in the public domain.

[bottom right] Figure 4. John Miller Baer, cartoon from *The Nonpartisan Leader*, published August 31, 1916, page 18. Image is in the public domain.



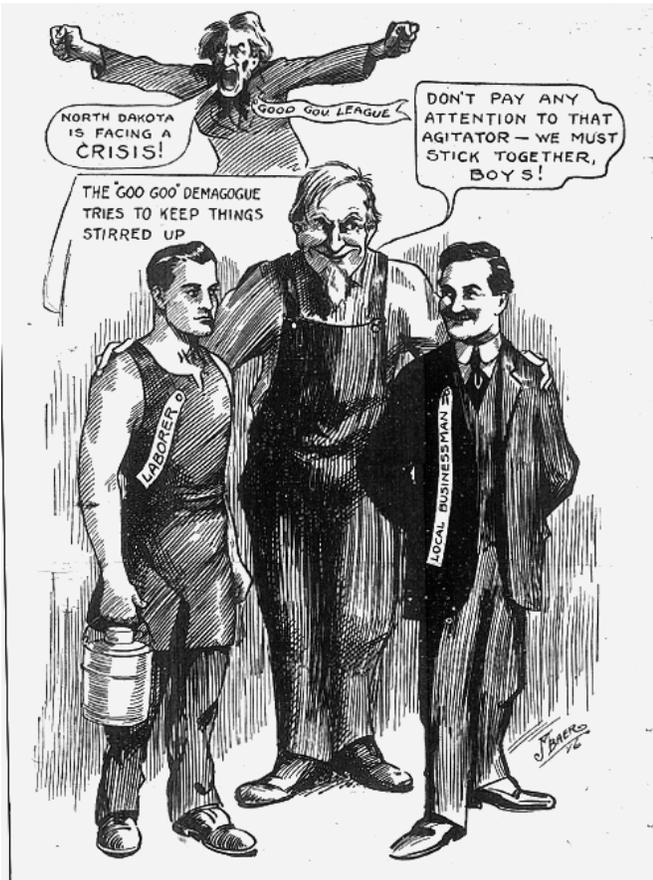


Figure 5. John Miller Baer, cartoon for *The Nonpartisan Leader*, published September 7, 1916. Image is in the public domain.

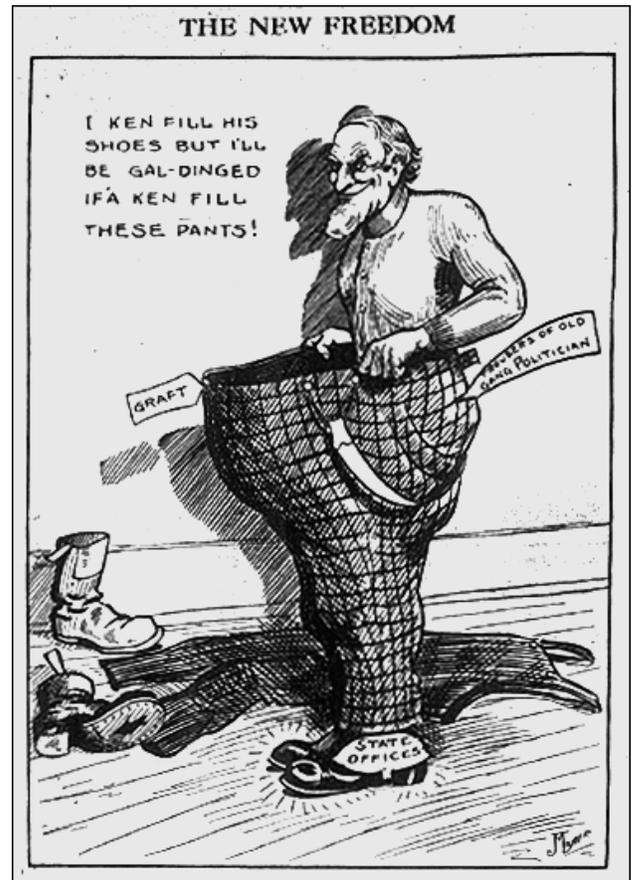


Figure 6. John Miller Baer, cartoon for *The Nonpartisan Leader*, published June 15, 1916. Image is in the public domain.

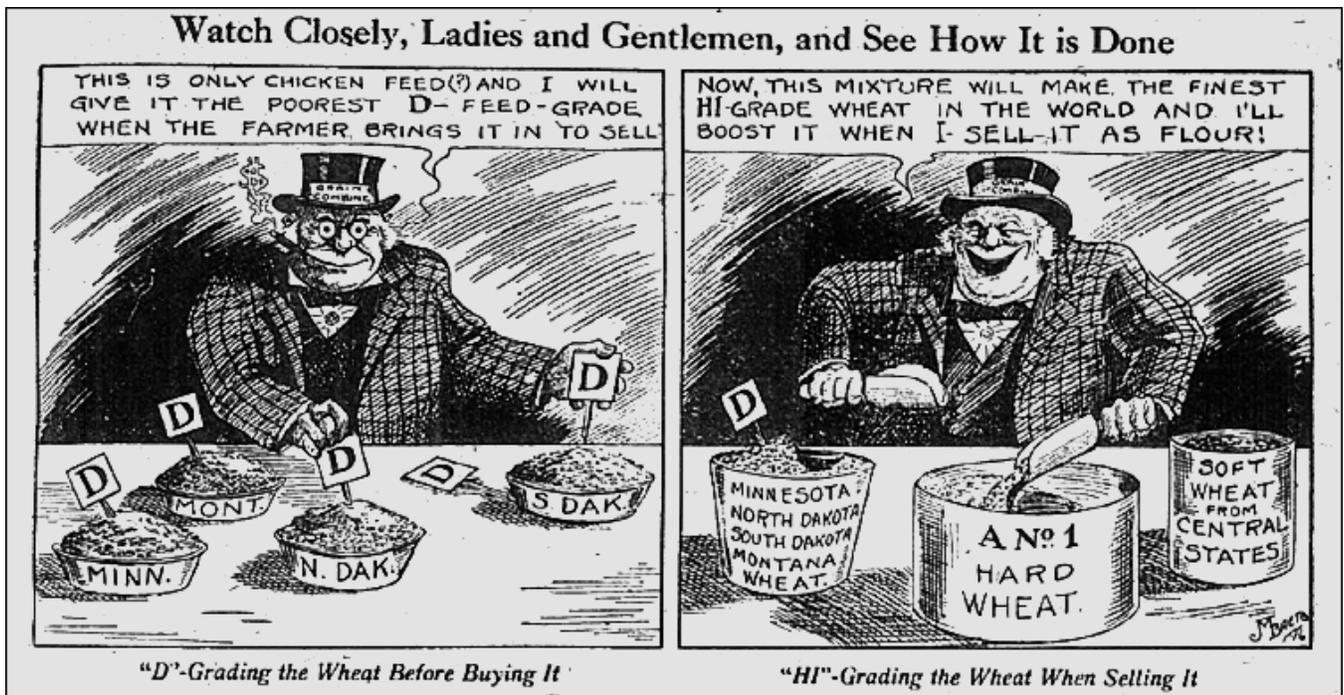


Figure 7. John Miller Baer, cartoon for *The Nonpartisan Leader*, published December 21, 1916. Image is in the public domain.

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