

THE FARMER IS STILL AN INDIVIDUALIST

In Voting for Crop Control, However, He Showed That He Is Not Afraid to Renounce Excessive Individualism

By HARLAN MILLER
 DES MOINES.

TO the subtle mind simplicity is a confusing thing, overlaid with paradox. And so it is paradoxical when the farmer of the American Midwest, that sturdiest of individualists, ratifies by the convincing ratio of two-to-one the continuation for the next year of the indubitable regimentation of Washington's crop-control system. Though his motives flow from the deepest pools of simple logic, they are veiled to many who see in the Autumn plebiscite the inception of departure from his historic psychology.

Has his untrammelled independence buckled under the caresses and bounties of paternalism? Or is he merely yielding a point, for the sake of experiment, in an era of flux, without conceding an iota in principle?

Palpably, the Midwest farmer has not changed overnight from a self-reliant, lone campaigner against nature and economics into the docile end-product of bureaucracy. Such men do not succumb so easily to the synthesis of legislative control; nor does the certainty of a paltry bounty suddenly tempt them to forego the more generous rewards of adventurous agriculture.

Far less a free individualist than the American was the Russian farmer, and yet even he has combated with a stubborn elusiveness the infinitely more rigorous regimentation by the present régime at Moscow. Actually, the farmer everywhere, with local variations, has long been accustomed to the most complete command of his own operations. On his acres he is incomparably freer from outside control and even customer influence than the most independent business man.

For every stiff-necked industrialist who bristles at external control of his domain there are a thousand farmers who bristle indignantly at each threat of supervision. In agriculture, they deeply believe, there is no "super" vision from afar equal to the skill and foresight of the man on the land.

THE farmer is not immune from the influence of his current environment, however. The prevalent philosophy of pervasive government in vogue at the Washington bureaus has affected him at least as intimately as it has disturbed any other powerful bloc of Americans. Were it to continue operative for several decades it might conceivably alter the psychology of the next generation.

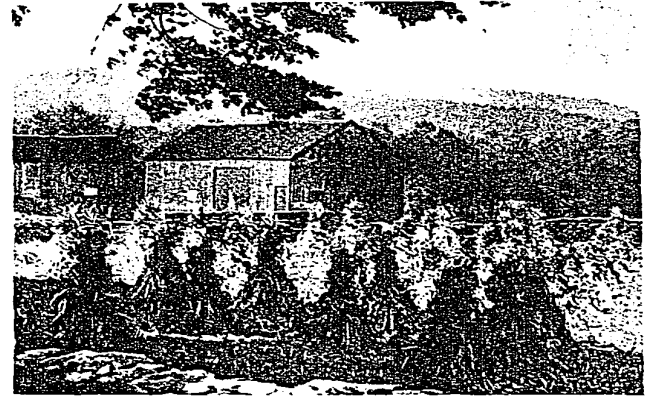
But the crop-control machinery has been in motion too briefly, the farmers' ratification of a 1935 program is too qualified by differences of opinion even in adjacent States and by collateral criticism and exceptions to permit the success of the Wallace plebiscite to be interpreted as a retreat from individual-

ism on the prairies. The explanations, which are complex and interdependent, must be sought elsewhere.

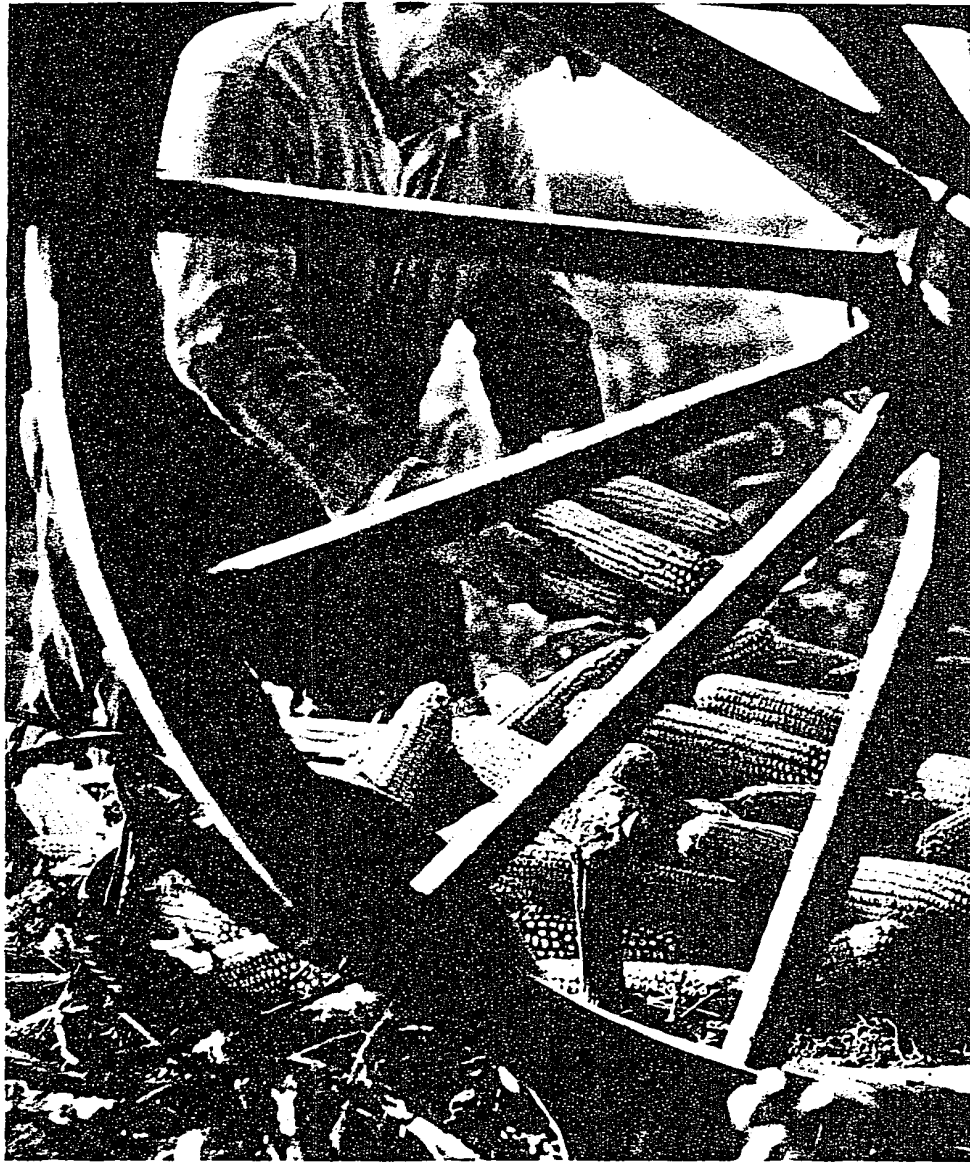
First of all, the word "regimentation" is by no means a fighting word on the prairies, whether accompanied by a smile or a growl. Most farmers know that it is regimentation when they have to line up for supper with trays at a cafeteria or at a church social. They are even more familiar with regimentation at planting time, when they distribute their seeds in straight lines like regiments on parade, so that they will grow better. So, though the verb and the

noun have been tossed back and forth by New Deal opponents as political oaths and epithets, they have not been notably successful in slogans stirring the farmer's emotions. It is difficult to convince a farmer that he surrenders his rugged individualism when he stands in line at a church supper, tray in hand.

Quite the contrary: In some ways the advance scouts of regimentation have actually operated to fortify and flatter the farmer in his rôle as an individualist. Beneath his more or less taciturn mask he is a sociable soul; he is far from displeased when a random caller



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the farmers' gain? he asks himself. It is fairly apparent that the greater the distance from the farm, the hotter and more vocal is the indignation against regimentation of the farmers.

Only a small minority of farmers, in fact, seem to be aware of the greatest shame of all that Washington has put upon them: The attempt to check up on whether Farmer Jones really had seventy pigs and forty acres in corn last year, as he says in his application for the bounty for reducing his pigs and his corn. A farmer who, like the vast majority, reports truthfully the size of his past operations has nothing to fear. The occasional untruthful farmer probably expects that his figures will be investigated.

Where the signatory farmers of a county obviously reported a total of pigs and corn for 1933 greater than the county contained that year, there has obviously been need for investigation, with the resultant delay in the issuance of the bounty checks. But the resentment of the honest farmers has been aimed as much at their grasping neighbors as at the government; it is more often the untruthful farmer who has raised a hullabaloo about investigation and delay. So far there has been little complaint from any quarter against payment of smaller bounties than the farmers felt they deserved under their contracts.

THE farmers' spoor in the march from individualism to regimentation becomes more perplexing than ever when the observer contemplates how differently the adjacent States in the corn and hog region seem to feel about crop control. Kansas was substantially against a control plan for 1935; in Nebraska there was a slim margin in favor; Iowa was overwhelmingly in favor, and in Illinois the pro-control sentiment was so strong that the Republicans not only took care to go on record in favor of control but even chided the Democrats for not speeding it up and expanding it.

Can it be that the farmers of Kansas are more ruggedly individual than those of Nebraska, and those of Nebraska more individualist than the Iowans? Can it be that the further east you go toward the habitats of the most rugged individuals of all, the farmer becomes more and more a devotee of regimentation? Palpably this is not the explanation; the fact that Kansas has remained anti-administration is a more likely reason for her anti-AAA vote. Illinois is as individualist as Kansas, but it happens to have gone Democratic, and the Republicans are trying to win it back.

The wetness of Illinois and the dryness of Kansas, too, probably had more to do with their stand on crop control than either individualism or regimentation. A dry will vote against a wet administration on anything—even if it has been paying him a bounty.

An earnest scrutiny reveals no

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dispels for a moment the loneliness of his acres. Once he was anonymous and unsung, a remote nonentity who poured his dribble of corn and hogs into the stream of commerce, helter-skelter and willy-nilly, and was never heard of again. Now agents direct from Washington come to confer with him; his humble activities take their place in the causation of national and world affairs; his opinion is listened to; he fills out long and important questionnaires; he appears before local committees and even serves on them; and every one of his pigs acquires a certain importance in the scheme of things. That may be regimentation, but it tastes good.

Of course, it is irksome when the checks for the unborn pigs and the unsown corn are late in arriving; and this annoyance has doubtless

been responsible for not a few of the votes cast against an Agricultural Adjustment Plan for 1935. Other farmers voted "No!" because they didn't like the agent's accent, or the sort of necktie he wore, or because they didn't like to be bothered with questionnaires, or because they thought the whole plan was a lot of nonsense. There are, of course, quite a few Republicans left in the northern half of the Mississippi Valley.

However, the very fury of the assault on the Wallace plans has made the farmer suspicious of the more feverish anti-AAA forensics. Such ardor, he feels, must be prompted as much by the warmth of self-interest as by cold, logical disinterestedness. The cries sound to him like the shrieks of some one whose ox has been gored. Can they be the cries of those whose loss is

THE FARMER HAS REMAINED AN INDIVIDUALIST

In Voting for the Government Crop-Control Plan, However, He Has Shown He Is Not Afraid to Renounce Excessive Individualism

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measurable change in the freedom of the farmer under the Wallace philosophy of crop control, unless it is noteworthy that he seems to have a little more spending money. He still has complete freedom to plant anything he likes, and as much of it as he wishes.

True, he is infinitely more sanguine than he was in 1933. He is easier in his mind about his debts and taxes; his corn and hogs are bringing substantially higher prices; he has in many cases been able to buy a new car and to re-equip partly his home and his family; he is able to go to the movies occasionally. College for his children seems more feasible than it did a year ago. All of these things he is apt, even in his more rebellious or questioning moments, to attribute largely to the same philosophy of government which invoked the crop-control system; corn loans, debt moratoria, tax readjustment, mortgage refinancing, potential tariff readjustment, extension of foreign markets are all pieces in the same quilt with crop-control payments.

Still, the crop-control payments have averaged only about \$90 for each farmer. His really substantial advantage has come through the augmentation in value of the 1933 corn he was able to store because of the 45-cents-a-bushel corn loans and then sell at the 1934 prices, and through the advance in prices which resulted from the drought and crop reduction. These he is inclined to regard partly as experimental phases of the program. For his permanent restoration to a parity of purchasing power he is increasingly inclined to rely, *first*, on restoration of a strong domestic demand for his crops through re-employment; *second*, on readjustment of tariffs to give him a parity of price with manufactured commodities; and *third*, on re-establishment of the foreign markets.

Throughout the experimental year he has, with his genius for keeping a grasp on fundamentals, swung back to the belief that a free expanded market alone offers him lasting salvation. That is why he ratified crop-control for 1935 by a 2-to-1 vote, but gave only a microscopic plurality for the 1936 AAA program. He is reluctant to commit himself too far into the future.

THUS what may seem to be a swing toward regimentation when viewed from afar appears to the farmer to be merely an experimental interlude. To him the primary fact that Washington has felt it vital to ascertain the agricultural temper through a poll is in itself ample proof that he is still in complete control of the situation.

A goodly share of the negative vote in the poll was probably due to the ceaseless efforts of such groups as the Farmers Holiday Association toward a more radical swing in the direction of price-fixing. Viewed in this light, the present struggle is not so much one between rugged individualism and the moderate innovations of Secretary Wallace as it is a struggle between his crop-control devices and the more extreme alternative of fixed prices.

Another element in the negative vote was undoubtedly the influence of the livestock commission men and the stockyards interests, who have been the most effective leaders in the campaign against the whole AAA program and most particularly the processing fees, which they deem inimical to themselves.

Because this interplay of forces and interests occurred in the midst of a heated mid-term political campaign, it is difficult to explain it entirely as a psychological metamorphosis in the mind of the farmer, or as a phenomenon di-

vorced from partisan politics. Thousands of farmers who were lifelong Republicans until they deserted to the New Deal two years ago because of repeated legislative disappointments have been deeply swayed by the desperate assaults against the New Deal policies.

FUNDAMENTALLY, the farm poll in favor of crop regulation was less an endorsement of regulation by Washington than it was another revelation that self-interest is still the dominant factor in any poll. The corn and hog farmers voted the dictates of their pocketbooks. Corn is bringing 75 cents a bushel instead of 30, hogs bring \$1.50 a hundred pounds more than they did a year ago. These are stimuli apt to influence the farmer more than such abstract considerations as individualism and regimentation, especially when he feels that he can maintain a rather firm grasp on his individualism.

It would be hazardous, therefore,

to interpret the 2-to-1 vote for the Wallace plan for 1935 as a retreat from individualism. Rather it serves notice that the farmer is willing to relinquish some of the outward semblance of autonomy for the sake of cooperation with his neighbors, and for the sake of bettering himself economically through certain adjustments in his farming operations.

He still believes that the world will ultimately return to the habit of eating all the food he can produce; he has a quiet conviction that he can even compete successfully with the other food-exporting countries in the world markets, if he gets an even break; but for the moment he knows, above all else, on which side his bread is buttered. He is still the arch-individualist; but he has demonstrated that he can renounce the excessive individualism which resulted in intermittent overproduction—until the majority of these individualists were paid to see the light.