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Courtesy, Ronald K. Hansen.

Preface

The present-day traveler on Interstate 25 from Wellington north of Fort Collins to Castle Rock south of Denver may catch glimpses of an occasional wheat field or cornfield but would see none of the market farms that once filled the valleys of the South Platte River and its tributaries flowing out of the Front Range. During the early 1900s, agriculture ranked first among sectors that made up Colorado's economy. Today, agriculture accounts for less than 1 percent of Colorado's gross state product, with livestock and livestock-related crops making up three-fourths of that 1 percent. Hidden by these statistics, however, is a story that features a little-known association of agriculturists committed to the well-being of family farmers and, through various forms of cooperatives and cooperation, poised to lead a renaissance of sustainable agriculture in the Rocky Mountain region.

As someone old enough to recall the cherry orchards west of Loveland and with a lifelong, if somewhat sentimental, fascination with farming combined with an interest in rural communities that is both historical and participatory, I found myself one day in the agricultural archives at Colorado State

University in Fort Collins searching for either an individual or an organization that could serve as a topic for a history that encompassed my interests. To my pleasant surprise, the archives had recently received the records of the Rocky Mountain Farmers Union (RMFU) and, what's more, they had been well catalogued.

Little has been written about the history of agriculture in the region since Alvin T. Steinel, an extension specialist, wrote a *History of Agriculture in Colorado* (1926) to commemorate the state's fiftieth anniversary. Robert G. Dunbar, while a history professor at Colorado State, contributed a fine essay on Colorado agriculture to Leroy Hafen's *Colorado and Its People* (1948). Longtime *Colorado Union Farmer* editor George L. Bickel wrote an idealized history of the RMFU (1978); and Charles Henry Livermore prepared a first-rate dissertation (1976) on James G. Patton, preeminent leader of the National Farmers Union, that included discussion of his formative years in Colorado. The present work takes a holistic view of the RMFU, focusing on agriculture and rural life within the context of ever-increasing urbanization.

As an admirer of Theodore Roosevelt, I have found it heartening to follow the successive stages of progressivism exhibited by leaders of the Rocky Mountain Farmers Union. Starting as a populist protest movement against land speculators, wholesalers, and monopolists—in sum, the vices of modernization—it has become, not unselfishly, an advocate for sustainable agriculture and renewable energy, all the while not neglecting its founders' ideological commitment to economic and social equity for all.

The religious and political eccentrics who started the farmers union in Colorado believed that family farmers, industrial workers, and urban laborers felt dispossessed; that was at the time when the US Census Bureau first counted more Coloradoans living in urban than in rural areas (chapter 1). An ideology that favored direct democracy, combined with the reality of vast geographic distances and the state's diverse topography, constrained the farmers union to begin as a confederation of union locals, each serving social as well as economic functions. The statewide organization sought to provide supportive services such as fire insurance, assistance with organizing cooperatives, and political advocacy on behalf of members (chapter 2).

Without question, Jim Patton was the preeminent farmers union leader, viewed as hero and mentor by his successors at both the state and the national level. As president of the Colorado Farmers Union and later as president of

the National Farmers Union, he put the entire organization on solid financial footing, based on fees for providing insurance services to members, and he aligned the organization's platform with the cause of social democracy. Imbued with utopian ideology, he envisioned the farmers union as providing economic security for its members through cooperative enterprises. As an organizer and a pragmatist and in view of agriculture's shrinking share of the nation's wealth, he saw that the vitality, indeed, the very survival of the family farm depended first and foremost on the understanding and support of consumers—that is, the broader electorate (chapter 3). Patton attracted to the Colorado Farmers Union two experienced farmers union operatives, Harvey Solberg and C. E. Huff, to take on the tasks of increasing membership, strengthening member services, and further financial stability for the organization. Their most ambitious business enterprise, the Farmers Union Marketing Association, meant to give members greater control over the marketing and processing of their raw products, thus a greater share of the food dollar. The fact that all those ventures—most notably, a large grain elevator and feed mill facility, a fruit and vegetable cannery, and a flour mill—eventually failed should not detract from their noble intent, the potential value of their efforts, and the lessons to be learned (chapter 4).

After a difficult interregnum, the Colorado Farmers Union, which by then had expanded to include New Mexico and Wyoming, took the name Rocky Mountain Farmers Union and elected John Stencel, its young education director, president. Stencel represented a new, more pragmatic generation of agricultural leaders. A consummate agricultural politician, Stencel valiantly sought to revitalize county chapters, union locals having withered; and he deftly led the organization during a radical farmers' revolt by supporting the radicals' goals but not their methods. In marshalling the electorate against non-farm corporate ownership of agricultural lands, Stencel built alliances with the religious denominations serving rural communities. Likewise, against the threat of unfettered development along the Front Range and around mountain communities, he developed alliances with conservation groups (chapter 5).

Following Stencel as president, Dave Carter sought to demonstrate that the organization's mission, as well as its economic and social goals, were more pertinent than ever given the continuing struggles of family farmers, the lack of universal access to healthful foods, and the pressing need

to protect soil fertility. In his view, increasing consumer demand for locally grown foods provided the key to the survival of family farming. Carter took a special interest in organic farming. To assist RMFU members in the San Luis Valley who farmed organically out of financial necessity, Carter and the RMFU invested substantial effort in helping to establish Ranchers' Choice as a so-called new generation farmers' cooperative, processing and marketing lean, organically grown kosher beef. Similarly, the RMFU helped create the Mountain View Harvest Cooperative to enable wheat farmers on the eastern High Plains to partake of the profits of post-harvest processing by purchasing a commercial bakery, which grew rapidly into a nationwide supplier of par-baked breads. Under Carter's leadership, the RMFU attracted the Cooperative Development Center, funded by the US Department of Agriculture, to extend the cooperative model to the revitalization of rural communities, to help with the revival of low-income urban neighborhoods, and—perhaps most important—to assist a new generation of agricultural activists, regardless of whether they were farmers union members, in organizing themselves for economic success (chapter 6).

While the Rocky Mountain Farmers Union as parent organization has continued its lobbying activities in favor of progressive legislation, the Cooperative Development Center has launched two new initiatives: the first to support efforts to grow food locally to augment the income of diversified farmers and the second to support renewable energy projects that provide supplemental income to commodity producers. By connecting to the local foods movement, the RMFU has positioned itself as the leading farm organization advocating for sustainable agriculture, bringing producers and consumers closer together, and, in the process, helping to incorporate agriculture into the urban landscape. By all accounts, the survival of family farming, and that of the RMFU itself, depends upon mid-size commodity producers diversifying their operations and shifting to more sustainable agricultural techniques and on small to mid-size vegetable and fruit growers, as well as specialty livestock and poultry producers, to meet the burgeoning consumer demand for safe, healthful foods (chapter 7).

At the outset of our story, a word about the term *family farm*: almost everyone favors it, laments its decline, and admits that the times have passed it by. But as we shall discern, aspiring young farmers and associates of the RMFU Cooperative Development Center will tell you that sounding the death

knell is premature. For them, a family farm or ranch might be just that, or it might be a farm corporation in which the majority of stockholders belong to one family and at least one of them is managing the farm, or it might also be a group of unrelated individuals operating a small to mid-size farm. The National Farmers Union (NFU) has defined the term only generally: "A 'family farm' is an agricultural production unit using land and other capital investments, operated by one or more farm operator families who reside on the farm, provide the management, take the economic risk, and do work (peak season excepted) required to operate the unit" (NFU National Rural Policy, art.1-a). The Census Bureau and the US Department of Agriculture have sought objectivity by distinguishing farms according to physical size, gross farm sales, and gross cash farm income. But such data are useful only when considered in context. A 12,000-acre wheat farm operated by a single family on the eastern High Plains may provide more or less income than a 25-acre diversified farm in Boulder County or a livestock operation dependent upon public lands on the Western Slope. Some even use the term *family farm* to describe a lifestyle. For our purposes, *family farm* is used interchangeably with terms such as *small farm*, *small-scale farm*, even *mid-size farm*. It is becoming more and more widely recognized that the well-managed family farm serves as *the* model for sustainable agriculture.

We urbanites who view ourselves as food connoisseurs, foodies for short, much prefer organically to conventionally grown products and harbor a fundamental misperception that has affected public debate and could impede the very transformation of farming we all hope for. We equate organic farming with sustainable agriculture. In fact, the two are not interchangeable. To be called organic, a farm must be certified according to regulations approved by the US Department of Agriculture that are based on criteria set forth in federal legislation. Sustainable agriculture describes an approach that, though measurable, carries no certifiable label; like the family farm, it, too, can be described as a lifestyle. Organic farming can be a form of sustainable agriculture, but not all sustainable agriculture is organic. Some large industrial farms grow produce organically but not in a sustainable way; many small farms operate so as to sustain soil fertility but are not certified as organic.

At one time, all farming was organic. As the nation's population grew and the world wars caused an ever-greater demand for foods, policy makers enacted laws that encouraged farmers to produce more while keeping prices

low for consumers. It was not until the postwar years that the public began to understand the consequences of ensuring maximum yields over sustaining the elements—soil, air, water—that made those yields possible. Much to its credit, RMFU leadership intuited that the economic and social well-being of its members, small to mid-size farmers, depended upon sustainable farming. Less is generally more sustainable than more, which strongly suggests that family farmers indeed are the best stewards of the soil and thus the most cost-efficient producers of the nation's food over the long term.

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