

David Blanke, *Sowing the American Dream: How Consumer Culture Took Root in the Rural Midwest* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2000).

The burgeoning literature on the history of consumption in America has for the most part concentrated on the experiences of city dwellers. In the city, many have argued, the new professional middle class resided, with their taste for mass-produced goods and mass-market magazines. In the city, new forms of media and new institutions like the advertising agency and department store were located. In the city, the culture of consumption first found its fullest expression and soon radiated out to encompass the rest of the nation. For example, Richard Wightman Fox and T.J. Jackson Lears noted in the introduction to their influential 1983 collection of essays on the topic, the study of consumer culture “should begin by concentrating on the activities of urban elites.”¹ David Blanke’s *Sowing the American Dream: How Consumer Culture Took Root in the Rural Midwest* convincingly challenges this assumption by examining the participation of Midwestern commercial farmers in the consumer marketplace from 1865 to 1930. He argues that farmers fully participated in the evolving modern consumer culture, and articulated a collective consumer ethos based on their own experiences as both producers for the marketplace and purchasers of consumer wares.

Blanke traces the ideological development of the Grange movement, noting the inherent tensions in a movement which posited collective solutions to the problems of independent agrarian capitalists. Farmers were informed consumers: agricultural journals and fairs ensured that rural customers were aware of the latest developments in farm machinery or domestic items. The problem, as many rural Midwesterners identified it, was that the existing distribution system was not responsive to their needs. The Grange hoped to tip the balance of power back into the rural customer’s favour through the use of strategies like cooperative stores and collective purchasing. At first, this fusion of “market and moral economies, of individual savings and communal ethics,” attracted thousands of farmers to the organization (117). Ultimately, however, the organization was unable to overcome both internal divisions and strong opposition from town merchants. Blanke’s depiction of this story is tinged with a sense of loss. For one brief moment, rural consumers managed to take an active role in shaping their participation in the market. Eventually, but not inevitably, he argues, rural consumers lost their sense of collective purpose and succumbed to the lure of individualistic materialism.

Sowing the American Dream will be of interest to scholars in a diverse group of fields. Business historians will find his nuanced analysis of the changing role of middlemen in rural distribution illuminative; scholars of rural history will appreciate his careful use of the voices of farmers themselves, found in the correspondence and diaries of farm men and women. Perhaps of particular interest

to those interested in advertising history is a chapter comparing advertising in small town and large city newspapers to explore the changing relationship between suppliers of consumer goods and their rural customers. Blanke analyzes over four thousand ads from selected newspapers to map the types of businesses which used newspapers to advertise as well as the possible consumers they hoped to reach.

More broadly, Blanke's work touches on a number of larger themes in American culture and demolishes old stereotypes about farmers as insular, backward-looking and reactionary. Midwestern farmers had a strong belief in community, but they were canny capitalists, not romantic yeomen farmers. Blanke demonstrates that in many ways Midwestern farmers grappled with the problems of "modern" consumerism years, if not decades, earlier than scholars of either urban shoppers or Populists have indicated. His work complicates the model of cultural diffusion in which ideas move swiftly from city to countryside, and rightly suggests that attention must be paid to regional variations in American consumer behaviour.

Sarah Elvins
University of Manitoba

¹ Richard Wightman Fox and T.J. Jackson Lears, eds., *The Culture of Consumption: Critical Essays in American History, 1880-1940* (New York, 1983), xi.

Kathleen Kennedy, *Disloyal Mothers and Scurrilous Citizens: Women and Subversion During World War I* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999).

In director William Wellman's classic western, *The Ox-Bow Incident* (1942), a posse, enraged over the reported murder of a local rancher, seizes and hangs three cowboys without benefit of a trial. Satisfied with their "justice," the returning posse encounters the local sheriff, who brusquely informs them that the rancher remains alive, if seriously wounded, and that he has captured the persons responsible for the shooting. Slinking away to the town saloon, the shame-faced posse members listen to the character played by Henry Fonda read from a letter scribbled hastily by one of the mob's victims.¹

While the film, made in the midst of World War II, does not discuss the issue of dissent during wartime, it does touch upon the all-too-ready capacity of a majority to tread upon minority rights. The question of whether a democracy can fight in a major war without stifling the right of dissent has been controversial in