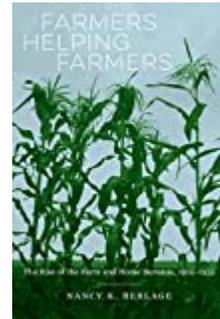


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Nancy K. Berlage. *Farmers Helping Farmers: The Rise of the Farm and Home Bureaus, 1914-1935.* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2016. 320 pp. \$48.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8071-6330-6.



Reviewed by Christopher Clark (University of Connecticut)

Published on H-Environment (April, 2017)

Commissioned by David T. Benac (Western Michigan University)

Recent literature on late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American agriculture and rural society has begun to shape a revision of some conventionally held interpretations of the period. In *The Populist Vision* (2007), Charles Postel questioned the depiction of rural social and political movements as backward looking or marginal, suggesting that they were part of the period's broader progressive upsurge. Nancy K. Berlage's new book, *Farmers Helping Farmers*, picks up this theme, offering a reevaluation of the Farm and Home Bureau movement that gathered weight after the demise of Populism and tracing its development up to the onset of the Great Depression.

The Farm Bureau movement has been seen as part of an increasingly structured, national consolidation in American agriculture that accompanied capitalist development and the extension of state power between the end of the Civil War and the onset of the Great Depression. In this view, mechanization, seed hybridization, and other developments marked the period as a precursor to twentieth-century agribusiness; the US Department of Agriculture, agricultural colleges, and the extension service represented the reach of national power into farmers' lives; and the Farm Bureau movement itself formed part of an organizational synthesis in which the inter-

ests of business and of large farmers held sway. Using bureau publications, farming periodicals, and some private papers of farmers and officials, Berlage challenges this view. Focusing particularly on New York, Illinois, and Iowa as case studies, but arguing that her findings have a broad, national scope, she suggests that the Farm and Home Bureaus were actually grassroots organizations controlled by moderate farmers and tenants. They pursued activities locally and fostered local and regional variety, rather than reflecting initiatives imposed from above.

Organization building itself often proceeded from below: many Farm Bureaus grew out of local farmers' clubs or soil improvement associations. Bureau structures varied by state; in Iowa, for instance, township organizations supplemented the more usual county-level arrangements. Even the establishment of the American Farm Bureau Federation in 1919 was not evidence of a centralizing tendency so much as of a search for broader coordination across this variety of state and local organizations. Moreover, Berlage suggests, the expansion of the Farm and Home Bureau movement through the 1920s and into the Depression years represented the persistence of voluntary associational activity in reform and improvement efforts during an era where state action was still weak.

Farm Bureaus provided arenas from which local groups could call upon the assistance of state agencies and the expertise of university and extension specialists, and do so somewhat on their own terms.

An important part of Berlage's argument is the emphasis she places on gender, on the bureau's promotion of farming as a family occupation, and on the participation of women in the improvement and educational activities the movement worked to sustain. Three substantial chapters, virtually half the book, are devoted to the development of the Home Bureau movement, to the roles of women in early twentieth-century agriculture, and to the fostering of systematic knowledge and farming practices through such organizations as 4-H. Building on the perspectives of such scholars such as Grey Osterud, whose *Putting the Barn before the House: Women and Family Farming in Early Twentieth-Century New York* (2012) demonstrated how far women as well as men self-identified as "farmers," Berlage shows bureau women adjusting the conventions of "separate spheres" and using their organizations as bases for social and political participation.

The significance of Berlage's argument for environmental historians lies in several areas. Scholars have long noted the importance of soil science for evaluating farm practices, together with the precision with which farmers and specialists mapped and understood local variations in soils and underlying geology. Berlage suggests

that the presence of the Farm Bureaus and their locally rooted support made this extension of science into farming a matter of local enthusiasm and cooperation rather than an imposition of outside knowledge from above. Similarly, the Farm Bureau movement crystallized many farmers' encounters with efforts to regulate and eradicate disease. A chapter on bovine tuberculosis traces the sometimes complex or conflicting relationships between individual farmers and experts, but suggests that the bureaus served to familiarize rural people with the principles of germ theory and its implications.

Farmers Helping Farmers summarizes much that can be learned from Farm and Home Bureau publications and memoirs about the practical, social, and political activities and functions of this important movement. By treating the movement from the bottom up, it makes a distinctive contribution to our understanding of rural society and culture in relation to broader agricultural and environmental concerns. Instead of being vehicles for imposing business interests or unwelcome expertise on reluctant country folk, Berlage's Farm and Home Bureaus harnessed and fostered the enthusiasm of farm families for reliable knowledge and its practical applications. Using extension agents as their allies, and choosing among opportunities for reform and improvement, many farmers made the bureau movement their means of embracing scientific change. Berlage's insights may well have wider applications, and this valuable book will repay thoughtful study and reflection.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-environment>

Citation: Christopher Clark. Review of Berlage, Nancy K., *Farmers Helping Farmers: The Rise of the Farm and Home Bureaus, 1914-1935*. H-Environment, H-Net Reviews. April, 2017.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=47368>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.