

# FARMER ORGANIZATION AND CLASS FORMATION

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## RICHARD FRUCHT MEMORIAL ESSAY PRIZE 1985

*Abstract:* In the United States, farmers have tended to organize as owner-operators in order to confront those providing the "forward and backward linkages" in the agricultural production system. Despite shared self-perception as "farmers," their organizations have been generally short-lived and/or fragmented, according to crop specialization. I suggest, through examination of a highly diversified farming county in southern Illinois, that the discrete labour processes entailed in particular specializations with their specific relations of production (including relations with suppliers of inputs and marketers of products), contribute to this fragmentation, conflicting interests, and lack of overarching class-based organization, representative of all farming sectors.

*Résumé:* Aux Etats Unis les fermiers ont eu tendance à s'organiser comme "propriétaires/producteurs" pour affronter ceux qui fournissent les liaisons entre la production et la distribution ("forward and backward linkages") du système de production agricole. Malgré une identité commune de "fermiers," la plupart de ces organisations disparaissent rapidement ou se divisent par cultures spécialisées. À la suite d'une étude profonde d'un comté au sud de l'Illinois, où l'on pratique une agriculture diversifiée, il me semble que les moyens de travail (processus, relations de main-d'œuvre etc.), et les conditions particulières de production (y compris les relations de fournisseurs de matériel ou de services et les vendeurs de produits), qu'exige chaque culture spécialisée, contribuent à cette fragmentation, aux conflits d'intérêts entre fermiers et au manque d'organisations compréhensives et intégratrices.

*Key Words:* U.S. agriculture, Class formation, Relations of Production, Labour process.

My overarching concern here is with those organizations that attempt or purport to address the problems farmers have as farmers, or perhaps I should say as agricultural producers. This paper represents an attempt to determine **which** farmers organize and participate in specific organizations, and to analyze the factors that weld individuals into a self-motivated "class."

This particular exposition is set in the context of a larger discussion that attempts to formulate a class analysis of agriculture that will adequately explain the positions and actions specific farmers have taken regarding different policy issues, locally and nationally (see, e.g., MacLennan and Walker 1980; Scase 1982; Goodwyn 1978; Newby 1980; Rodefeld 1978; Banaji 1980; Goss, Rodefeld and Buttel 1980; Flinn and Buttel 1980). To do this, it is necessary to examine closely particular cases of farmer organization and activism to determine which farmers organized. The problem undertaken here, therefore, is to discover the empirical bases of class formation, and the social milieu, in all its diversity, from which groups which can be characterized as classes coalesced.

The dominant ideology of the "family farm" in the United States has tended to obscure, at least in the lay person's mind, the reality of the tremendous variety subsumed under the term "American farm." Central to this diversity are variability in land use and tenure, labour and marketing arrangements, credit arrangements, and cultural heritage. The data for this paper are drawn largely from Union County, Illinois, a rural county in midwestern United States, which represents many aspects of this diversity, both in its present composition and in its historical

makeup. As some theories dealt with below focus particularly on commodities raised, land tenure, and labour arrangements, a brief summation of these aspects of Union County farming will serve as an introduction to the particular case considered here. A comparable exposition could be made concerning marketing systems, but in the interest of brevity, such arrangements will be treated in the context of the specific case of class formation considered here.

Union County is a relatively small county – only 424 square miles – in extreme southern Illinois. It is the most agriculturally diversified county in Illinois. This is partly determined by its geography: the western boundary lies within the frequently flooded but extremely fertile, flat Mississippi bottoms, in which relatively large, specialized grain farms predominate. Immediately to the east, an extension of the Ozark Mountains rises abruptly from the flood plain, creating a rugged zone much of which is now in national or state forests. These hills and those immediately to the east are covered with a thick deposit of fertile silts blown from receding glaciers. The steep slopes create excellent air drainage, providing the environment for extensive orchards and market gardens. The loessial (wind-blown) soils become thinner to the east and much of this poorer hill land is in mixed livestock or grain farms.

The Illinois Central Railroad bisects the county, connecting it with Chicago and New Orleans markets. The GM&O Railroad used to run a few miles to the west of the IC, and connected the towns that were developed along it with St. Louis. The area within a few hours' wagon ride from the rail lines became one of the major

fruit and vegetable producing areas of the state; at one time Cobden fruit, and particularly Cobden peaches, were nationally famous.

#### LAND TENURE

Tenure and labour relations are diverse, as well. By the time land was purchased from the government, it was surveyed into the standard grid farm mandated by the Continental Congress. During the nineteenth century, considerable amounts of land were purchased for speculation, or were granted to the Illinois Central Railroad to finance construction of the rail line, with most of this land passing initially to individual farm operators. Throughout the 170 or so years of American settlement the dominant form of land holding has been as owner-operated units, the size determined largely by the land that could be cultivated or maintained as pasture with existing technologies and family labour supply, supplemented perhaps with a hired hand and additional help at peak periods. Father-son partnerships (and, in some instances, partnerships among brothers) is the major variation on the general pattern of nuclear-household farm operation.

From the earliest settlement, varied forms of tenant farming have coexisted alongside free-holding farmers. Tenantry existed as one "step in the "tenure ladder," as a young farmer accumulated sufficient capital to purchase his own farm, or waited to inherit his parents' land. Many were and still are renters on their retired parents' land, and can anticipate inheriting it. In 1929, the only year for which data are available, 22 percent of all tenants reported being related to the landlord (U.S. Agricultural Census, 1930, County Table XII, p. 654). As arable land

became unavailable in the late nineteenth century, however, tenantry became more pervasive as a permanent status. Since World War II, the proportion of farms operated by tenants has dropped sharply, until this form of tenure has become negligible (see Table 1).

Three basic forms of tenantry existed. The most common appears to have been acquisition of multiple farms by wealthy landowners and/or local merchants, frequently through foreclosure on mortgages. This land was farmed by share-renters, some of whom established themselves on the farm, but most of whom moved from farm to farm within the general area. Some land, particularly in the rich Mississippi bottoms, was held by absentee landlords whose major interests lay in railroads, banking, or other commercial ventures. This land was farmed by tenants, the more ambitious of whom made strategic moves until obtaining rental of a particularly desirable farm (and landlord), which they then farmed for many years. Such a renter might acquire substantial investments in stock and machinery and, in some instances, purchased farms which they then rented to other landless farmers. In both the upland and bottoms tenant farms, the division of the crop was largely determined by the proportion of capital provided by the owner and by the renter. Generally, such share-tenants were provided with conventional farm houses by the landlord, or occupied the house left vacant by the former owner, so that to the casual observer it is difficult to determine which farmers were tenants and which owner-operators.

In addition to widespread share-renting, many farmers – both renters and owners – maintained housing for labourers. Fruit and vegetable production are particularly

TABLE 1  
Farms in Union County  
by Tenure of Farm Operator, 1920-1980

Year	Full Owners	Part Owners	Managers	Tenants total	Percent
1920	1,283	84	32	607	30.3
1925	1,267	97	11	621	31.1
1930	1,020	151	35	546	31.2
1935	1,002	269	25	687	34.6
1940	1,203	89	11	421	24.4
1945	1,140	164	12	367	21.8
1950	1,067	233	2	233	15.2
1954	821	247	6	171	13.7
1959	755	220	7	115	10.5
1964	675	190	3	85	8.9
1969	648	151	–	68	7.8
1974	558	177	–	69	8.6
1978	484	182	–	66	9.0
1982	429	178	–	43	6.6

sources: 1920, 1925, and 1930 from Census of Agriculture, 1930, County Table 1, pp. 574-575.

1935, 1940 from Census of Agriculture, 1940, County Table II, pp. 680-681.

1945, 1950 from Census of Agriculture, 1950, County Table II, p. 483.

1954, 1959 from Census of Agriculture, 1959, County Table 3, pp. 130-131.

1964, 1969 from Census of Agriculture, 1969, County Data Table 3, p. 729.

1974, 1978 from Census of Agriculture, 1978, Table 3, Union County, p. 659.

1982 from Census of Agriculture, 1982, County Data Table 5, p. 203.

\* 1940 Census lists "2 Share-cash tenants" and 56 "Other tenants."

1950 Census lists 121 crop share tenants and croppers; 49 livestock-share tenants; 42 other and unspecified tenants (40 for 1945); 10 other tenants; and 32 Unspecified tenants.

labour-intensive, and on some of the larger farms many such families were housed. These tenants generally were provided with a small house, a garden, and land for some livestock for home use. They might also farm some land on shares, but their major contribution to the farm was as a reliable source of day labour.

The final form of operating arrangement is that of a hired manager for a corporate or absentee individual owner. This is not a common arrangement, and has become increasingly infrequent in recent years.

It should also be noted that many farmers combine ownership with renting, an arrangement that appears to have increased in importance as technologies have permitted one farmer to work large amounts of land.

## LABOUR

Before the widespread adoption of modern agricultural technologies after World War II, many farms used considerable amounts of non-family labour. One frequent form of permanent labour was the live-in hired hand. Such a hand might be a neighbouring widower who was able to exchange his labour for the services his wife once provided; others were younger, unmarried men, most of whom were neighbours of the employer.<sup>1</sup>

The fruit and vegetable industry required large numbers of seasonal labourers, as well. Prior to the 1920s, most seasonal labour was recruited from local small farm families, tenants, and townspeople, including many area youth. Local labour has continued to be utilized, although in steadily declining numbers as fewer people sought such work. Migrant labour has become increasingly important in providing the large amounts of labour required during peak harvest periods. This labour has been recruited from different sources at different periods. During the 'teens and '20s, a large pool of hoboes was sometimes tapped, with individual transients occasionally establishing long-term seasonal work relations with particular farmers. During the 1920s and '30s, large numbers of poor whites came over from the Mississippi flood plain ("delta" or "bottoms") of Missouri and Arkansas after cotton was chopped for the summer; some black people from the same region and from extreme southern Illinois were part of this migratory pattern. During World War II, farm labour was extremely scarce and Jamaicans and German POWs from a nearby POW camp (Pomona) were used by the larger growers. After a period of difficult labour recruitment in the 1950s and early '60s, a large and steady stream of Mexican and Mexican-American workers have provided the bulk of the seasonal labour and, increasingly, year round hands for the fruit growers.

The arrangements whereby this labour is recruited are diverse – trusted workers were relied upon by the growers to recruit their own crews, which they then bossed in the field or orchard; during the '30s government employment services established local offices in the area which still function to supply a regular stream of labourers; and strong, lasting ties have formed between specific growers and specific workers so that the same families return to the same grower year after year.

The degree of division of labour depends on the size of the farm operation. On a small truck farm, the husband is

generally able to oversee the field work and overall workflow while the wife oversees the packing operation. In a larger operation, a system of overseers and foremen control on-site work, while the operator acts as general manager over the entire operation.

In addition, various parts of the work may be contracted for, with the work provided either by farmers who invested in particular machinery (e.g., threshing outfit, balers, combines, large trucks) or by full-time specialists.

## THEORIES OF CLASS FORMATION

With this brief background, we can now return to the central theme of this paper – that of the relationship between particular types of farming and farmer organizations that are organized to promote their perceived interests.

John Bennett (1982:41-43), in his recent book about a region in south central Canada, notes in passing the different social consequences of what he terms "modes of production" – e.g., ranching and farming – on collective action and political strategies. While I would quibble with his terminology – I use the concept "mode of production" in its Marxist sense to refer to the dominant relations of production with their associated institutional, legal, ideological and normative arrangements, which would include both ranching and farming – his passing observation correlates with my initial thesis, and with the observations of many writers on "the farm problem." Ladd, in a 1964 book *Agricultural Bargaining Power*, saw the diversity of commodities upon which different farmers are dependent as creating a serious obstacle to unity. Frequently termed "commodity-ism," the focus on particular commodity specialization has been used to characterize sectional alliances and policies (e.g., McConnell 1953; Kile 1948; Campbell 1964:22).

Ladd (1964:83) went further to attempt to analyze other factors which act as "obstacles to obtaining unity" in establishing collective bargaining units similar to those established by labour unions. He distinguishes 1) high-volume, low-cost producers vs. low-volume, high-cost producers, who require different rates of return on investment to remain viable; 2) different combinations of commodities produced, in which the cost/price mix may vary in complex and non-standardized ways; 3) different product qualities, with correspondingly different pressures for where bases should be set to establish prices; 4) attitudes toward governmental activity, ranging from strict laissez-faire to strong price supports and production controls; 5) geographic location, with its implications for differential transportation costs (and I would add production costs); and 6) the age of the operator or, as Chayanov first observed, stage of family cycle. There appears to be no underpinning for this listing; it rather appears to arise, ad hoc, from Ladd's observation of the situation.

Rodefeld (1978:158; Goss, Rodefeld, and Buttel 1980:113), in contrast, attempts to provide a class-based, or structural, schematization of differing farm interests, based on two central criteria; the proportion of land and capital owned by the operator, and the proportion of labour provided by the operator (ibid.1980:113). Using these two variables, he divided farms into four major



"types": family, tenant, larger-than-family, and industrial types. Although this is a theory-based schematization, which I would expect to find more satisfying than an ad hoc listing such as Ladd's, I find this particular classificatory schema remarkably unsatisfying when I attempt to apply it to the actual situation in Union County.

The classification is not satisfactory in part because the categories established subsume widely divergent forms of actual social relationships, as I think I briefly indicated above. The term "tenant" embraces everything from quasi-peonage on some orchards to a strategy, particularly by young farmers who anticipate inheriting the family enterprise, for farming more land without incurring the capital costs of purchasing land. Similarly, the term "farm labour" subsumes what might be considered a true "class," as with the migrant labourers who now harvest the crops in Union County, or the poor agricultural and timber labourers who used to come to the area in the '20s and '30s, along with others who gain only a small proportion of their income from this work.

Further, the vast majority of smaller farms (which is the vast majority of all farms), have been and continue to be dependent to a greater or lesser degree on wages or salaries obtained outside the farm enterprise itself. There has tended to be systematic reliance on hired labour throughout the history of farming in this area (see Schob 1975). Smaller farmers have worked in timbering (Krause 1983), mining (kaolin, silica), as hands for larger growers, as railroad or road hands, or as factory labour in local industries, including seasonally active box and barrel factories. Government jobs have increasingly provided employment for farmers, as well. With the construction of high speed highways and a network of hard-surfaced secondary roads, members of many farm families drive 100 or more miles to job sites.

While seasonal labour is not indicated by statistics indicating primary source of employment, such figures provide an indication of persistent heavy reliance on off-farm income. In 1940, with 78.8 percent of all farm men considered to be in the labour force, less than 57 percent were listed as "Farmers and farm managers." By 1980, this had fallen to 36.5 percent. In 1940, only 6.5 percent of farm women worked off the farm; by 1980 this had risen to 30.5 percent (Census of the Population, Illinois, Table 14, page 627; and 1980 Census of the Population, Illinois, Table 191, page 15-845). Those members of farm families who worked seasonally on neighbours' farms or at other, occasional occupations are not included in these statistics as their primary occupation remained farming.

Clearly, a more dynamic notion of "classes" is necessary. Initially, it is important to define more closely what is meant by the term "class" and to establish the utility of using that concept to analyze and explain the development of specific farmer organizations. "Class" can simply refer to any grouping that coalesces out of a given social milieu, in which case it becomes a solely descriptive, rather than analytic, term. It has been frequently used to refer to strata within social hierarchies, with differential access to wealth and power – again, a largely descriptive term.

I find it more useful to locate classes in relation to

productive processes and the social relations organizing production and distribution, focusing, as Rattansi (1982:20) states, on "the centrality of forms of the extraction and appropriation of surplus labour" in the relations of production. Rodefeld's schematization is, in part, congruent with such a conceptualization of class but as noted above, it fails initially to encompass successfully the actual relationships subsumed under the four-fold categories established.

On a somewhat deeper level, such a schematization lends itself to mechanical application, failing to provide the conceptual tools to explain the historical dynamism of different agricultural producers. Further, it reduces – as does any class analysis based solely on the immediate (economic) relations of production – the problem of class formation to a narrowly economic phenomenon. Goodwyn (1978, especially pp. xv-xvi) stresses the danger of making unwarranted assumptions about individual and group political action based on actual or purported class positions. He further focuses on the important ingredient of self-consciousness and self-transformation that becomes a central ingredient of any social movement. It is at the juncture between the "objective" or "structural" position individuals hold within the relations of production and their actions arising from and demonstrating shared interests with others in a similar position, that a "class" can be said to exist (see, e.g., MacKenzie 1982, especially pp. 65-66, 86). While a social movement brings such commonality and shared interests into conscious awareness, such self-consciousness is not necessary.

Bourdieu (1977:85; *passim*) used the concept "habitus" to refer to the commonality which members of a particular class express. The habitus, he states

is the product of collective history, the objective structures (e.g., of language, economy, etc.) to succeed in reproducing themselves more or less completely, in the form of durable dispositions, in the organisms (which one can, if one wishes, call individuals) lastingly subjected to the same conditionings, and hence placed in the same material conditions of existence. (p. 85)

He notes that sociology treats not the individual, but the **population**, an aggregate of "biological individuals, but with the same class habitus. . . . Though it is impossible for **all** members of the same class (or even two of them) to have the same experience, in the same order." He observes, "it is certain that each member of the same class is more likely than any member of another class to have been confronted with the situations most frequent for the members of that class." The habitus is "engendered by the objective structures, that is, in the last analysis, by the economic bases of the social formation in question" (Bourdieu 1977:83).

If the concept "class" can be utilized to analyze organizations created by farmers, it must therefore encompass several aspects: the direct relations of production, including control over the tools and processes used in production; the mechanisms by which surplus is accumulated; and the "habitus" through which individuals seemingly spontaneously coordinate their actions. Within Union County, one social grouping has been particularly active in forming organizations to pursue their interests. With a

long and reasonably well-documented history of activism and organization, the fruit and vegetable growers provide a case amenable to analysis.

### FRUIT AND VEGETABLE GROWERS

Well back into the nineteenth century the fruit growers formed a distinctive grouping in Union County, particularly in the Cobden area. In 1863 a Fruit Growers' Association was already in existence. The members built a "Horticultural Hall" that year, which was used as a school building and community worship house as well as a hall for the horticulturalists (Perrin 1883:398). The first farmer-cooperative type of enterprise that appears in county corporate certificates served fruit growers – the Cobden Refrigerator and Shipping Company, incorporated April 18, 1872.

The locus of cooperative activity and militant agitation was largely with marketing arrangements. Growers were particularly concerned with freight rates and service and treatment by Chicago commission houses to which they consigned their produce.

In 1873, with farmer agitation rising throughout the county (and the nation), (see, e.g., Scott 1962; Goodwyn 1978; McConnell 1953), Union County farmers participated in the first wave of populism, organizing farmer's clubs throughout the county. While a variety of complaints, involving a variety of commodities and rural problems, were aired, some of the first specific actions were taken by vegetable growers. The newly formed farmers clubs in the Dongola area, at the extreme southern part of the county, put out a call to ship their produce to Chicago every Wednesday, in order to take advantage of shipping by the carload. By the end of the summer they were beginning to screen the brokers with whom they would deal as well (Jonesboro Gazette 7/19/1873; 8/30/1873). The bank crisis of September and October of that year was felt acutely by fruit and vegetable growers, as the Chicago commission houses were unable to pay for the produce shipped to them (*ibid.* 10/4/1873). Carlot shipments and more organized relationships with brokers became institutionalized following this initial phase of agitation.

The next wave of farmer agitation in the 1890s again brought a burst of farmer organizations, particularly, it appears, on the part of the fruit and vegetable growers. Farmers at all the shipping points on ICRR – Dongola, Balcom, Anna, and Cobden, going from south to north – organized Fruit Grower's Associations. Their charter, which were essentially similar, declared their purpose as "packing and distributing of fruits and vegetables in carlots or otherwise and to endeavour to obtain the best markets for the same and the best rates of transportation and to furnish fertilizers, box materials and other supplies" (Dongola Fruit Growers and Shippers Association Corporate Certificate 3/22/95). About 10 years later, similar organizations were formed along the Cairo and St. Louis (later GM&O) Railroad, in Alto Pass, Jonesboro, and Mill Creek. The corporate certificates and farm extension annual reports indicate a continued proliferation of cooperative, educational, and promotional organizations organized by and for the fruit growers and horticulturalists.

In 1906 one of the few attempts at a producer cooperative was formed in Cobden, the Cobden Canning and Manufacturing Company.

The major focus of these organizations was with marketing arrangements; particularly with the sale of their products, but also with the procurement of production and packing materials. In terms of produce marketing, these organizations attempted to mediate with (mainly Chicago) commission men and with the railroad; they attempted to raise quality and establish reputable brands that could guarantee stable prices; and they attempted to develop new markets. They also had an educational dimension, with particular emphasis on technologies of production. At various times the growers' organizations had an explicitly political dimension. Linked with state and national horticultural, pomological, and general farm organizations, they sought (and seek) to influence government policies to their benefit. Despite the heavy use of seasonal labour, it was not until the 1930s that growers' organizations began to act on labour recruitment and housing. Under New Deal legislation mandating minimum housing conditions for migrant labour, and with the establishment of the State Employment Service, farm organizations, through the county farm adviser, obtained and distributed tents, encouraged construction of barracks and sanitary facilities, and helped recruit the migrant labour force. Labour shortages during World War II and subsequently, and greater government protective legislation for migrant workers, led to greater involvement by growers, as individuals and through their organizations, in labour recruitment, housing, and policy.

It should be noted that at this same time other farmer cooperatives were being organized to serve the needs of other types of farming and to establish telephone systems, but by far the largest number of formal organizations were those created by and for fruit and vegetable growers. Although horticulture has dwindled drastically, from 81 percent of all farms reporting horticultural production in 1935 to 7 percent in 1982<sup>2</sup> (U.S. Ag. Census 1935, Table VI, p. 182-3; U.S. Ag. Census 1982, Illinois, derived from Table 3, p. 170) orchard crops remain important regionally.

Formal and informal discussions with county residents, as well as local promotional and descriptive literature about the county stress the centrality of orchards and horticulture to the local culture. Alto Pass has an annual strawberry festival and Cobden's Peach Festival is attended by people from all over the region. A neighbouring town (in Jackson County) has a fall apple festival. Although the area has always produced livestock, wheat and corn – even, in the early years of the state, providing seed corn to northern counties whose corn suffered from early frosts – and despite the contribution timbering made to the local economy up through the 1920s, pomology and horticulture have dominated the local culture. It appears that fruit and vegetable growers form a distinct class, in both the structural and cultural sense.

Structurally, growers are well represented on local bank boards of directors and as stockholders. They hold public office and are on the board of the county Farm Bureau. They intermarry to a considerable extent. Until

the 1920s, fruit and vegetable production was extremely profitable and the larger growers were able to accumulate considerable wealth. A nineteenth century account declared that in the early days of fruit production, in 1863-64, "men made from \$800 to \$1000 per acre on their strawberries" (Perrin 1883:344). For those farmers who have been able to increase their scale of production sufficiently to sustain reliable market connections and to support investment in the expensive equipment necessary for producing the quality of fruit required today, fruit production remains a profitable business and members of fruit growing families remain important in the local political economy.

Further, production by the larger growers approached plantation conditions, with their heavy labour demands. Seasonal labour is the most visible, but the year round work of pruning and otherwise maintaining the fields and orchards required a stable resident labour force.

A number of the early growers were diversified capitalists, with interests in a variety of businesses. While it was common in the mid- to late nineteenth century for merchants and industrialists to invest in farmland, biographies of leading citizens in the 1880s suggest that this was particularly common in horticulture and pomology (Perrin 1883). David Gow may serve as the archetype of the early growers who introduced commercial fruit and vegetable production to Union County: according to the "History of Cobden" (n.d.:48)

He was the son of the largest grower of strawberries in Scotland . . . He came to Union County in 1855, and to Cobden in 1858 where he became the first station agent and a specialist in horticulture. He built the first combined freight house and depot at his own expense, and was later reimbursed by the railroad [the I.C.]. He was the first man to introduce the hot bed into Union County, and probably the first to ship tomatoes from the County, which were sent out on June 8, 1856, and sold for \$1.00 per dozen in Chicago. He was also the first to use fertilizer and did the first under-ground draining in the county. He was the originator of the . . . system of shipping together at car load rates to Chicago, and was active in the organization of the . . . system of shipping in refrigerator cars.

Although Gow was not as involved in diverse commercial enterprises as others of the early, prominent fruit-growers, his innovative approach to horticultural production was similar to that of his more entrepreneurial contemporaries. It is notable that among the organizers of the various cooperative enterprises (formed as joint stock companies with large numbers of local shareholders) formed in the late 1800s and early 1900s, are some of these capitalist farmers, along with full-time farm operators.

Most growers, until the post-World War II era, although specializing in one or several crops, raised a wide variety of fruits and vegetables which began with asparagus, rhubarb, and strawberries in the early spring, continued through the summer with tomatoes, peppers, squash, cucumbers, melons, and peaches, and in the autumn harvested apples, turnips, and sweet potatoes. In addition, cattle, poultry, hogs, wheat, oats, corn, and hay grown primarily for family consumption were raised and processed. When pursued at any scale, such a regimen required skills not developed in other forms of agriculture. The larger growers, due to the nature of the productive

process, developed unique managerial skills and manners required to successfully coordinate many workers in a relatively complex operation, as well as to deal with agents of other sectors of the economy.

Other factors have also contributed to the constitution of this group as a self-conscious class. The larger fruit growers and horticulturalists have considered themselves to be "progressive" farmers, that is, innovative in terms of technologies and procedures used, and experimental in varieties.<sup>3</sup> This, I suggest, has been due to the nature of the products themselves, which are highly perishable and subject to extreme market fluctuations during the harvest season. The grower who can get his crop to market earliest has a great advantage over those who sell most of their products at peak periods, when the price declines, frequently to the point that shipping costs are not even covered. Further, better packing and cooling techniques permit the product to arrive in better condition at the commission houses, thereby bringing a better price. Beginning in the teens, some growers and the extension agent began pushing for consistent grading and improved quality, a trend that was later enforced by government regulation. Growers sought to establish a reputation with commission houses and the general public by providing consistent quality and, in some cases, establishing a brand with other growers.

A number of the early growers, at least in the Cobden area, for which there are good and accessible data in a mammoth county history published in 1883 (Perrin 1883), came to Cobden specifically to grow fruits and vegetables, having heard of its choice conditions. In contrast to the first wave of migrants to the area, who came as small farmers from North Carolina and the intervening mid-south states, some of these growers, as indicated above, came directly from England or Scotland, already schooled in horticulture and pomology – participants in late-nineteenth century "scientific" agriculture. An elderly descendent of one of the early settlers recalled that the Cobden people seemed rather "snobbish" to him (Casper 1975). It should be noted that this division was not impermeable – several descendents of original settlers became renowned fruit growers and nursery men. Nonetheless, the cultural values were those of the educated Yankee and European, rather than the subsistence farmer who was fortunate to have a limited common school education.

Further, fruit growers and horticulturalists were drawn into sustained intercourse with their commission agents in Chicago, involving them in a sustained network of relationships foreign to those who marketed their grain at the local mill or grain house or, later, elevator, or shipped their livestock sporadically to different livestock markets. Growers' relatives might be agents for the commission houses. In some cases what appear to be real friendships developed between growers and commission men, as when a Chicago broker annually visited his growers in Cobden to participate in autumn duck and goose hunting in the bottoms. Hunting clubs, owned by a group of local growers and businessmen, provided a recreational centre for such affairs. Growers and their families might make reciprocal trips to Chicago. The growers, that is, tended to



be more urbane than most other farmers, due both to their relative wealth and their participation as relative equals in urban distribution systems.

At the present time, despite the hard times that have decimated the ranks of the orchardists, and especially the horticulturalists, one senses a social cohesion among the orchardists that does not exist among other groups of farmers. The agro-chemical companies, in cooperation with the local extension services, sponsor dinners and informational meetings for fruit growers (separate ones for market gardeners), which are very well attended by growers from around the area. There is considerable camaraderie, gossiping, — it is an occasion to socialize, in addition to possibly learning some new techniques and getting reports on how other orchards are doing around the area. Growers from as far away as 75 miles attend some of these meetings. There are in addition state-wide meetings and a state horticultural society in which many county growers are active.

Fruit and vegetable growers, with particular emphasis on the larger growers, therefore, can be judged to share a distinctive habitus. This is based in part on the direct relations of production through which they gain their livelihood, that is, as employers of labour and managers of considerable amounts of labour and capital, through which they have been able to accumulate substantial surpluses. They are forced, however, to relinquish considerable portions of that surplus to the commission houses and other market outlets, to the transportation system, and to the suppliers of raw materials. Further, the intense competitiveness of the market and the extreme fragility of their products puts a premium on early arrival on the market and predictably high quality, fostering innovation and cooperation for expensive packing machinery. All of these factors directly tied to the production process tend to present fruit and vegetable growers with a particular body of skills and a unique set of problems not generally shared with other farmers, even those who manage non-agricultural enterprises and oversee tenant or hired labour. When these factors are combined with a somewhat distinctive cultural heritage derived from mid-nineteenth century educated Yankee values, ties of kinship and sociability that are intensified through family and organizational gatherings, a long history of organizing to promote their self interest, and a regional pride in their production, I argue that this grouping of individual farmers has been constituted as a class.

Since World War II the fortunes of this class have dwindled. Industrial production conditions in California, Florida and Texas have been able to provide fruit and vegetables to national markets at prices below that needed for sustained production in southern Illinois. Labour, materials, and transportation costs have all risen to the point that only the largest farmers, able to invest in expensive cooling, packing, storage, and hauling equipment, and able to tap directly into the increasingly rationalized national fruit market, have been able to sustain a rate of profit comparable to earlier growers. Prosperous

vegetable growers have diversified, raising cattle and other crops in addition to vegetables and small fruits. Smaller growers prefer to sell directly to the consumer or to peddlers rather than risk consigning their surplus produce to agents in Chicago.

The recent (1984) sale of a large cooperative packing shed and supplier of production materials to a private partnership may indicate the continued decline in the number of fruit and vegetable growers, to the point where they no longer form a group large enough to pursue their own interests.

Further, while fruit and vegetable growers have functioned as a distinct grouping particularly as exemplified by the numerous exclusive organizations they have created to further their economic interests, such that I have termed them a distinct class, in a larger or more comprehensive context they can be seen to be but one element of an ambiguously-bounded class of relatively small property-holders, which many be composed wholly or only partly of farm operators. Within Union County, fruit and vegetable growers join with other commodity producers, largely through the Farm Bureau, and individual growers are and have been active in local politics, sit and have sat on the boards of local banks, and been involved in a broad range of civic, church, and social organizations.

Further research is required to determine to what extent class or group identification has led to consistent political behaviour in this agricultural context. Nonetheless, I think that data assembled here support the notion that the specific productive processes in which people are engaged, and the relations of production regulating these processes, give rise to a shared "habitus," from which collective endeavours arise. This approach can incorporate the political consequences embodied in the notion of "commodity-ism," while providing the framework for a far fuller and richer account of the actual dynamics of a particular situation than any rigid schematization or eclectic list of discrete factors separating farmers one from another.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The research for this article was made possible in part through a grant from the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research and an Illinois State Historical Society Fellowship for dissertation research. I am deeply indebted to the many residents of Union County who shared memories and private documents with me, as well as to personnel at the Union County Court House, at the County Agricultural Extension Office, and at Southern Illinois University Library, who made materials easily available to me.

#### NOTES

1. For an analysis of this pattern on the Plains, see Friedmann 1978.
2. In 1978 only 66 farms reported commercial sales of vegetables on 629 acres; it is unclear in the 1935 census whether all those reporting horticultural production were commercial growers.
3. There appears to be a distinction between those small farmers who subsisted off a widely mixed agriculture which included fruit and horticultural products as well as livestock and grains, and those who specialized in horticulture and fruit crops, with livestock and grains raised predominantly for home use. Even these specialists, however, marketed their other products; the distinction is not abrupt.

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