

Hamlin Garland and the Farmers' Frontier

by Gilbert C. Fite

Hamlin Garland was one of the chief literary interpreters of the farmers' frontier in late nineteenth century America. As a realist, Garland vowed to describe life and society on the farm as they really were, especially in the region of Iowa, Minnesota and the Dakotas. He said that he was going to "tell the truth about the barn yard's daily grind." Garland believed that the true picture of farm life had not been portrayed, and that the agrarian tradition, so deep in American thinking, was only a myth. Such prominent Americans as Thomas Jefferson had lionized farm life and rural existence, and very few Americans in the nineteenth, or even in the twentieth century, would admit that towns and cities were to be preferred over life in the fields and meadows.

Garland believed that the romantic notion about life in the country was sheer nonsense. There was, he said, little or nothing that was good about western farm life, and he vowed that he would tell the truth. To Garland farm life was not a joyful existence of freedom and independence where man and nature joined in the work of creation. Rather, Garland emphasized the isolation, loneliness, dirt, unending toil, poverty, and cultural deprivation of existence on midwestern and Great Plains farms. In his opening to *Main-Travelled Roads*, he wrote that the main-travelled road in the West was "hot and dusty in summer, and desolate and dreary with mud in fall and spring, and in winter the winds sweep the snow across it." While he admitted that there were some exceptions to his bleak portrayal, the farm road, he wrote, ran between a "home of toil" at one end and "a dull little town" at the other, and was travelled mostly by the poor and weary.

Indeed, there are few more vivid descriptions of certain aspects of farm life on the upper midwestern frontier than those presented by Garland. One of his most poignant passages is found in *A Son of the Middle Border*, in that section where he returns to Iowa and Dakota in 1887 after having been in the East. Visiting old friends in Iowa he wrote: "Every house I visited had its individual message of sordid

struggle and half-hidden despair.” The beauties of nature, he said, could not hide the poverty of the people, nor their graceless homes and dull daily routines. He describes one Iowa farm wife as “ill and aging, still living in pioneer discomfort toiling like a slave.” Garland said he watched another farm woman toil at housekeeping “from dawn to dark, literally dying on her feet.” But his real shock came when he met his mother on the Dakota prairies. Her hesitant speech, gray hair, and weathered appearance made him bitter. The farm had done this not only to his mother, to his family, but to multitudes of families on the western frontier. As Garland said goodbye to his parents and sister, leaving them “to this barren, empty, laborious life on the plain, whilst I returned to the music, the drama, the inspiration, the glory of Boston,” he said that he felt like a traitor and a deserter.⁴

Garland’s indictment of frontier farm life can be grouped under four broad categories. In the first place, work on the farm was hard and never ending. Life seemed to consist only of unremitting toil, day after day and year after year. Secondly, despite hard work and a bountiful nature the only reward was grinding poverty. In the third place, Garland interpreted farm life as being lonely and void of social life. Finally, existence on the lonely prairies was intellectually sterile. Altogether, according to Garland, such a life was not worthy of human beings with feelings, ambitions and aspirations.

There can be no doubt that the conditions described by Garland in his autobiography, and in some of his short stories, did indeed exist on the American frontier in the late nineteenth century. But the important question is, were the conditions described by Garland typical of Great Plains and Midwestern farm life, or did he grossly exaggerate the undesirable conditions found among farm people? The first thing to remember about Garland’s writings on the farmers’ frontier is that he was personally bitter because of what life on the frontier had done to his parents. He was not an objective chronicler of farm or pioneer life on the Upper Plains, but like any true artist he was deeply involved emotionally with his subject matter. While this deep emotional involvement is what makes much of Garland’s writing compelling and meaningful, at the same time readers should be careful not to confuse emotion with fact. While Garland was a literary realist, one should not confuse the reality of the literary artist with what actually existed. Moreover, it is important to remember that he adopted radical political views and called for basic economic and social changes.

Let us look first at the matter of labor on the farm. No one who has ever walked behind the plow would deny that farm work was hard and monotonous. However, it must be remembered that in the region which provided the setting for Garland’s works, the labor requirements

were neither universally hard nor constant. Most of the heavy farm work in that area was done between April and September. During the planting season of April and May farmers were very busy, and then during harvest in July and August there was little time for anything but work. However, much of the year farmers could work at a leisurely pace which involved little more than taking care of the livestock. Moreover, it must be remembered that by the 1880s in the United States most farmers were using horse drawn machinery, and relatively little work in the fields was done by hand.

To make accurate judgments about the human condition, one must take into consideration time and place. Garland kept comparing life on the Dakota prairies with what he had seen in Boston among the intellectuals. This is hardly a fair comparison. If one compares life on a western farm in the 1880s or 1890s with that among workers in the eastern cities, the comparison presents a different picture. However hard it might have been, life on the farm was probably as good, or perhaps even better, as in the eastern factory or mine. In a period of rapid economic development almost all Americans worked hard. Indeed, that was a part of the American creed. But it is doubtful if farmers found their work harder or more boring than the average American in other walks of life.

Probably Garland would have stressed the unending toil less if the rewards of agricultural labor had been greater. But to him it seemed as though farmers worked interminably and then existed in poverty and want. Here Garland gets closer to the real situation than he does in some other criticisms of farm life because agricultural incomes did lag behind those in other sectors of the economy. Yet, in a period of generally low living standards, farmers in the Upper Midwest did not suffer greatly for want of the main necessities of life. Even Garland admits that food and clothing on the western frontier were within reach of all. Indeed, most farmers ate quite well, with a good variety of meats and vegetables supplemented with milk, butter and eggs. Their main lack was fruit. With the passage of a few years, however, many farmers had their own orchards, especially in Iowa and Minnesota where apples, plums and other fruits did well. Moreover, most farmers were not far from a town or marketing center, and within a short time after settlement in a new area farmers were selling their products and buying commercially produced foods. These included canned fish, fruits, and other delicacies.⁵

In the case of housing, many farmers lived initially in small mud or sod houses, or little wooden shacks no more than fourteen or sixteen feet square. But again, this was usually a temporary situation. After a few years most farmers built new houses or added to their old ones in

order to make room for their growing families or to provide greater conveniences. Furniture was generally plain and utilitarian, but in most cases it was adequate. Water was sometimes a problem, but water wells provided sufficient supplies for household purposes in most cases. In other words, the amenities of life were plain but adequate. It was the exceptional farm family that was ever hungry, cold, or without sufficient clothing. Compared to the developing slums in New York and other cities, the average farm home in the Upper Midwest did not appear so bad.

Garland makes a great deal of the loneliness and lack of social life on the farmer's frontier and it is here that he is probably more in error than in any other of his criticisms. From Garland one gets the impression that farmers traveled very little, that they spent long winter months hovered around the stove and away from the snow banks, without ever seeing another soul. Nothing could be more untrue. Indeed, there was a remarkable amount of travel among the frontier farmers. Almost every farmer had a team of horses and a wagon, or a buggy, and by this conveyance farm families went to town frequently, to visit neighbors, to lodge meetings, to church, and to social affairs of one kind or another. It was not uncommon for farm families to drive eight or ten miles, or more. There was great mobility on the frontier, with much visiting. This is clearly revealed in the diaries kept by some farmers and farmers' wives during this period.'

One farmer on the Kansas frontier kept track of the number of people who ate a meal at his place during 1881, only about six years after settlement. This record revealed that his wife served nearly 800 meals to visitors over three years of age. This was probably unusual. However, a farm wife in these circumstances might be tired but she surely was not lonesome. Furthermore, it was common on the frontier for more than one member of a family to settle in a single community. This is clear from the census records. In other words, relatives were often not far away. Consequently, there were family gatherings as well as meetings with friends and neighbors. In most frontier communities there were literary societies which met in homes or at the local school house, and farm organizations, particularly the Grange established in 1869, that performed a social function in many farm communities. The school and the church were the centers of much social life, especially in the winter months when farmers were not busy in the fields.

One of the reasons that there was less loneliness on the frontier than Garland implies, is because settlement occurred very rapidly. In many places within a period of only two or three years the raw and uninhabited prairie was transformed into a settled community. All of the records, both personal and official, testify to this rapid settlement.

And the American land system assured fairly close neighbors. Most frontier settlers obtained 160 acres of land under one of the federal land laws or by purchase. Under this system it was unlikely that settlers would be more than a half mile or a mile from their nearest neighbor, and often there would be four or five neighbors within a mile's distance. Besides frequent visits with neighbors, farmers organized and attended singing socials, literary and debate societies, spelling bees, Fourth of July celebrations, and Christmas parties. Indeed, many western farmers had a rather busy social life throughout the year, except during the planting and harvesting seasons. Elam Bartholomew in Northwest Kansas often mentioned the good times that he and his family enjoyed at community social affairs. On December 28, 1885, he wrote in his diary: "In the evening took wife and the children over to the schoolhouse where we participated in the Christmas tree festivities and enjoyed ourselves very much. We all received a number of pleasing presents. A very large crowd was present and everything went off nicely." Literary society meetings offered a pleasant type of entertainment. At one schoolhouse meeting debaters considered the question: "Resolved that man will do more for the love of money than he will for the love of woman." The negative side won which probably flattered the women. A Nebraska farmer said that his literary society debated whether "There is more enjoyment in poverty than in riches." Seeing no joy in being poor, the judges decided against such a proposition. Church services were also held in schoolhouses and within a few years of settlement several denominations were present from which the settlers could choose. After only six years of settlement in one Kansas community the Presbyterians, Congregationalists, Baptists, Methodists, and Catholics, all had organized congregations.

The loneliness on the frontier did not come so much from the fact that settlers were physically alone, but that they missed old friends and familiar surroundings. Young married couples who went west missed their parents and relatives, and longed for the areas where they had been raised and lived part of their lives. Garland caught this point when he told about how his mother hated to leave Wisconsin and move to Minnesota and Iowa. She was settled in that community; she had friends there; and she felt a part of it. She found her new home lonely, not because of a lack of people but because she missed the people with whom she had been associating. It seems clear from the record that, while loneliness existed on the frontier, Garland greatly overemphasized isolation and lack of social life.

What about his charge that life was intellectually stagnant and sterile. Of course, this was true if a comparison is made between the

western farm and life among the intellectuals in Boston. However, it is doubtful if life was any more sterile on the farm than in the factory or mining towns. Farmers had few books, it is true. Usually they had the Bible, a farmer's almanac, perhaps a volume or two of some ancient classic, plus the community newspaper, or farm journal. There is no evidence that the average worker's home in the city was any better blessed with reading material. Also the local country school and the church were centers for programs to inform adults through speakers, lectures, debates and other kinds of educational meetings.

Hamlin Garland's contribution was not that he provided a realistic picture of the farmer's frontier. Part of what he wrote was certainly accurate, but it would be wrong to accept his descriptions and evaluations as being typical. What he did do, however, was to help break down the idealistic view of farm life which had been perpetuated in speeches and writings since the beginning of American history. Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and many other leading Americans had insisted that farm life was preferable to all other existence. Not only was farming the best way to make a living, but farmers possessed certain virtues others did not have. They were more democratic, honest, pure of motive, dependable, and happier than people living in the cities. Americans had praised farm life with a vengeance, without apparently stopping to analyze actual conditions on the farm. The so-called agrarian tradition had waxed strong in American ideas and writing. Garland turned the spotlight on the undesirable aspects of farm life. In emphasizing what he called "the bondage of the farm," he came into direct conflict with one of the strongest traditions in American life and culture.⁹ But in trying to show the undesirable side of farm life, he presented only one part of the picture. He exaggerated the hardships and poverty on the farm, but this is characteristic of those trying to make the point or establish a position. We owe Garland a debt for presenting so clearly and so interestingly the darker side of farm life, but we should recognize that much of his realism was not genuine realism at all.

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NOTES

1. Hamlin Garland, *Main-Travelled Roads* (New York, 1930 ed.), front material.
2. Hamlin Garland, *A Son of the Middle Border* (New York, 1917), p. 364.
3. *Ibid.*, 363.
4. *Ibid.*, 373.

5. See the diary of Fred A. Fleischman who in 1878 settled near Lake Preston, Dakota, about 150 miles from the Ordway community in which Garland's parents lived. North Dakota Institute of Regional Studies, Fargo, North Dakota.

6. This is made clear in the diaries of such pioneer plainmen as Elam Bartholomew of Rooks County, Kansas, 1871-1934; and Anne Jones Davies, 1882-1888 who lived near Osage Kansas (Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka); and John A. Sanborn, 1886-1896, Franklin County, Nebraska, (Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln).

7. Mrs. Uriah Oblinger to "Dear Friends at Home," March 24, 1878. Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, Nebraska. Mrs. Oblinger wrote her relatives in Indiana that Fillmore County, Nebraska, where she lived was filling up very fast. Three new houses were going up in her neighborhood at the time she wrote.

8. Bartholomew Diary.

9. Garland, *A Son of the Middle Border*, p. 365.