

Primary Source Reading 13-2 ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

The Farmers' Plight

▣ About the Selection

Many factors caused hard times for farmers in the late 1800s and early 1900s, but the most important factor was overproduction. Efficient machines had dramatically increased crop yield. As production increased, however, prices for farm goods dropped equally dramatically. Washington Gladden was a reform-minded Congregational minister. In an article published in 1890, he discussed remedies

Reader's Dictionary



monometallism: support for the gold standard
circulating medium: money

for the problems facing farmers in the United States.

GUIDED READING

As you read, note why the farmers are "up in arms." Then answer the questions that follow.

The farmers of the United States are up in arms. They are the bone and sinew of the nation; they produce the largest share of its wealth; but they are getting, they say, the smallest share for themselves. The American farmer is steadily losing ground. His burdens are heavier every year and his gains are more meager; he is beginning to fear that he may be sinking into a servile condition. . . .

There is no doubt at all that the farmers of this country are tremendously in earnest just now, and they have reason to be. Beyond question they are suffering sorely. The business of farming has become, for some reasons, extremely unprofitable. With the hardest work and with the sharpest economy, the average farmer is unable to make both ends meet; every year closes with debt, and the mortgage grows till it devours the land. . . .

The causes of this lamentable state of things are many. Who shall estimate them? Mr. Davis gives this list: "Monometallism, deficient or defective circulating medium, protective tariffs, trusts, dressed-beef combinations, speculation in farm products, over-greedy middlemen, and exorbitant transportation rates." These are a few of the disadvantages of which the farmers now complain. Doubtless several of these causes are working against them. Whether, in their diagnosis of the disease, they always put their finger on the right spot may be doubted. People cannot always be trusted to tell what ails them. The patient knows that he is suffering, but he does not always discover the nature of his malady. Mr. Davis gives strong reasons for the belief that the root of the difficulty is overproduction; that there are too many farms, and that more corn, wheat, oats, beef, and pork have been raised than the country can use.

But granting that this is the chief cause of the depression of agriculture, other causes of considerable importance should not be overlooked. The enormous tribute which the farmers of the West are paying to the

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moneylenders of the East is one source of their poverty. Scarcely a week passes that does not bring to me circulars from banking firms and investment agencies all over the West begging for money to be loaned on farms at 8 or 9 percent net. The cost of negotiation and collection, which the farmer must pay, considerably increases these rates. . . .

. . . They believe that the miseries under which they are suffering are largely due to political causes and can be cured by legislation. They have found out that of the 20 million breadwinners they comprise 8 or 9 million, and they think that if they stand together they can get such legislation as they desire. The old Grange kept pretty well out of politics; the new Farmer's Alliance and its affiliated organizations intend to work the political placer for all that it can be made to yield. Hear them:

The prime object of this association is to better the condition of the farmers of America, mentally, morally, and financially; to suppress personal, sectional, and national prejudices, all unhealthful rivalry and selfish ambition; to return to the principles on which the government was founded by adhering to the doctrine of equal rights and equal chances to all and special privileges to none; to educate and commingle with those of the same calling to the end that country life may become less lonely and more social; to assist the weak with the strength of the strong, thereby rendering the whole body more able to resist; and to bequeath to posterity conditions that will enable them, as honest, intelligent, industrious producers, to cope successfully with the exploiting class of middlemen.

Source: *Forum*, November 1890.

READER RESPONSE

Directions: Answer the following questions on the lines below.

1. According to Gladden, what is the chief contribution of the farmer to the United States?

2. What are some of the causes of the farmer's problems that Gladden identifies?

3. What is the main purpose of the new Farmer's Alliance?

4. **Critical Thinking** What do you think Gladden means when he says "People cannot always be trusted to tell what ails them"?
