
This brief (204 pages) account of US agriculture is richest in its connection of the details of farm life with brief accounts of agricultural policies and business. This reviewer grew up on the farm, and I settled in for an attentive read in one sitting. He brings to bear a rich stock of knowledge now largely lost (why a single family needed to butcher two 300-lb. hogs each year, for example) with accounts of how successful farmers adapted to the changing business of farming. Most farming in the US has been commercial, and commercial forces present challenges to those interested in food safety. This is not a primary focus of the book, and is summarily dealt with in one paragraph that closes with “overall, our food is safe.” He is more concerned with how tasty are the tomatoes.

In a brief but clear analysis of the diversity of farmers, touched on in several places but most forcefully in the last chapter, Conkin notes that all but about three percent of farmers who own their farms are white. This was the product of discriminatory policies in agriculture support and extension policies, as well as general job and credit discrimination and other racist practices, and by the time of the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act the damage had been done—the non-owning small farmers were doomed, and that was the situation of the African American farmers who had not yet left the farm.

In the US farmers and farm life have been highly idealized for decades, even as farmers have dramatically shifted what they do. When my dad was a boy the country had about six million farmers, and now it has about 350,000—and those fewer farmers feed far more people. Over the next fifty or so years they will have to feed many more still—given the rising world and national population and higher living standards, world food production needs to increase by about half over the next half century.

Farmers will likely meet the challenge through means already tested—more reliance on specialized, large-scale farming, support for research into crop varieties, fertilizer, and farm practices, reduction in the share of farm costs going to hired labor, farm families relying on off-farm jobs, and similar trends that have been at work since after WWII. To this reviewer, it appears the same forces that make food safety an issue will, if Conkin is right, grow more intense.