

T H E D A W N O F
I N D U S T R I A L
A G R I C U L T U R E
I N I O W A

Anthropology, Literature, and History

E. Paul Durrenberger

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INTRODUCTION

Questions

The history of the United States is the history of capitalism, the transfer of wealth from those who create it to those who control it. The history of its culture is a history of ways to either disguise that process or to normalize it and make it acceptable. This dynamic was established early in the Northeast and spread west as America's robber barons incorporated the hinterlands as suppliers of raw materials.¹ In the mid-nineteenth century, Iowa was at the western edge of that movement. The railroads and their industrial infrastructure moved Iowa to the center in a transformation from the original family farms of the settlement period into today's agricultural industry. This book is about these developments as a part of America and about two Midwesterners who chronicled them as Americans.

Paul Corey was born in western Iowa at the beginning of the twentieth century; Ruth Lechlitner was born in Indiana about the same time. Paul graduated from the University of Iowa in 1925, and Ruth received an MA in 1926. Their lives spanned the most consequential period in history of the

United States, one that is difficult to imagine from the perspective of a hundred years later.

Paul and Ruth told the stories of these processes in poetry and fiction. How did these remote political and economic forces shape their lives? How did Paul and Ruth depict those forces? And finally, what are the relationships of fiction, individual lives, and anthropology?

The lives of Paul Corey and Ruth Lechlitner offer us a window into life between 1925 and 1947, one of the most radical and creative in the history of the United States, a period when everything was in the balance, when it appeared the country could as easily move toward fascism as toward communism, a period before the warfare state and the cultural and political repression that was to engulf them.

Iowa's Industry

Today Iowa, the heartland of the United States, is covered by a horizontal industry that is as polluting as the old vertical ones of the Rust Belt. The oft-repeated slogan, "we feed the world," is true to the extent that this industry produces the ingredients of the American diet that are responsible for our epidemic of obesity and diabetes and associated health problems. This industry also controls the political structure of the state.

If industrial farming is so bad, so damaging, why is it still going? Why haven't the perpetrators stopped? Having grown up on an industrial farm, and having a father who still farms that way, agricultural journalist and writer Stephanie Anderson is very accepting of industrial farmers. Many farmers could make the switch from damaging industrial to helpful restorative farming but do not because they are trapped in the industrial system, running from one season to the next on the productivity treadmill—borrow money, buy inputs to improve productivity and acquire more land, harvest more, watch prices fall, repay as much of the loan as they can. Or, if prices go up, acquire more land and bigger equipment. And the accompanying debt. And repeat. Year after year.²

So good people are trapped in a bad system that is contributing to the destruction of our planet and our health. But, Anderson says, there comes a time "when claiming to be a good person trapped in a bad system is no longer an excuse for inaction—and that time is right now."³ We know organic

regenerative agriculture can feed the world and support farm families. We also know that industrial agriculture doesn't work for our society or our environment. What's the holdup?

Those masters of the ruggedly independent American farmer, agribusinesses and their allies, are very powerful and control national and state governments and their farm policies. That's the reason. One means by which they do this is by enacting subsidy programs that keep the prices of American food at artificially low levels that do not account for the costs of environmental damage or harm to our health, either through eating their products or sharing the planet with them. In this they are powerfully aided and abetted by the universities created by the Morrill Land-Grant Acts and the extension programs that provide the corporate research and ideologies to justify and promote industrial farming.⁴

I use the term "industrial" farming rather than "conventional" because, as Anderson suggests, "conventional" sounds like it's the "way things are supposed to be."⁵ That's no mistake. The industrial agriculture movement is famous for its Orwellian twists of language to make "water pollution" "water quality," and chemical pollutants and swine sewage "nutrients," and "we feed the world" for "we destroy our planet," just to name three examples.

So, yes, those ruggedly individualistic farmers are not feeding the world—they're destroying it to serve their agribusiness masters. But Anderson emphatically argues that the "good people in a bad system" excuse will no longer hold up. It's time to grow a spine and get out of that system and follow the lead of people who, like the farmers she visited and wrote about, are making their livings by practicing regenerative agriculture to restore rather than destroy the planet.

Journalist Eric Schlosser starts his story with fast foods and shows how they are related to virtually every dimension of American life from transportation to politics and housing.⁶ Our story starts from the other end, the production of the components of those fast foods. It gets to the same dire place of pollution, political corruption, and epidemiology all centered on the heartland of Iowa, a place cloaked in a culture of niceness that prohibits the mention of such unpleasantness.

This is a complex of practices and ideas as integrated as the culture of the Plains Indians that preceded it and just as amenable to a cultural ecological understanding.⁷ Both understandings rest on often contradictory

ethnography.⁸ A system this complex offers many structural positions, each with its own view of the world; none may encompass the whole system. Some in the system actively attempt to conceal its operation. Ethnography can describe this system from the various points of view, but to understand the system as a whole, we have to step outside of it and grasp the totality. Paul Corey's classmate in the journalism department at the University of Iowa, George Gallup (1901–1984), grappled with this problem and developed the method of polling as a means of characterizing whole social orders statistically. Sociologists often use government statistics to develop such descriptions and supplement them with their own surveys. Anthropologists rely on ethnography, the experience of living with the people we want to understand and observing closely their daily lives. Each pixel contributes to the picture; none is the whole. This brings anthropologists face to face with the problem of deciding what to believe or how to encompass the various points of view with all of their contradictions. Privileging any single viewpoint provides a skewed vision of the whole. Paul Corey transcended the various perspectives in his fiction. That is where I begin.

Perspectives

Literary critics of the period provided contemporaries' insights into the fiction and poetry of the time. Literary historians have commented from a temporally alien perspective. American Studies scholars have commented on the commentaries. All told, there is an intimidating pyramid of literature cascading from the novels and memoirs of the period to the contemporary appreciation of them to the remote analysis of them to the examination and critique of those analyses. Layer upon layer, farther and farther from the original writers and events at each echelon until the realities of the period and the people are blurred under blankets of interpretations. What can an anthropologist contribute to that *mélange*?

Anthropologists like to stay close to the material we're trying to understand. So this is not a work of literary history or literary criticism. Nor is it ethnography. It is something else, an anthropological biography, the approach to a period via the lives to two people, the examination of the lives of two people to reveal something about the subject matter about which Paul Corey wrote: family farming in Iowa. Along the way it provides the

context for their lives, the period in which Paul and Ruth were most active in writing, between 1925 and 1947, which encompassed the collapse of capitalism, the rise of the Soviet Union, the rise and defeat of fascism, the postwar Great Depression, and the creation of today's continuous warfare state in the United States.

Anthropology and Biography

From the point of view of anthropology, any single person is one node in a network extending back to our first ancestors in Africa, into the indefinite future and around the planet. There are no individuals; we are all instances of greater wholes. An individual can be a window on a whole culture or illustrate otherwise invisible relationships and structures. Illustrative of this was the last of the Native American Yana people, Ishi, who in 1911 walked out of the forest in California where the anthropologist Alfred Kroeber recorded his language and stories. His wife, Theodora Kroeber, wrote his biography, *Ishi in Two Worlds*. Similarly, in 1929 the anthropologist Oliver La Farge wrote *Laughing Boy*, a fictionalized biography of a Navajo to illustrate the encroachment of Euro-Americans. Or Ruth Behar's story of a Mexican woman.⁹ More recently, there is anthropologist Gísli Pálsson's *The Man who Stole Himself* (2016) about a Caribbean slave of African and Danish descent who washed up in a small hamlet in nineteenth-century Iceland. The understanding of each of those lives contributed to the understanding of larger configurations and processes.

Life histories were part of the practice of early anthropology in the United States¹⁰ when anthropologists followed the army into Native American lands to chronicle their lifeways.¹¹ Many of them, like Ishi's Yana, were decimated if not abolished. The remnants were driven onto reservations and reduced to dependency on the Bureau of Indian Affairs. By exploring the patterns of the lives of individuals, anthropologists hoped to reconstruct the living cultures of which they'd been parts. These exercises were based on the assumption that individuals do not stray far from the patterns of their upbringing.

Nor did the principles of this book, Paul Corey and Ruth Lechlitner. Nor can anyone. João de Pina-Cabral wrote that while anthropologists identify the material or mental conditions that frame events,¹² we must remember that human speech and action is underdetermined; that there is a lot of

leeway in the actions of people, even if they are structurally determined. Author Howard Fast, for instance, wrote that while the experience of poverty and misery was burned into his soul, and nothing changed in the scheme of poverty, what did change was his ability to face and alter circumstances: "I ceased to be wholly a victim."¹³

Looking at the question from a different perspective, anthropologist Philip Carl Salzman summed up E. E. Evans-Pritchard's wartime study of a Libyan province by saying that it shows that "an understanding of culture and structure alone are not sufficient for explaining human destinies; as well we must take into account the agency and acts of the multiple parties and the events these generate."¹⁴

Paul Corey and His Fiction

Paul Corey was born on a farm in western Iowa in 1902, took a journalism degree from the University of Iowa in 1925, married poet Ruth Lechlitrer, lived with her in France for some months, and went to homestead and write in rural New York. His ambition was to produce a multivolume series of interlinked novels as a social history to describe to the rest of the world rural life in Iowa and the death of family farming there. Three volumes of the series were published before the Second World War and a fourth just after. After the war, Corey was in the process of being disappeared during the Great Repression and knew it. He thus abandoned the remaining volumes of his project and moved to California where he and Ruth homesteaded again and where they died toward the end of the twentieth century. Here I sample the fourth volume of the series, *Acres of Antaeus* (1946):

The roar of the crowd sounded like a gigantic corn-sheller thundering at its job, and Emily climbed to the top of the cab on the Winters truck to get a better view. Down Main Street all she could see was the blue overalls and jackets of farmers. Not a citizen of Markley was in sight. The farmers had taken over the town. The courthouse square was packed with them, jostling and shifting, talking, sometimes laughing and sometimes cursing. But the whole crowd was quick to sober.

Sometimes angry shouts were flung up. "We want our farms! To hell with the insurance companies!" On one of the sandstone arms of the west

courthouse steps, Emily saw the unmistakable Stetson hat of Carleton Smith, the old Holidayer.¹⁵ She heard his oratorical voice ranting and exhorting the crowd and the swelling roar of angry voices reached her like a blast of wind.

"What's happening inside?" she asked one of the farmers standing near the truck fender.

"Don't know, Miss. They been in there quite a spell now."

An hour had passed after the farmers crowded into the courtroom before Judge Hart came out of his chambers and sat down behind his bench. His face was gray but stern and stubborn. The bailiff stood at the edge of his desk with the foreclosure judgments in his hand, while the clerk sat down below chewing gum nervously.

As the farmers pushed in, the railing creaked and cracked under the strain. The blue-uniformed throng [of farmers] crowded toward the bench. Judge Hart rapped loudly for order. Someone back in the crowd yelled: "We want our farms back, Judge!"

"Order!" shouted the judge. "I'm, here to carry out my legal duties as Judge of Baldwin County . . ."

A voice interrupted him "Don't sign them judgements or you'll regret it."

"Are you threatening the court?" yelled the judge.

"We want our farms back."

"Order! Or I'll have to clear the court."

"We want our farms back." The demand became a chant. "We want our farms! We want our farms!"

The judge made a sign to the sheriff. "I order you to clear the courtroom."

Silence fell on the crowd. No one moved. The sheriff stepped forward and ostentatiously drew his gun. His lips twitched several times, but he said nothing. He took a step toward the crowded enclosure before the bench, and stood close to Al Winters.

Old Jeff stood opposite the officer, his lean face set, prepared to meet stubbornness with equal stubbornness. The judge could not sign the foreclosures in the face of all this pressure. He could not do it. The sheriff could not clear the courtroom. The farmers simply would not leave.

. . . The crowd surged back and forth, some trying to get out of the room, some rushing the judge and the sheriff. There were yells, hoarse shouts, and the sound of blows. The crash and splintering of the railing echoed through the other sounds.

Old Jeff saw the judge dragged over his bench, struggling and cursing. The sheriff lay unconscious on the floor. The bailiff, the clerk, and the lawyer for Corn-States fled through the chambers door. Old Jeff and Roy were swept along with the crowd out of the courtroom, the others dragging the grunting, fighting judge along with them.

Emily heard that revolver shot above the rising and falling roar of the crowd. An abrupt, terrifying silence fell upon the huge throng of farmers; then a murmur began. "What was that?" "Who's doin' the shootin'?" It grew pushing toward the courthouse. It seemed to squeeze on the square sandstone building from all sides. In a moment the answers came circulating back.¹⁶

This scene is a fictionalized version of events in Le Mars, Iowa, on April 27, 1933. The 1930s was a period of intense activism across Iowa, and Paul Corey's depictions of farm life in western Iowa provide a rich background to the primary and secondary sources on the period.

The 1930s in Iowa

Corey's Mantz trilogy—*Three Miles Square* (1939), *The Road Returns* (1940), and *County Seat* (1941)—were published by Indianapolis's Bobbs-Merrill after every New York press had rejected them. His *Acres of Antaeus* came out in 1946 from Henry Holt of New York. The publication of that volume also has a complex history. Those events of the radical thirties have been expunged from the consciousness of present-day Iowans and from the history of Iowa. Iowans can remember Herbert Hoover, a native of West Branch, Iowa, and celebrate him in an annual festival, though not by reenactments of Hoovervilles. But people do not remember or celebrate Paul Corey or any of Iowa's activists of the thirties, much less this scene from *Acres of Antaeus*.

Organization of the Book

Add to these overt political and less overt social exercises of power a great cultural revolution that had been underway since the turn of the twentieth century to remake American culture so that corporate rapacity would become acceptable and normal and we see a powerful engine for obliterating nonconforming events and people from memory.¹⁷ It has been largely successful in shaping our sense of history so that we celebrate Hoover but

not Hoovervilles and family farms where there are none. The first chapter discusses how Corey was expunged from Iowa's memory and how that was part of larger historical developments in the United States.

The second chapter tells the story that engaged Paul Corey's attention, the industrialization of Iowa's agriculture and the death of its family farms. The third is the story of the farm boy who went to the Mecca for writers, New York City, and how that experience convinced him of the necessity to free himself from the burden of a job in order to write. That was the chief reason he homesteaded—to make himself as independent as possible of the surrounding economy. This provided ample opportunity for him to live by his gospel of work, the old Puritan idea that work toward some objective is its own reward. This stands in opposition to the gospel of wealth that was being pronounced by Andrew Carnegie and his industrial cohort, who were intent to remake American culture into one that would appreciate and value their corporate rapacity.

Three broad movements are evident in the lives and writings of Corey and Lechlitner. The first was the movement to flee the ills of the industrial cities, a back-to-the-land movement of which they were a part and to which they contributed. I discuss this movement in chapters 3 and 4 as one branch of America's fascination with the rural. The other branch was the country life movement that promoted the industrial principles of efficiency and profits in an attempt to urbanize farmers. Corporate leaders such as Carnegie, who considered themselves to be the pinnacle of evolutionary processes that made them the natural managers of wealth for the good of the wider society, used their wealth to promote an ideology to justify their avarice and to found the discipline of economics that would add the seal of approval of science. The revolution to remake American culture in the image of this ideology is one theme of this book. Struggling against this tide were the back-to-the-landers such as Corey and Lechlitner.

The second was the literary movement of regionalism, associated in Europe with the rise of fascism and thus suspicious in the United States in this age of flux. Regionalism and its association with fascism are the topics of chapter 5. By virtue of his focus on Iowa farming, Corey was a regionalist. But since his fiction also encompassed California as well as rural and urban New York and Chicago, his subject matter was not confined to his natal region. There was, however, a strong regional movement that defined

a distinct culture of the Midwest and heavily influenced Corey, not least in his dedication to the gospel of work.

This is the culture that Paul Corey was fleeing with no sense of nostalgia. The wide horizons of Iowa, Corey said, gave Midwesterners their frank, clear, and open eyes but beckoned to him, made him uneasy with an anxiety that led him beyond the horizon. Those thousands of miles of rolling plains were uninteresting and drab, “terrifying with stark, barren monotony.”¹⁸ Many never returned and never wanted to, he said. “I, for example, do not plan to ever return to live in Iowa. The vast gently rolling plains bore me, but the atmosphere of my youth, the perception of distant horizons, still haunts me.”¹⁹

The perspective of distance allowed Corey to describe the details of daily life on Iowa farms in the first decades of the twentieth century in all of their sordid detail and to leave an ethnographic record of that time and place. He wanted to preserve a record of events and people that were being erased from consciousness and history.

The third movement was the stylistic movement of naturalism that Corey found best fitted to his subject matter, writing about the details of peoples’ lives and the processes that determined them. It is a descriptive and gritty style associated in the United States with hard times and is still characteristic of American writing. In chapter 6 I discuss this movement and its relationship with ethnography, which exemplifies it. This opens the question of the relationship between fiction and ethnography, which has a long history in American anthropology.

Chapter 7 describes the overall plan that Corey developed for this project. In chapter 8 I discuss Corey’s style of writing, his particular adaptation of naturalism to his subject matter. In chapter 9 I return to Corey’s writing style as that was an important matter in his relationship with the publishing industry. He insisted against all advice on his collective style of writing that emphasized no heroes or villains, that had no plot or resolution, that entailed no judgment—that was in fact ethnographic and thus did not always fit the strictures of fiction. That sets the stage for his engagement with the publishing trade—the cultural apparatus. The correspondence in chapter 10 between Corey and various publishers regarding his story “Number Two Head-Saw” illustrates both his ideas of group-focused stories versus the more usual individually focused stories and editors’ negative responses to the notion.

The correspondence of both the novelist and his poet wife Ruth Lechlitner shows the power of what sociologist C. Wright Mills called the cultural apparatus,²⁰ those networks of social relations that determine whose work gets displayed and whose is destined for oblivion. On the one hand, the editorial process guarantees a certain level of quality; on the other, it can squelch lines of inquiry, genres of writing, and politically fraught material. These days, that means forcing the creations onto the Internet; in the thirties, it meant oblivion. All of these were parts of larger cultural processes in the United States. This is the subject of chapter 9.

Chapter 10 provides an example of Corey's style of writing in a previously unpublished story. Paul was too old to serve in the Second World War, but he was intent to organize a militia that could meet what he thought was an imminent German aerial invasion of the eastern United States. This engaged him in a relationship with a wealthy and powerful industrialist. The correspondence between the two is a striking illustration of the differences between the gospel of work and the gospel of wealth, the topic of chapter 11. Chapter 12 treats the eve of the war, the looming sense of dread, and Ruth's treatment of it in poetry. It also deals with the evolving relationship between Paul and Ruth as she becomes pregnant a third time.

After the war the couple and their daughter move to California to repeat the homesteading experience. Chapter 13 treats the move, their later life, and their final days. Having come to the end of the stories of Paul and Ruth, the book devotes the final chapter, 14, to an epilogue. Iowa drops from their story when they move to California, and I do not treat their lives in California in detail.

Now, to anticipate the fate of Iowa's farms that I discuss in chapter 2, here I return to *Acres of Antaeus*.

Acres of Antaeus Again

In the end, the corporation wins and recedes into invisibility, engulfs all, even Jim, the protagonist. Jim starts the novel working as a foreman of a road-paving crew, meets school teacher Emily at a street dance in Markley, and takes a job at Mid-West Farms because "They're going to farm Iowa the way it'll be farmed in the future,"²¹ with industrial equipment, management, and methods on land that insurance companies and banks have repossessed from

failing family farmers. Emily, daughter of a farmer, disapproves of Jim's job with the heartless corporation, but he explains that he can change the corporation from the inside.

Jim visits with the Chief, one Mr. Granger, who explains mass production in agriculture and, with a gesture toward a map of the corporate holdings says, "We have our great industrial empires in America; well, I'm building an agricultural empire."²² One of Jim's first tasks is to prepare for plowing by removing the fence between the Clausen and the Harris farms. Harris had just died of pneumonia. Clausen is still on his farm, which has been absorbed into the empire, and is none too pleased. Charley is a worker who hadn't seen two bits all winter and is glad of a chance to earn a buck doing whatever he's instructed, but as time goes on he begins to organize workers. At Christmas, Jim assesses his situation to Emily:

"Last spring I thought I had a good job," he went on. "I thought Mid-West was doing things the way they should be done. I was farming in a big way. But my job isn't farming in a big way any more; my job's to get all the work I can out of poor devils and pay them as little as possible. I've got to hang on to that job because there isn't any other job to be had."²³

Clausen dies of a heart attack; Jim visits, and the widow says blankly, "There's an end to everything."²⁴ Corporation thugs have beaten up Charley, the Red, who lies bandaged in the Clausen parlor as Otto Mantz vows to take care of the gang Mid-West sent to beat up Charley. Jim informs Mantz that the person who sent the thugs has been replaced as the corporation is now conscious of its public image. The corporation has hired the judge for \$20,000 to induce him to drop all charges he might bring. Through such machinations, the corporation becomes invisible and erases any traces of resistance.

Jim concludes his visit to Charley and the widow at the Clausen's place and buttons his coat:

With an uncertain gesture, he turned and walked quickly out through the kitchen. He drove out of the yard with a sense that the confusion in his life had begun to clear. Soon it would be time for spring sowing. The picture of tractors roaring down a field rose in his mind. He whistled a tune.

As he sent his car droning along the open highway he turned things over in his mind. The days of building empires were over, even agricultural empires.

The land had to belong to the people who farmed it; the land was too much of a living thing to be left to the quarreling and bickering of men interested only in making money. The farmers would have to learn to own the machines of mass production co-operatively; then they could compete with the growing corporation farms.

Tonight, he decided, he would call Emily and tell her how the situation stood. . . . This year, he told himself, he'd see to it that the workers for Mid-West got a better break. When he swung in under the arch over the gateway, it was too dark to read the sign: "MID-WEST FARMS, INC."²⁵

The corporation has faded into the dark, erased from view just as this period of history has receded from the awareness of Iowans and most Americans.