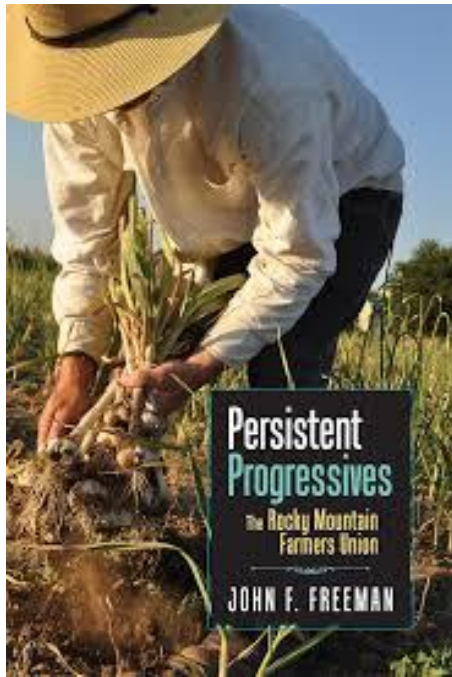


Review of...

Persistent Progressives: The Rocky Mountain Farmers Union / by John Freeman



Reviewed by:

Todd Laugen

Publishing: Boulder, CO : University Press of Colorado, 2016. xvi, 235 pages. Illustrations, map, notes, bibliography, index. 9 x 6 inches.

In *Persistent Progressives*, John Freeman traces the origins, development, challenges, and endurance of an important group of Colorado farmers over the last one hundred years. Founded in opposition to land speculators and monopoly owners, the Colorado Farmers Union sought alternative paths for small- and medium-sized farmers in the marketplace of twentieth-century agriculture. After expanding geographically beyond Colorado borders, the union became the Rocky Mountain Farmers Union (RMFU). It continued to promote “education, cooperation, and legislation” on behalf of farmers. The RMFU worked to enhance local farmer control over the marketing, distribution, and consumption of

commodity and specialty crops. This farmers’ union hoped ultimately to expand the democratic possibilities of cooperatives in ways reminiscent of nineteenth-century Populists.

Freeman is at his best in reconstructing the organizational history and leadership efforts of the Rocky Mountain Farmers Union. He has sifted thoroughly through the archival records of the organization. From its first local union in Peetz, Colorado, in the early twentieth century, the RMFU advanced cooperative approaches with initiatives that ranged from coal purchases to member insurance programs. In the 1920s, the union shared with the Farm Bureau a national legislative victory that freed cooperatives from antitrust prosecution. Under the leadership of Jim Patton (also a National Farmers Union Leader), Harvey Solberg, and John Stencel, the RMFU experimented with various cooperative strategies in order to help the otherwise independent farmer reach out to consumers and compete against big business. Freeman traces union membership expansions and contractions in the face of economic, political, and environmental challenges.

One consistent opponent of the RMFU was the American Farm Bureau Federation. In Freeman’s account, the Farm Bureau often lurks off-stage as a consistent, conservative critic of the more left-leaning RMFU. This more influential agricultural lobbying organization did briefly make common cause with the RMFU over the principle of parity in the 1920s and again in support of New Deal farm programs in the 1930s. Yet the Farm Bureau worked more comfortably alongside the chambers of commerce to support corporate expansion in agriculture. The cooperative principles of the RMFU did

not run as deep in the Farm Bureau. Freeman might helpfully have extended this contrast of the two organizations in order to highlight more fully the alternatives to big agribusiness that the RMFU offered. Comparing membership profiles in the two farm organizations especially could illuminate why RMFU members defected at key moments to the Farm Bureau.

Other challenges that confronted the farmers union included chain grocery store expansion, cycles of drought, falling commodity prices, threats of farm foreclosure, and mismanagement of various member-owned insurance, marketing, and value-added operations. Freeman highlights the persistence of RMFU leaders and core members as they weathered these repeated difficulties. Generally, legislative lobbying yielded fewer results than cooperative schemes over the decades. Even though the original Peetz union disbanded in 2012, Freeman expresses optimism that the RMFU can benefit from recent trends such as the “Buy Fresh, Buy Local” movement and urban neighborhood gardens.

Freeman’s organizational history nonetheless leaves open the possibility of future study of a few aspects of the RMFU. Though clearly building on the legacy of the Populist movement, the RMFU apparently offered fewer opportunities for women than that earlier protest. The Populist movement empowered and engaged women as leaders and activists in social and political contexts. Women, however, rarely appear in this account of the RMFU. Freeman also quotes the original farmers union charter as inviting “only white persons...who are of industrious habits [and who] believe in the Supreme Being” (page 23). Bankers, retailers, and speculators were excluded from membership. Given the insistence on “white” farmers, it would be helpful to learn about relations with Hispanic or Japanese farmers in the San Luis Valley or African Americans at Deerfield. Perhaps owing to limits in the source collection, gender, race, and ethnicity are not consistent categories of analysis for Freeman.

Still, *Persistent Progressives* offers a detailed review of a group of farmers who resisted the tide of corporate agribusiness. Their efforts evoke the earlier farmers’ organization recounted in Lawrence Goodwyn’s *Populist Moment*. Populists also sought local and democratic control over capitalist markets, and like the RMFU, did not achieve broad success. The story of enduring enthusiasm for cooperative approaches in the RMFU remains inspiring even if tempered by corporatism and twentieth-century globalization.

About the Reviewer:

Todd R. Laugen, an associate professor of history at Metropolitan State University of Denver, works with social studies teacher candidates in addition to teaching Colorado history, the American West, and the Progressive Era. He is the author of *Gospel of Progressivism: Moral Reform and Labor War in Colorado, 1900–1930*.