



The Wheat Empire of R. H. Garvey, 1930–1959

by Craig Miner



Ray Hugh Garvey

Ray Hugh Garvey was not the typical, representative, or ordinary person historians lately have delighted to emphasize. He was not exactly a bull in a China shop, but in his wheat farming operations in western Kansas and eastern Colorado in the 1930s and 1940s, he was an unusual presence in a traditional industry, one might even say folkway. The average farm operator did not own one hundred thousand acres in two states; coordinate farming with several other businesses (a string of gasoline stations prominently); study the land and grain markets on a large scale for

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Garvey began buying and selling farmland around Colby in 1918. Land sold best, Garvey believed, when it was planted in wheat. In this Thomas County scene, ca. 1920, fields are being plowed following the summer harvest.

investors in his Amortibanc mortgage investment company as well as on his own account; and build two hundred thousand bushels of elevator storage capacity. Garvey did all that while growing wheat between 1918, when as an attorney in Colby, Kansas, he started investing in land, and his death in an auto accident in 1959, by which time he was one of Wichita's most active millionaires.¹

Like others of his kind, Garvey was *cupidum rerum novarum*—eager for new things. He was an inductive reasoner, a pragmatist, an opportunist who had plenty of choices for the investment of his capital and who regarded farming as a business based on costs, margins, and careful study of conditions, circumstances, and the impact of techniques over time.

Garvey was not typical, nor was he one-of-a-kind. Both Robert H. Baughman of Liberal, Kansas, and Henry C. Wear of Brandon, Colorado, for example, owned more land in western Kansas and eastern Colorado than did Garvey at his peak in the 1940s, and they were both breaking sod for wheat growing as he was in defiance of the Soil Conservation Service dictates for preventing another Dust Bowl.

Garvey was not even particularly original. His personal maxim was "copy the best." He simply applied to farming what had worked in other twentieth-century business-

1. The most useful published source for Garvey's general biography is Olive White Garvey, *The Obstacle Race: The Story of Ray Hugh Garvey* (San Antonio, Tex.: Naylor Co., 1970). Garvey's widow and researcher Virgil Quinlisk used Garvey documents as well as her recollections. Other sources treating Garvey and the Garvey family are Billy Mack Jones, *Olive White Garvey: Humanitarian, Corporate Executive, Uncommon Citizen* (Wichita, Kans.: Center for Entrepreneurship, 1985); Craig Miner, *Harvesting the High Plains: John Kriss and the Business of Wheat Farming, 1920–1950* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998); *Expectations to Equity* (Wichita, Kans.: Garvey, Inc., 1992).

es. His summer fallow practices, meshing environmental sensitivity and self-interest, were not new in the 1930s and have since been widely accepted in semiarid areas. He was an absentee landlord for a part of his career but had deep local knowledge, current and historical. He grew mostly wheat. But he created diversity not only in wheat monoculture through, for example, the introduction of fall sheep grazing operations, but in his overall enterprise through diversification and cross-fertilization of businesses. He took advantage of the economies of scale. He used foremen and crews instead of his family as labor, and he expected to compensate them through salary and profit-shares. He recorded and tracked his costs carefully and tried to anticipate his crop to maintain a desirable fixed/variable cost ratio, giving him flexibility to survive the lean years. He used the corporate device when it was legal in Kansas and it suited conditions. He had a banker as a partner and a friend and appreciated the importance of capital and of borrowing to seize current chances. He calculated maximum efficiency in the use of his equipment and farmed large acreages as flat as he could find. He took government subsidies, while opposing them in theory, on the grounds that even he could not compete unsubsidized in a subsidized industry. He regarded profit as a test long beyond his need for money, and he used his farm business to provide managerial challenges and money-making opportunities, not only for his sons and sons-in-law but daughters. There was nothing remarkable about those things: most were gospel in the corporate world. However in the value-laden business of agriculture in the Dust Bowl and post-Dust Bowl era on the American High Plains, those actions were plenty controversial and required a forceful personality to implement.

Garvey was unforgettable as a person, like him or hate him, and there was little in between. Nervously energetic, totally unassuming, constitutionally extroverted, he was an information omnivore with a prodigious memory, and he was an obsessed man-driver, sometimes unrealistic and inconsistent, overwhelming his people by turns with detailed instructions and grandiose visions. Average people could not work for Garvey, and he was reluctant to pay extraordinary people what they were worth. He could be brutally frank and explode in colorful rages. He was cocksure in his opinions, repeating his one-line maxims ad nauseam. But he was a believer, an enthusiast in the game of capitalism, and the excitement for him was learning, “paying tuition,” and developing himself as a human being through the discipline of nature and economic reality. To Garvey “operations [were] interesting,” and production was fun. “It is not too easy to make any business pay Willard,” he wrote one of his sons in 1945.

In normal times it is a strain to see whether it loses money or makes a little money. I guess it should be that way, humans being human beings, and it is necessary to channel them, and the nicest way is perhaps the law of supply and demand and loss and profit, and so arranged that life is mostly a chain of averages for the most part with an occasional bulge and quite frequent dips. Therefore people must keep on their toes all the time to try to keep it up to average.²

The Garvey family, he wrote, knew how to farm, “and most businesses cost a person quite a bit to learn how, and sometimes they cost a bit after a person thinks he knows how.”³

Like most interesting people, Ray Garvey was a bundle of contradictions, no saint, and some of his strengths were also his weaknesses. But he and his enterprises were at the time and should be to us now unfailingly interesting. For he was an innovator. Maybe the world does not need maximum agricultural production anymore, despite its demonstrable hunger. People told him it needed neither production nor him much in the 1930s or 1940s. But to Gar-

2. R. H. Garvey to Willard Garvey, June 2, 1945, folder 5, box 21, R. H. Garvey Collection. The Garvey Collection is in the possession of the Garvey family and not available for general research. It has, however, been organized into its present series, cataloged, and an inventory and finding aid created by Tony Brusca for the Ablah Library Special Collections, Wichita State University. All correspondence to or from R. H. Garvey hereafter cited is from the Garvey Collection and is referenced by folder and box number.

3. R. H. Garvey to Willard Garvey, June 2, 1945, folder 7, box 21.

vey it was production that mattered, and he was a monomaniac about it. Thanks to his having left a complete collection of his correspondence from 1930 to 1959, and to his habit of thinking in single-spaced pages dispatched to all his managers nearly every day, there is an unusual opportunity to examine his type—certainly an American type—and the stakes for which he played in the wheat business during one of its low and high cycles.

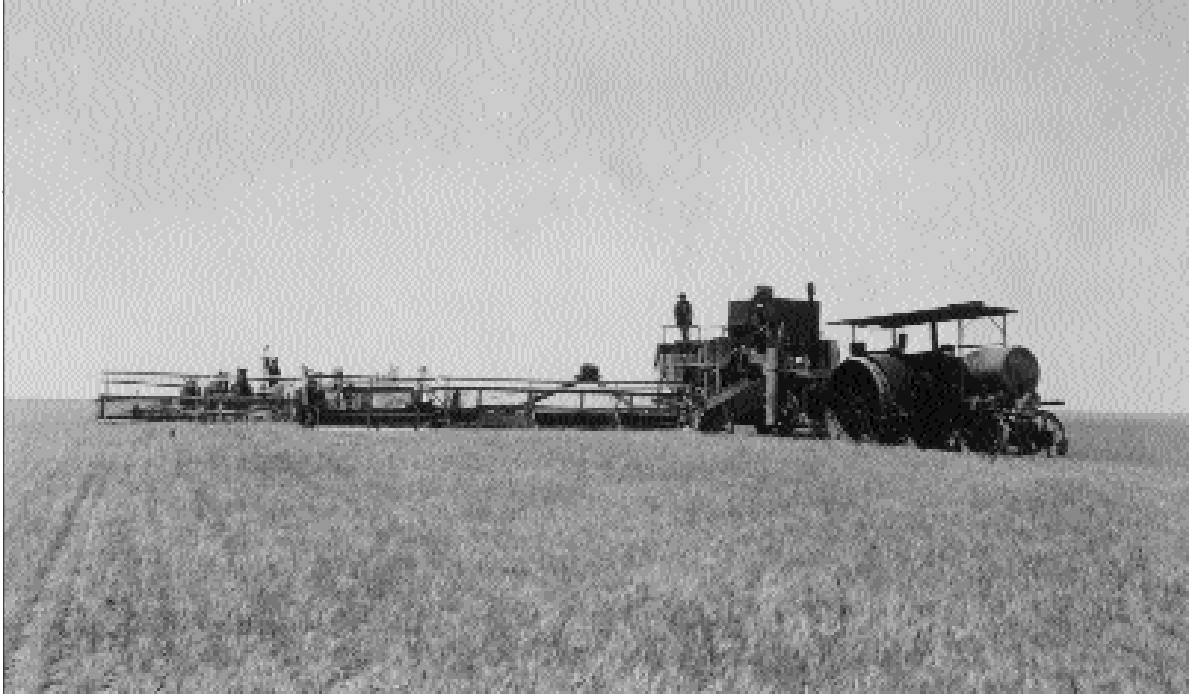
There is every evidence that Garvey went against the grain of his times, countered trends again and again. That he was temperamentally suited to that role does not mean that the total explanation was psychological. Time, the bitterness of the jealous losers, and the coin of the realm in his accounts demonstrated in hindsight that his actions were rational and prescient, however unexpected and unpopular. What, then, made him effective?

The force of great personality, combined with keen intelligence, is undeniable. The voluble Garvey, dressing so casually people visiting his office building in Wichita sometimes mistook him for the janitor; dictating fifty to sixty long, single-spaced letters a day, sometimes dispatching two a day to the same manager; and driving around western Kansas “putting the pump handle” on people of all classes and stations to find out how a man might make some money in their town, was a special personality.⁴ It is axiomatic that one must meet such a person, not just read written remains, to get the effect. But there is a vividness, humor, and pragmatic complexity in most Garvey letters, whether he is chiding a politician, instructing a subordinate, or encouraging a family member, that point to daily realities in the living man. In his correspondence he amazed while he overwhelmed each recipient knowing only a fraction of his total activity.

Like most entrepreneurs he was an optimist but with the usually pessimistic accountant’s and attorney’s attention to detail. He drove several farm and ranch managers to distraction with his detailed instructions, always followed by a suggestion that each needed to delegate to “ramrods” and be himself the “ramrod of ramrods,” focusing on the “big picture.”⁵ Garvey was philosophically opposed to micromanagement but could compete with any New Deal bureaucrat in collecting statistics from the field and attempting to control everything. He had a high estimate of how much ground should be covered and how much responsi-

4. Willard W. Garvey, interview by Craig Miner, June 18, 1998.

5. R. H. Garvey to Ernest Fogleman, June 26, 1943, folder 15, box 16.



Garvey, whose farming empire grew during the 1920s, hired foremen and crews to handle his large enterprise. Here crews harvest wheat in Thomas County, 1925.

bility should be taken by hired men, paid four dollars a day, working twelve-hour shifts six days a week and living in makeshift bunkhouses and trailer homes.⁶

Of managers more still was expected. “On this weed situation,” he wrote his farm manager Ernest Fogleman in 1943, “you must be a prophet and look into the future and anticipate when the weeds are going to start. You can’t get them with a spring-tooth cultivator or a rod-weeder after they have attained any size. It would require one-waying, and one-waying is only half as fast as spring-toothing. . . . This is your important job, and don’t let anything interfere with getting over the ground with all machines during all available working hours.”⁷ Fogleman tried keeping a diary recording everything he did. Garvey loved it and sent it to other managers, but Fogleman could not keep it up. Fogleman suggested an airplane: Garvey did not think so.⁸ Instead he should delegate more to subordinates. “I think you had better step on Ryser’s tail,” he wrote, “as he should be getting out more work. And, of course, we can’t afford to leave a tractor down at the Zanzibar [ranch] unless they produce results. . . . any of these ranch foremen who expect to get rich quick will probably be disappointed.”⁹ Garvey noted that “the foreman, as a foreman is not a candidate for public office. He is there to get a job done.” He outlined to Fogleman

from memory the nature of the wheat crops in the area and its rainfall for the past thirty years. He specified how many cowmen it should take to supervise one thousand steers and how many bushels of wheat were required to put one hundred pounds on a young pig.¹⁰ Like every other manager, Fogleman eventually rebelled at this. He had twenty-three thousand acres cultivated and nineteen thousand in grass to supervise, he noted, and his only previous experience had been a desk job at the Federal Loan Bank in Wichita. “This thing is entirely too big,” he wrote.¹¹

I realize that I am not a super human man yet I never admitted that a thing could not be done and so am trying to be foreman, general director, and chief ramrod all in one. I cannot cover that much ground efficiently and know no more than I do about the business. Writing me 12 months after I took over and did not know anything about farming and sheep at a time when I am buried in troubles didn’t help much either [but] . . . you are furnishing the money and giving the general orders so you can say or do anything you choose. . . . I want to make money and I am not afraid to work for it but I believe I know when a thing is not going right.¹²

At that, Garvey would back off. “Your letter of February 13,” he wrote Fogleman, “was apparently written when you were too disturbed to be quite rational. . . . Let’s not worry about past errors. Let’s just try to learn from

6. *Ibid.*, February 12, 1944, folder 21, box 18.

7. *Ibid.*, March 19, 1943, folder 4, box 16.

8. Ernest Fogleman to R. H. Garvey, August 2, 1943, folder 15, box 16; Garvey to Fogleman, August 3, 1943, *ibid.*

9. R. H. Garvey to Ernest Fogleman, June 21, July 6, 1943, folder 15, box 16.

10. *Ibid.*, September 27, December 8, 1943, folder 16, box 16.

11. Ernest Fogleman to R. H. Garvey, December 26, 1943, *ibid.*

12. *Ibid.*, February 13, 1944, folder 21, box 18.

them and take care of the same thing better in the future. Just get your chin up and run your job and your crew, and the profits will probably take care of themselves."¹³ Garvey noted that his instructions were only suggestions and that his managers must think first about how things ought to be done and not how R. H. Garvey wanted them to be done.¹⁴ Under the circumstances, that was difficult. Fogleman wrote:

Have you ever realized that the class of men we are working here will kiss our feet when jobs are not plentiful but just as soon as they get a couple inches ahead of the hounds then same fellows become resentful of all who have made a success financially and try to gig him in small ways . . . Because I don't know a thing I am not sure of my self and when not sure of myself I hesitate to try to tell you when you are wrong. I think you are wrong in thinking that we are going to be able to get a farming crew to go out and farm in a cook shack . . . I realize that you want this deal to go over and that you are trying to help in writing your letters, but it seems to me that you either over look the problem facts or refuse to recognize them and therefore instead of your letters helping they just discourage me more. It is easy to say do this and do that to hell with what you are up against but try doing it a while and you get another slant on the picture.¹⁵

Fogleman said that he was not a "Bolshevik or Communist," but he did have to disagree with some of Garvey's directives.¹⁶

No problem, Garvey responded. Stop brooding. "I believe if you can visualize a little simplification that you will get along much better. You seem inclined to get things too complex. . . . I am pulling for you and hope and expect you to be able to run this layout." That advice was followed in the same letter by a detailed tractor assignment list by field number and a suggestion that "you should make a typewritten list of all of the machinery, and you had better make it in triplicate and number each item and put the sheet where it is located."¹⁷

That push seems mostly negative. But it showed both Garvey and his managers what their limits really were and often set those limits well beyond what either would have

imagined. The intense daily interaction with the aggressive Garvey created self-confidence in managers when it did not destroy them. His frankness about people's faults made them sure that he really meant his compliments: "You are a good cattlemen but hell on trucks."¹⁸

He did have a sense of humor and could kid in dark moments. "Your statistics on wind velocity are very interesting," he wrote W. D. Ferguson in Colby shortly after the move to Wichita. "While I was not there as much in 1930 as in the previous 14 years, I hope there was no personal allusion in this comparison."¹⁹

Forced to justify their decisions to Garvey, the managers came to know exactly why they were doing something a certain way. And when they did gain independence and confidence, as John Kriss did as a farm manager, Garvey harassed less and delegated more. And everyone who dealt with him, including his real peers, had to defend themselves against domination. Henry Wear gave Garvey's overbearing instruction short shrift when he wrote in 1944: "So do not give me any more fireside chats—I am too damned busy and there comes a time when too much advice is resented. Do not over do it. . . . I TAKE IT I AM NOT WORKING FOR YOU."²⁰

There were incentives too. Claude Schnellbacher, John Kriss, and Ernest Fogleman, Garvey's three farm managers before his son James took over in 1948, received a modest salary (one hundred to two hundred dollars a month), some off-season work with Service Oil, and a 10 percent share of the farm profits with no downside risk. That was not much of a living for Kriss during the depression, but by 1945 he was earning close to one hundred thousand dollars a year. After the one million bushel wheat crop in 1947, Kriss, who then had a 25 percent profit share on ventures with Garvey, had to come to him for tax advice and to invest in Garvey's Petroleum, Inc., as a tax shelter. In the 1990s the Kriss family farmed fifteen thousand acres on its own, much of it bought in the 1930s and 1940s with and on Garvey's advice. Kriss, whom some thought was taking a job as Garvey's manager in 1933 that would amount to virtual serfdom, found the reality quite different over time. Garvey was a character whom it paid to tolerate.²¹

13. R. H. Garvey to Ernest Fogleman, February 14, 1944, *ibid.*

14. *Ibid.*, March 5, 1944.

15. Ernest Fogleman to R. H. Garvey, March 3, 1944, *ibid.*

16. *Ibid.*, March 5, 1944.

17. R. H. Garvey to Ernest Fogleman, March 4, 1944, *ibid.*

18. R. H. Garvey to W. D. Ferguson, November 2, 1931, folder 31, box 2.

19. *Ibid.*, February 9, 1931, folder 30, box 2.

20. H. C. Wear to R. H. Garvey, March 12, 14, 1944, folder 4, box 20.

21. R. H. Garvey to Willard Garvey, September 19, 1945, folder 7, box 21; Miner, *Harvesting the High Plains*, 150, 177.



Among Garvey's managers was local farmer and landowner Claude Schnellbacher, shown here with his team of "horsepower."

And there was more to it than a temperament. There was a rational system involved.

Garvey had diversity of the kind that allowed him to survive bad times in one business by finding a margin in another. In the 1930s, for instance, he held on to the farm land he had because not all years were a total loss, because he cut costs, and because he had profits from the Service Oil business he had purchased in 1924. The "black legend" about Garvey has it that he bought his land at desperation prices from family farmers dusted out during the Dust Bowl. In fact, he bought little in the depths of the depression, knowing that even if it were free he could not afford the taxes and the planting costs on it. When he did begin buying big again in the early 1940s in Colorado he bought pasture and rangeland, mostly from speculators already holding sizeable pieces of the blocks he wanted for large-scale wheat farming, not isolated grain farms. It was true, as his critics emphasized, that he could hold what he had accumulated, unlike some others. Having studied local history, he knew that weather on the High Plains was cyclic. It was "next year country," and the only way to succeed was to be able to survive the bad years. Anyone who thought otherwise was not thinking straight.

He claimed that diversity was forced on him. "All of the business which I have entered," he wrote, "have been merely the results of optimism."²² He needed a better source of fuel for his tractors in the 1920s, so he bought bulk oil depots and gas stations from a bus line. He needed elevators to store his own grain in the 1930s and 1940s,

22. R. H. Garvey to Willard Garvey, November 20, 1945, folder 7, box 21.

so he bought them in Kansas where he could and built them in Colorado where there were no elevators since no grain had been shipped from the areas he worked in fifteen years. The desire to educate his children caused his move to Wichita; that move steered him into the mortgage investment business, something related to what he already knew. That business led to house mortgages, and eventually, by steps and enhanced

by the World War II housing shortage and heavy defense spending in Wichita, to house construction, rental, and sales. The construction experience with Builders, Inc., combined with his farm experience and the tax advantages of a government program, led him into the construction of his terminal elevators. Tax considerations, too, forced him into the oil production business, investing in Petroleum, Inc.²³ But whether it was a push or a pull, the benefits of diversity to Garvey, and particularly to his wheat farming operation where timing was everything both within and across seasons, were clear. He ran his farms like a business, and he knew how to run a business.

Anticipation was essential always. It was related to memory and local knowledge in that study of history, and all aspects of present operations of others was the key to predicting the future. Garvey was no more a prophet than any other person, although even his enemies credited him with supernatural prescience when what was preparation to him appeared magic to them. It was no more than the focus of any business trying to rationalize conditions on having as much predictability and therefore stability as possible.

"Remember this word, ANTICIPATION," Garvey wrote to a manager once.²⁴ On another occasion in 1930, just as he himself was anticipating the deepening depression and preparing for it, he quoted a slogan he had seen on the wall of a business office in Wichita: "Nine-tenths of wisdom consists of being wise in time." He told Wear that he showed "damned poor judgment" in purchase of cattle

23. The scope of business is well covered in Garvey, *The Obstacle Race*.

24. R. H. Garvey to Ernest Fogleman, June 25, 1943, folder 15, box 16.

in 1943, although the price seemed good, in that “you did not have the foresight to foresee the rollback that came two months later.”²⁵

He understood that it was not circumstances that mattered so much as how management dealt with circumstances. When wheat was thirty cents a bushel, there could still be profit provided costs could be contained accordingly and provided that bets could be hedged in dry years by grazing sheep on fall pasture, not seeding into overdry ground, summer fallowing more territory in the worst years, saving labor expense mostly for harvest, and, most of all, being patient to wait for the cycle to turn without losing one’s assets in a panic. Not only did Garvey have to give up his corporate organization, and thus a source of capital and limited liability during the depression, but he had to change farm managers. Claude Schnellbacher, who had been with him for several years, was an outstanding producer in good years but could not adjust to the severe cost disciplines that Garvey saw were necessary during the depression. However pleasant the association had been, Garvey felt he could not afford to be sentimental about changing horses before it was too late. “The chances are greatly in favor of the Farming Company going broke,” he wrote in the fall of 1931. “We are not working on the basis of 60 cent wheat or \$1.00 wheat and we cannot make our expenditures on that basis. We are working on a basis of the lowest prices for commodity products that this generation has known, and when a company runs out of money it had better quit spending it. . . . I didn’t realize we were in such a serious situation, and I don’t believe you folks realize it yet.”²⁶

Schnellbacher would not anticipate modified conditions and change accordingly; therefore he had to be replaced quickly. It was necessary, he wrote, to make “Claude see that we all make mistakes, but those who insist on continuing to make them, on the theory that they



John Kriss managed the Garvey operation during the Dust Bowl years, adjusting well to the problems of drought and limited production. On Garvey’s advice Kriss began buying his own land and eventually amassed fifteen thousand acres.

are infallible and the mistakes are not mistakes are the ones who go broke first. The rest of us may go broke also but it will take a little longer. We have all made lots of mistakes and we are having to pay through the nose for same, but non-recurring mistakes and non-recurring losses are probably the difference between going broke and continuing operations.”²⁷

A primary discipline Garvey used in planning and accurate anticipation was his personal memory and broad reading in history. He was regionally famous for his encyclopedic recall of his own farming experience, both financially and climatologically, and his penchant for applying those patterns to the next crop. And his historical study went beyond the region and beyond the time of his personal involvement. “It is probable that we do not know it,” he wrote the manager of his oil company in 1931, “but we are in as serious a situation as in 1820, 1857, 1875, or 1893.”²⁸ He read the *Chicago Tribune*, corresponded with congressmen, took the pulse of his various businesses, and then sought historical parallels, whether the current situation suggested the applicability of the lessons of past financial panics or of deflationary periods that tended to follow wars.

His local knowledge, historically as well as in the present, and his ability to correlate it with broader trends was impressive. He never forgot and never tired of remember-

25. R. H. Garvey to Kenneth Crumly, April 19, 1930, folder 7, box 1; Garvey to H. C. Wear, October 3, 1944, folder 5, box 20.

26. R. H. Garvey to Kenneth Crumly, October 29, 1931, folder 27, box 2.

27. *Ibid.*, November 21, 1931.

28. *Ibid.*, December 12, 1931.



Garvey and Kriss found ways to survive during the 1930s, such as grazing sheep on fall wheatlands, gaining some profits from the crop that might not withstand the winter winds and summer drought until a July harvest.

ing his great losses in the cattle business in 1918–1919 and again in 1920–1921 in the postwar price collapse. “It is rather peculiar,” he commented in 1943, “how the crops line up in Thomas County.” He analyzed the clusters of good and bad crops by decades in that county since 1914 and looked for patterns.²⁹ His managers were to send him a telegram every time there was a point of rain anywhere for his records. One of his resultant bromides was that when it stopped raining on the High Plains it was likely to stop for some time, and the reverse was true when the wet years returned. But the cycles were of varying lengths. In 1935 he noted that “In [Grover] Cleveland’s last administration, there were no worthwhile rains to warrant the planting of a crop, but I question whether this is the starting of another thirty year’s drought.”³⁰

He recognized and allowed for changes in historical patterns. “With the income tax like it is now, even with profitable years like 1940 to 1943, I question whether a person can keep a sufficient amount above income tax to stand two to three years like the ones we experienced from 1933 to 1939.”³¹ He recognized that farming was revolutionized “when they began to use gasoline tractors and the elimination of the horse started. Much more crops can be raised now with less labor, but the market for crops has lessened since motor power supplanted horse power.”³²

Both his historical understanding and his grasp of

currently available alternatives came from talking with many people and advising his employees to do the same. Before going into a new business, he informally did much of what would now be called “due diligence.” Shyness was not an option, and Garvey did not seem to have any sense that people might not wish to reveal their secrets to him. Like Dale Carnegie, he seemed to believe that peo-

ple genuinely loved to talk about themselves, and when they were doing so, he was a careful if selective listener.

Based on what he learned, Garvey pursued what seemed to him responsible innovation. “Practical idealism” was perhaps a Kansas characteristic. Certainly Garvey’s visions, however impossible they might seem to some, and however genuinely risky, were, in his mind, achievable. Dryland farming was not new, although it was far from universal on the High Plains in the 1920s when he insisted on it, nor was it easy to explain to the Agricultural Adjustment Administration, which based its subsidy allotments on last year’s planting, when Garvey might well have been purposefully cutting back in anticipation of a dry year. Sheep had been grazed on wheatlands, probably by people who, like Garvey, were trying to get income out of a crop that might not last through the winter winds until harvest in July. The difference with Garvey was the scale of sheep raising and the expertise developed at it by his depression-era manager John Kriss. Wheat had not been grown for some time in areas of eastern Colorado where he bought land in the 1940s, and the Dust Bowl had made it seem to many that it would never be grown again. But it had been grown there before, and Garvey thought he had a system of management, hybrid grains, moisture conservation, equipment, and capital that made his play at breaking sod a responsible innovation. The fact that many did not see it that way made land prices low and provided an economic opportunity. And there had been large-scale farmers in the area, touting the virtues of size and business methods and bitterly criticized by family farmers since T. C. Henry showed off his operation in Dickinson County, Kansas, in the 1870s. Garvey personally studied the history of the operations of James N. Fike in northwest Kansas

29. R. H. Garvey to John Kriss, October 1, 1943, folder 3, box 17.

30. R. H. Garvey to Kenneth Crumly, August 19, 1935, folder 38, box

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31. R. H. Garvey to John Kriss, October 1, 1943, folder 3, box 17.

32. R. H. Garvey to Ernest Fogleman, October 1, 1943, folder 16, box

16.

in the first decade of the twentieth century, and of the Wheat Farming Company at Hays, in which he was an investor, that operated about sixty-five thousand acres in the early 1930s.³³

Of course Garvey could have too many ideas to suit his farm managers. Overwhelmed with the task at hand, they would get letters from him asking if they would like to run a new ranch he had bought, or a restaurant. Would they be interested in organizing a custom combine crew to better utilize the combines they were purchasing?³⁴ Often they did not even dare reply, but Garvey thrived on testing new ideas and new combinations.

Despite anticipation, historical study, local knowledge, and achievable innovation, there was risk. Garvey felt comfortable with the risks of weather. More frustrating was political risk, and Garvey was less astute as a diplomat than a businessman. When Garvey bought his land in Colorado, participation in any government wheat programs required that the local Soil Conservation District Committee certify that breaking sod for wheat was appropriate land use. While many Kansas committees routinely approved Garvey's requests, the Colorado ones did not, and it took a considerable lobbying effort by Garvey and other Kansas buyers such as John Baughman, whom he joined in hiring local attorneys to change the rule that "suitcase" farmers from elsewhere had no vote on these committees.³⁵ Had his breaking permits been refused, he would have had carefully planned and fenceable blocks of wheat farming land that he could use only as pasture, and a massive investment in wheat equipment and personnel would have gone down the drain.

Public relations was problematical. "Garvey and Kriss," Coloradan H.C. Wear once wrote, "being wholesale wheat growers, are starting to tear up the country around



Through careful planning, willingness to adjust, and cost cutting, Garvey held on to his farmland during the devastating drought of the 1930s. This western Kansas field displays the ravages of high winds and no rain.

Sheridan Lake [Colorado]. . . . I believe you . . . will agree with me that we are going to have some pleasure listening to what the natives say about our ambitious Kansas friends."³⁶ Kansas congressman Clifford Hope, who was from western Kansas and served on the Agriculture Committee, supported strict soil use restrictions to guard against a return of the Dust Bowl. Hope was a conservative and said he agreed with Garvey on many things but thought he was wrong in his Colorado sod breaking. He wrote to Garvey in 1945:

The sod you are breaking out now isn't going to make much difference as far as the world's food supply is concerned. . . . The things that we are short on now are those things which are produced through methods of diversified farming rather than by those who farm several thousand acres of wheat land from a distance . . . western Kansas has suffered so much from the type of farming that you are doing that I cannot bring myself to feel too concerned about the order of which you complain.³⁷

Garvey replied that "the soil in Western Kansas blew in, geologists tell us, and it blows around easily, and whether farmed by suitcase farmers or others, when you have a combination of dry weather and poor prices it will probably blow again." Farm regulation was a New Deal plot, he said, to tell farmers where to live and what to do and to take the country down the "Road to Serfdom" until it, like

33. Miner, *Harvesting the High Plains*, 7–8, 35, 63.

34. R. H. Garvey to Kenneth Crumly, March 29, 1944, folder 9, box 19; Garvey to Ernest Fogleman, July 27, 1944, folder 22, box 18.

35. R. H. Garvey to John Baughman, June 1, 1945, folder 12, box 20.

36. H. C. Wear to H. C. Healy and Jack Denison, March 27, 1945, folder 6, box 22.

37. Clifford Hope to R. H. Garvey, June 5, 1945, folder 9, box 21.



Garvey surveys some of his vast farming empire, which spread throughout western Kansas and eastern Colorado.

Russia, could not produce food at all.³⁸ He was partisan enough to tell a friend during the depression that he hoped for the end of “Dust and Democrats” and a return to “Rain and Republicans,” but did not brook with the GOP and its main-line candidates either when it crossed him.³⁹

Hope was polite about such excesses in Garvey, who had a deep hatred of government and could not quite approach any politician rationally (he was prone to call them “cockroaches”). Others were not so polite, and Garvey, when his frankness turned to colorful insult, made powerful enemies. Garvey told Kriss in the 1940s to keep moving, to give his instructions by telephone, and not to stop in any towns in Colorado. Wear wrote in capitals that “YOU SURE AS HELL NEED A LOT OF THE COMMODITY KNOWN AS GOOD WILL.”⁴⁰ There was a gamble involved and it could have gone much differently. Needless to say, too, Garvey lost money, big money at times, not only in agriculture, but in other enterprises. “Losses are not as easy to take as profits,” he wrote, “but a person has to keep trying or they will not take profits.”⁴¹

Minimizing risk involved incorporating knowledge and experience into a system that could be applied consistently. Probably Garvey was deficient on the consistency part and set a poor example himself for his rules of focus

and one thing at a time. But there was a system based on a folklore of experience, and it was not entirely idiosyncratic. Garvey’s letters were his manual of procedures, his personnel department, and his training program. There was a definite “way things are done around here,” and the standardization meant that lessons learned gave cumulative benefit. “This is the sound way to farm that ground,” Garvey wrote in 1930, “and it is certain to come. Ninety per cent of the little farmers are incapable from a standpoint of knowledge, finances and will to do the right kind of work to handle power machinery profitably. We also may be incapable of it but

we have the best man there on farming and the volume of land for the operations.”⁴²

That Garvey farmed on a large scale was perhaps his greatest public relations dilemma and political risk as well as his most important business lever. The anti-“chain farming” movement hit his agricultural operations first in 1930 at the same time as the antichain-store movement threatened his string of gas stations with Farmer’s Union competition. And it was a constant thereafter. Garvey’s early farm corporation partner W. D. Ferguson was so frightened of his association ruining his reputation in Colby that he asked Garvey to keep it a secret.⁴³

Garvey favored attack rather than hiding and called the anticorporate sentiment “another Ku Klux program.” As to his large farming corporation, “I have no apology to make for it and no defense to offer. I hope it will make money. It is my loss if it doesn’t.”⁴⁴ It was time, he said, to get centralized and standardized.

I have petered along with indifferent tenants for the past ten years, and if I had been having it farmed as Schnellbacher farms, my rents would have amounted to from five to ten thousand dollars more each year. On the present basis the tenants such as have been messing with my land would break me over the next ten years. . . . There is no use leaving machines idle. If they will handle more ground and we have it avail-

38. R. H. Garvey to Clifford Hope, June 8, 1945, *ibid.*

39. R. H. Garvey to W. D. Ferguson, March 26, 1935, folder 3, box 7.

40. R. H. Garvey to John Kriss, April 19, 1945, folder 13, box 21; *ibid.*, April 16, 1945, *ibid.*

41. R. H. Garvey to Kenneth Crumly, April 16, 1931, folder 26, box 2.

42. R. H. Garvey to W. D. Ferguson, June 18, 1930, folder 12, box 1.

43. W. D. Ferguson to R. H. Garvey, March 25, 1930, *ibid.*

44. R. H. Garvey to W. D. Ferguson, March 31, June 18, 1930, *ibid.*

able, why not handle it. Cutting down acreage in Thomas County is bunk. It is a race to see who must quit, and I believe we are in an airplane, and we are not just competing with the smaller farmers of Thomas County, but with the large raisers of Canada, Australia and Argentine. I believe we can produce wheat as low per bushel as they can.⁴⁵



As the rains returned to western Kansas in 1939 and the 1940s, Garvey's wheat empire was once again in full swing and continuing to grow. Garvey would actively and energetically pursue his farming and other business ventures until his untimely death in 1959. The photo is of a wheat harvest around Colby, ca. 1950.

Rexford Tugwell in Washington was talking in 1934 about taking seven million acres of High Plains land out of production. "It would not be an unthinkable procedure," Ferguson commented to Garvey, "to shoo us all out of here and turn this back to the Indians." That, to those men, was ludicrous, but there was a time he could only hope that the New Deal agencies "may run out of letters before they get around to us and that may save us."⁴⁶

Real life excited Garvey, and so he loved business with its harsh and surprising feedback. He liked farming best, characterizing his other large businesses for years as "sidelines." I think keeping busy with one's business, family and friends," he wrote in the 1940s, "if all are interesting, is a pretty good way to spend the next fifty years."⁴⁷ Ten years earlier, in the depths of the depression, he claimed he was still having fun. "This is an interesting period to live through," he wrote W. D. Ferguson, "if one lives through it."⁴⁸

The way to survive was to learn the lessons of nature and of the market, to innovate, to produce at low cost, and to sell as high as possible. None of that was automatic, but one had to adjust to conditions. In writing to Ferguson in 1930 about that banker's "complex" concerning the controversy in Colby over large farming, Garvey noted that

"this is the same proposition that has existed since 1885 as the different changes took place in agriculture and, first, when the cattle men had their range cut down by homesteaders and the homesteaders in turn had their cattle range cut down by farming operations, etc." Four years later Ferguson was willing to agree that it was wise "to look at things as they are and not as you think they ought to be."⁴⁹

That is good advice for historians too. Garvey is the type of figure many of them love to hate. A certified genius, he was an anti-intellectual and encouraged Ferguson, who was on the Kansas Board of Regents, to cut back salaries at the universities and get rid of left-wing professors.⁵⁰ His right-wing political views do not fit academia either, nor his aggressive, often simplistic way of expressing them. But as an entrepreneur in wheat he must be taken seriously as the harbinger of a world in farming that some may wish had not arrived but which is increasingly a fact. There is no need to replace one mythology with another to recognize that there are a range of satisfactory approaches to farming, and that the bucolic utopia of the yeoman family farmer was probably never what it was supposed to be.



45. *Ibid.*, July 8, 1930, folder 13, box 1.

46. W. D. Ferguson to R. H. Garvey, January 3, 1934, folder 1, box 6.

47. R. H. Garvey to Willard Garvey, September 19, 1945, folder 7, box

21.

48. R. H. Garvey to W. D. Ferguson, January 5, 1934, folder 1, box 6.

49. *Ibid.*, September 13, 1930, folder 13, box 1; W. D. Ferguson to R. H. Garvey, September 18, 1934, folder 3, box 6.

50. R. H. Garvey to W. D. Ferguson, September 20, 1934, *ibid.*; Ferguson to Garvey, December 2, 1933, folder 4, box 4; Garvey to Ferguson, December 6, 1933, *ibid.*