

MEMORANDUM

July 15, 2012

The growing season started off so fine in the Midwest this spring, writes William B. Dickinson in this communication from Lawrence, Kansas. A mild winter moved up the harvest of hard red winter wheat into May, and Kansas farmers were emboldened to turn around the plant soybeans – double cropping. “Then came Mother Nature’s comeuppance,” Dickinson reports. “Drought and searing temperatures spread across the Midwest in June and July, damaging crops and confirming the old-timers’ warning that no harvest is sure until the grain is in the bin.”

Now the fraught farm scene has caught public attention. Rising commodity prices can translate into higher food prices at the supermarket. The inconvenience for Americans pales in comparison to the impact of grain shortages and higher food costs in poor nations. For Dickinson, a former Washington editor and journalism professor, this summer’s weather drama inspires him to revisit family legends. His great-great grandfather and family moved from Virginia to northeastern Kansas in the 1850s to buy land being offered for \$1 an acre. The hardship of their life on the Kansas frontier was common in those days.

“Today, the ‘family farm,’ if not an oxymoron, requires new definition,” Dickinson writes. “Families are much smaller because mechanization changed the economics of farming....A whole field can be planted or fertilized without touching the steering wheels of modern tractors....No wonder that so many memoirs from farm country are filled with bittersweet nostalgia for a way of life that is long lost.

“Each time a generation passes in these parts, we are reminded of a way of life that has disappeared,” Dickinson concludes. “We can only guess at the changes still to come. First, we will be looking to this summer’s unsparing sky to see if the weather turns in our favor.”

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