“You’re a Bigger Man”: Technology and Agrarian Masculinity in Postwar America

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American farmers of the postwar period reduced labor requirements for production through the use of new machines and chemicals. Farm work was increasingly managerial and less physical. Observers struggled with how to represent this businesslike and technocratic farmer, first promoting space age, push-button imagery and then the notion of the “farmer in the business suit,” before turning away from images of actual farm folk toward increasingly hyper-masculine paid models. This shift also corresponded with challenges to traditional masculinity, including the Cold War, the Farm Crisis, a proliferation of new masculinities, second-wave feminism, a growing number of women farm operators, and a new identity as a beleaguered minority. By boosting the size and stature of farm men, advertisers reassured farmers that even during a period of rapid social and cultural change and one in which the physical requirements of farming declined, farmers remained strong.

In January 1960 the agricultural machinery manufacturing giant International Harvester (IH) advertised a bold claim: “YOU’RE A BIGGER MAN WITH AN IH TRACTOR.” The image depicted a pastoral landscape with the sun low in the sky over a tractor at work in the field. The scene is dominated by a giant male figure, standing in a grove of timber, sleeves rolled up, and gazing over his domain. In addition to its scale, the image depicts power due to the assertive body position, facing forward with hands on hips, making an already large figure look bigger.¹

If advertising is the science of persuasion, then the audience for this image is important. The IH executives who accepted the Bigger Man campaign did

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not need to convince farmers of the value of tractors. After all, many of those farmers lived through the transition from horse and mule power to machine. That fight was over, and for most American farmers, tractors won.

So why did producers who were already committed to tractors and the accompanying suite of machines have to be sold on becoming bigger men? This essay addresses the changing depictions of American farm masculinity in the post–World War II period, focusing in particular on the relationship between labor-saving technology and farm imagery. I suggest that farm experts and advertisers sought new depictions of masculinity in the face of a rapidly changing landscape of farm work. They worked through several iterations of masculinity that emphasized business and technical expertise, but the depictions that came to dominate print culture were increasingly hyper-masculine, emphasizing physical prowess and stature.

While other scholars have addressed changing masculinities across North America and Europe, my emphasis is on the ways in which the story unfolded in the United States, particularly in a rural midwestern context. To make sense of the advertisements for farm machinery, I begin by discussing the roots of the postwar labor shortage and then describe three main issues in the process of redefining American farm masculinity. The first issue was the 1950s effort to emphasize technological expertise and business acumen.
in agriculture, a project that de-emphasized the physicality of agricultural labor. This was a trend that dated to the late nineteenth century, but one that received renewed attention in the postwar period. The second issue was that of remaking the physical form of farm males from everyday folks of all descriptions into a uniformly muscular agrarian ideal. Finally, I will address some of the social, economic, and cultural currents—that help make sense of this anatomical transformation in representations of farm men.

The root of much of this change is found in World War II. Could farmers meet wartime production goals with less labor and less access to labor-saving machinery? When President Roosevelt signed the Burke-Wadsworth Act in 1940, creating the first peacetime draft in American history, farm owners and principal operators were exempt from the draft to ensure a consistent supply of food, oil, and fiber production for national security. Farm laborers who picked much of the corn, cotton, hops, fruits, and vegetables, chopped the cotton, or worked as bindlestiffs, however, were not exempt. Those workers enlisted in the armed forces, were drafted, or found employment in defense industries. To compound the rural labor shortage, the Roosevelt administration restricted farm machinery production. Military vehicles were more important than farm tractors and tractor-drawn implements such as corn pickers and combines. Farmers who wanted labor-saving technology had to apply to a local board for a permit to acquire a machine, and even if they obtained a permit there was no guarantee that there would be a machine to purchase.

The threat of the labor shortage continued after the war, although many farm owners were in a favorable financial position to take advantage of the latest technology. Many former farm laborers stayed in cities where wages were high, they could escape Jim Crow, or they could avoid the discomfort of sharing the same house and outhouse with their employer. Farmers who had saved money and paid down mortgages on land and chattels purchased electric motors to replace hired hands, thanks to cheap electricity provided by the REA and TVA. No longer would each farmer shovel tons of feed and manure by hand every year or haul and hoist heavy milk and cream cans every day. Farmers retired and sold draft animals and invested in new tractors and specialized tractor-drawn machines such as combines, corn pickers, forage harvesters, and hay balers. As a result, the farm equipment industry consolidated its hold on the countryside, a development often welcomed by people who had endured years of wear and tear on their bodies.5

As farming mechanized in the postwar period, two new versions of the
American farmer gained traction. The first, farmer as technocrat, found expression in space-age imagery. The second, the farmer in the business suit, echoed the more prosaic imagery of the grey flannel suit that characterized the respectable conformity of American business culture and the growing suburban middle class. Images of the farmer as technically savvy and a businessman were not new but were increasingly important after the crises of the Great Depression and World War II passed. With the restoration of prosperity (albeit incomplete) and peace (also incomplete), there were few obstacles to the growth of these representations of the farm man.

The first of these two ideals, the farmer as technocrat, was often suggested by cartoons in the farm press. In 1950 the Iowa-based magazine *Wallaces’ Farmer* published a cartoon featuring a farmer in bed, waking to an alarm clock ringing at 3:00 a.m. But instead of preparing to work, the man stretched out his leg to a console marked with buttons labeled “chores,” “feeding cows,” “slopping hogs,” and “milking” and tapped the milking button with his toe. The questioning title of this futuristic image, “Pushbuttons by ’60?,” raised the issue of what role manual labor would play on the farm of the future. Another cartoon depicted two young boys sitting on a log, fishing. In the background, a tractor pulled a hay baler fitted with a bale thrower that fired the bales into a wagon. One of the boys remarked, “I haven’t minded being replaced by automation.” Of course he wouldn’t. Bucking seventy-five-pound bales on a blistering day is hard work, especially for children. Less amusingly, yet another cartoon depicted a father holding his young son over his knee, spanking him. The man explained to his wife, “This is about the only thing I have to do by hand anymore.”

These cartoons addressed the replacement of physical labor with machines, a phenomenon known as “push-button farming.” Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, futurists invoked “push-button” in multiple contexts, including a prime-time animated program, *The Jetsons*, which brought that ethic to the small screen in 1962. Push-button futurists, on the farm and off, envisioned a world in which the work people performed was intellectual and emotional rather than physical. The outer space reality of 1962 was arguably more Soviet than American, though. While President John Kennedy called for Americans to put a man on the moon by 1970, the Soviets enjoyed more successes in the early space race.

If the actual space race was undecided in the late 1950s and early 1960s, space-age farming was an American triumph. In 1957 the Kansas State College magazine *Ag Student* published a cartoon of a space-age farmer on its
cover, captioned “Ag in 2000 A.D.” The farmer sat comfortably in the middle of the image, surrounded by television monitors and controls, with machines such as an “atomic milker” and “radioactive egg producer.” Monitors showed a radio-controlled tractor at work as well as livestock herded onto a rocket destined for winter pasture—on Mars. Most important, however, was the position of the farmer. He reclined in comfort with legs crossed, receiving information through headgear while adjusting a control panel, with a refreshing drink on the table. There was no physical work for him. The work of
this space-age farmer required more brain than brawn, much like the 1950 push-button image from *Wallaces’ Farmer*, not to mention George Jetson or the Jetson’s robot-maid, Rosie.

By the 1960s there was some truth to the 1950 prediction of push-button agriculture. Farmers across the country installed automated materials-handling systems that, in effect, made them into bigger men. A photo of a real farmer from the cover of a 1964 issue of *Electricity on the Farm* encouraged farmers to use push buttons to “put positive chore power under your thumb.” The figure in the image leans against the control panel, applying power in a feeding operation to do in minutes with a machine what would have previously taken hours by hand. It was an reassuring message of agrarian masculinity through technological mastery, but it was one that left farmers with the physique of an office worker.9

The second image that emerged from the 1950s was the farmer in a busi-
ness suit, which was the title of a 1957 book by economist and assistant secretary of agriculture John H. Davis and farm writer Kenneth Hinshaw. In 1955 Davis coined the term “agribusiness” and developed the idea in a publication of the Harvard University business school in 1957 titled *A Concept of Agribusiness*. Historian Shane Hamilton has explored how Davis developed the idea of agribusiness as a way for farmers to remain viable in a rapidly changing marketplace. In *Farmer in a Business Suit*, the authors hoped to reach a popular audience by tracing the “transition from the self-sufficient farming of the old homestead to the modern combination of agriculture and business that now provides our great abundance of food and fiber.” They conjured a fictitious family with the telling surname of Yeoman to share this story of innovation and progress.¹⁰

According to Davis and Hinshaw, American agriculture moved through three periods: the Earthbound Era, the Transition, and the Agribusiness Era. The Agribusiness Era, in short, provided both forward and backward linkages to enable farmers to prosper amid rapid change. Throughout the first two eras, the key to prosperity was increased production, which, according to the authors, was often as ruinous as it was profitable. The key to prosperity in the new era, they argued, was integration and coordination.¹¹

At the conclusion of the book, patriarch Carl Yeoman claimed, “Farming must stand shoulder to shoulder with its related businesses. In other words, we put the farmer in a business suit.” Lest the reader miss the message, Davis and Hinshaw made the connection explicit. “Mom,” son David asked, “do you suppose one of those suits would fit me?” She replied, “What suit, David? Oh, I get it—you mean you want to be the farmer in the business suit.” After locking eyes with her husband, Carl, and sharing a moment of pride, mother gave her blessing. “I do believe a Yeoman could wear that suit with pride . . . and distinction.”¹²

If farming became more businesslike, then how would farmers be represented? No one, not even Davis and Hinshaw, expected that the farmer would literally wear a business suit, let alone a space suit. Farming still required contact with soil, grease, manure, livestock, and chemicals. Overalls, blue jeans, and work shirts, not grey flannel, was optimal clothing for agriculture. If anything, farmers became the “Businessman in a Blue Denim Suit,” as suggested by the 1960 advertising campaign for Master Mix Feeds. Here, the “profit conscious” farmer was pictured speaking on the telephone, seated in a leather chair at a desk in the middle of a pasture. Other advertisements in the “Blue Denim Suit” series showed a farmer at a factory-style time clock reviewing
Technology and Agrarian Masculinity in Postwar America

records and another studying a maquette of a modern farmstead. Master Mix Feeds reconciled the activities of the businessman with denim overalls, reflecting the growing importance of cost accounting, management, expertise, and marketing in American agriculture. For farm owners like the ones represented in the advertisements, physical labor was no longer the most important part of agriculture. Farming was a sophisticated endeavor, requiring a sophisticated executive for success. Like the space-age farmer, the businessman-farmer representation de-emphasized the physicality of agriculture, merely requiring

Figure 4. Master Mix Feeds advertisement, “Businessman in the Blue Denim Suit,” Farm Journal 84, no. 5 (May 1960): 52C
A change in garments. Several scholars have addressed shifts in representations of masculinity in advertising and rural discourse, especially in relation to technology and business skill. In 1995 sociologist Berit Brandth conducted a groundbreaking study on rural masculinity as depicted in Norwegian tractor advertisements. Brandth concluded that technology and masculinity were mutually constructed, with tractor use marking male identity on the farm. In the context of the 1990s, however, Brandth described a new form of masculinity emerging in farm advertising, with the physically strong mechanic yielding to a white-collar businessman constructed to “match a more scientific form of agriculture.” For Brandth, the new ideal was the farmer in the business suit. More recently, historians Joshua Brinkman and Richard Hirsch analyzed advertisements in midwestern farm periodicals, emphasizing the importance of images that depicted what they labeled high-tech practitioners. Sociologist Shannon Bell and her co-authors observed a “manipulated masculinity” in their 2015 study of representations of male farmers in the American context. Like Brandth, they saw a transition away from depictions of the rugged farmer who performed demanding physical labor and toward depictions of farmers as businessmen.

But Brandth, Bell, and others missed two important things about farm advertising. The first is that engagement with technological mastery was not especially new. Stretch the temporal scope and we see it early and often; Catherine Wilson highlighted it in her study of the discourse around plowing matches in nineteenth-century Ontario; Deborah Fitzgerald explained the significance of business skill and technology in the first half of the twentieth century in Every Farm a Factory. More recently, Brinkman and Hirsch showed the connections between technology narratives from the early twentieth century and the late twentieth century. Advertisers and farm commentators had linked perceptions of masculinity with ideals of modernity long before World War II.

The second thing that the sociologists missed is the body. The emphasis on positioning male figures as technocratic businessmen obscured the importance of the physical form. Katherine Jellison’s work is instructive on this point. She called attention to the importance of the muscular, sculpted form of men’s bodies in advertising and propaganda during World War II. In her telling, advertisers and government artists framed men’s bodies on the farm the way they framed those of GIs and naval gunners. Even if wartime propagandists failed to convincingly valorize farm work the way they did military
service, masculine farm imagery affirmed the patriotic and war-winning work of farm producers, justifying their draft exemptions.\textsuperscript{18}

Despite the prevalence of hyper-masculine US government poster campaigns and the Madison Avenue blitz, there were still everyday folks to be found. Government films such as the REA’s \textit{Power on the Land} (1940), the USDA’s \textit{Henry Browne, Farmer} (1942), and the TVA’s \textit{The Valley of the Tennessee} (1944) all depicted strong but unassuming men and their families who tilled the land. The everyday people such as William Parkinson from \textit{Power on the Land} and Henry Clark from \textit{The Valley of the Tennessee} returned to farm marketing after the war as the farm muscle men Jellison described faded in importance. Parkinson, Clarke, and Browne were undoubtedly strong, but their stature, girth, and appearance were not exceptional; they were plain folk. So, too, did postwar farm advertisements frequently feature real farmers, photographed on farms complete with names, locations, and testimonials. When advertisers created symbolic farmers in original artwork, they were plain folk, too.

By the late 1950s, however, the consequences of the technological and business revolutions became apparent. International Harvester’s “bigger man” entered the farm scene at the same that the Allis-Chalmers company introduced a tractor with a power shift lever they labeled the “big stick.”\textsuperscript{19} The eight graduated speeds of the Allis-Chalmers stick made any farmer “the boss,” suggesting that those who lacked the big stick were less powerful and less able to manage farm work. Many of these advertisements produced between the 1950s and the 1980s featured renderings or illustrations of farmers rather than photographs, reflecting the human scale of the producer, even as the technology sized up.

In the 1980s, photographs of human subjects became more common in farm advertisements again. This time, however, the real farmers or plain folk receded, replaced by models who matched a particular profile, invariably white and increasingly beefy over the course of the 1990s and early 2000s. The bigger, more powerful machines and technology summoned bigger men that could not always be found on the farm. An advertisement for Lasso herbicide in 1983 showed the transition, featuring the head and shoulders of a model farmer on one page with a composite of four real farmers on the facing page, also pictured in head and shoulder shots with testimonials.\textsuperscript{20} The real farmers were a mixed lot of size and shape, but clearly just folks. By the millennium, it was difficult to find the everyday people of farm country in advertisements. In 2000 Zeneca Ag Products announced that it was time to make wild oat
herbicides “earn their pay” with a square-jawed, cleft-chinned farmer built like a linebacker. These carefully cultivated advertisements presented the farm man as physically capable.

Such invocations of male physicality have been ubiquitous in the twenty-first century. Examples from just one year provide ample evidence of the trend. One 2013 herbicide advertisement presented a solid-looking, stubble-bearded man with a requisite chore coat and the caption “It’s Man vs. Weed,” framing the problem of weed control as one in which the stakes of failure somehow seemed more important than simply the economic cost of a weedy field. The challenge was as simple as the call to “Man up with Massey.” An advertisement for Valley Irrigation foregrounded the head and shoulders of yet another stubble-bearded model farmer, wearing a cap that looked as if it was run over by a bush hog. The caption informed viewers that using Valley products offered proof “that you know what you’re doing.” While the advertisement copy was about knowledge, the image was all beef. More tellingly, on the opposite page from the advertisement there was a photo of a real farmer in a news story about irrigation. Unlike the model farmer, the real one was clean-shaven and looked as though he might be a middle school teacher, a cousin at anyone’s family reunion, or, perhaps, a historian at a conference. The juxtaposition of the model farmer and the real farmer in the pages of the magazine highlights the fiction of the agrarian muscle man.

In a final 2013 example, the editors of Successful Farming titled a story about the threat of western corn rootworms “The Return of the Billion Dollar Bug” and illustrated the piece with comic book, superhero-style images. The full-page illustrated panel at the beginning of the story depicted two bulky white male figures defending a corn field from an onslaught of giant western corn rootworm beetles. These cartoon men faced the threat armed only with clenched fists and shields. The association of superhero imagery with the farm male may have drawn a smile from subscribers, even though the insect threat was real. Of course there was no way to combat beetles by hand, but the message was that men needed to be physically strong as well as informed and vigilant.

Not every tractor, chemical, and machinery advertisement from this period was hyper-masculine. In some cases, tractor and machinery advertisements only suggested a farmer, focusing the viewer’s attention on the machine rather than the operator. There are numerous other examples of the farmer as family man, depicting connections across three generations. In some of these advertisements, there is a ghost image of a father or grandfather mirroring
the actions of the present-day farmer, posing the question for the viewer of whether or not the son could match the skill and persistence of his ancestors. Children were present in some advertisements, reinforcing the importance of patrimony or intergenerational succession. Still other advertisements depicted women and men as experts, with men consulting with and learning from female scientists, engineers, or sales representatives.

Women as producers, however, appeared in very few advertisements. In one notable Case IH advertisement from 1991, the Illinois farm woman pictured in the advertisement stated, “Our Magnum tractor is so easy to handle, I can pay more attention to what’s going on outside the cab.” Here, advertisers actually reinforced the narrative of agriculture’s declining physical requirements by emphasizing ease of operation using a woman’s voice. Most often, postwar farm advertisements showed men. More tellingly, even when physical stature was not the focus of the advertisement, those farmer-business-technocrat-family men increased in size.

What accounts for this change? While this discussion of the changing representations of masculinity thus far has been from the point of view of the tractor seat, dairy parlor, and feedlot, there were political, social, and economic transitions that help explain the need for a “bigger man” on the farm.

The emerging Cold War touched almost every aspect of life in the United States, including manhood. Political leaders not only framed the world in an us versus them binary, but also in terms of hard versus soft. Voters valued the leaders who could be hardest on communism, questioning or rejecting those who were too soft. It was a period in which the nation experienced a missile gap and a muscle gap. In the 1960 presidential election campaign, Senator John Kennedy derided the Eisenhower administration for falling behind the Soviet Union in the number of missiles in its atomic arsenal. While the missile gap had actually closed by 1960, the perception that American boys and men might not match Ivan remained.

In a December 1960 essay in *Sports Illustrated*, president-elect Kennedy called out “The Soft American,” lamenting the poor condition of America’s youth, especially boys. Kennedy subsequently expanded the Eisenhower administration’s program on youth physical fitness to prepare cold warriors. Calls for middle-class boys and men to become more physically fit were not new, of course, with Progressive Era manifestations through Boy Scouting, military preparedness, and college football. But those calls were reenergized in the postwar context of NSC–68, with totalitarian communism an unflagging, existential threat around the globe, on Main Street, and in the suburban cul-de-sac.
In the midst of the Cold War, as Elaine Tyler May explained, one of the important narratives of American distinctiveness and superiority was that middle-class men earned the family wage. The man in the grey flannel suit could support a wife and children in comfort, vindicating America’s version of guns and butter capitalism. That vision of the family wage, however, was eroding. The pressure on a single income increased as middle-class Americans welcomed the postwar brand of consumption with one or two automobiles, larger homes, and increasingly expensive expectations for child-rearing. Furthermore, the vision of the family wage was under attack from within the family. Many women experienced “the problem that has no name,” as Betty Friedan explained in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), and they consequently sought more fulfillment and income working outside the home.  

New masculinities emerged in American culture at the same time. Much of this developed in an urban context, with young male consumers receiving new attention from advertisers. In the 1980s and 1990s, discourse in Madison Avenue’s trade magazine *Advertising Age* focused on the proliferation of men’s magazines. Many of these new publications were dedicated to fashion, lifestyle, and the rhetoric of self-care through consumerism. It was a new market with new sensibilities; Old Spice aftershave and Lucky Tiger hair tonic gave way to Axe Body Spray and “product.” New or reworked masculinities gained traction across the country during this period, especially in urban settings. These included “sensitive new age guys,” metrosexuals, hipsters, and multiple expressions of queer identities.

The connection between the Cold War and the late twentieth-century florescence of masculinities is more apparent than meets the eye, in large part because conditions on the farm were not static, either. The Farm Crisis of the 1980s further undermined the Cold War narrative of masculine power. It was the largest farm crash since the late 1950s, causing pain for every member of the farm family and across communities. When commodity prices collapsed, those who had borrowed to purchase land and invest in technology and buildings were exposed. The loss of control was hard on everyone, especially men who had experienced significant power as farm decision makers. As Mark Friedberger and Pamela Riney-Kehrberg have noted, the shame of confronting foreclosure and accepting relief and the attendant loss of position and privilege damaged male confidence.

Of even greater importance was the role women played in renegotiating their places in the social landscape in this period. Americans saw it on the small screen on the CBS network’s *Mary Tyler Moore Show*. The protagonist
lived independently of a man and worked in a position of responsibility, reflecting a growing reality for many urban women. In rural America, women took on new advocacy roles in farm organizations and emerged as important spokespeople in farm activism, as Jenny Barker Devine has taught us. The substitution of machinery for labor placed a premium on women's work in fields and farmyards. New tractors with power steering made it easier and less tiring for both men and women to do field work. Automated materials-handling systems discounted the premium of upper body strength, making it possible for more women to make ever larger contributions in production agriculture, which had been a goal for many farm women for decades.

In fact, the number of farms with women as principal operators increased in the late twentieth century. The 2007 census of agriculture indicated that since 1978, the first year that farm operators could report their sex, the number of farms with a female principal operator increased from just over one hundred thousand to over three hundred thousand, a change from 5 percent of all farms to 14 percent. Even when there was a significant decline in women as principal operators between 2007 and 2012, the decline in women farm operators was less than the decline for men.

Furthermore, scholars have demonstrated that women's off-farm labor became ever more important during this period. From the vantage point of the 1980s, Deborah Fink noted that women's off-farm work in the previous decades was often low-status and that there were few good options for women to work in town. Still, a growing portion of farm women took town jobs, simultaneously providing family income and, ideally, obtaining employer-sponsored health insurance to cover the rising healthcare costs that Americans confronted. While many farm women never abandoned the productive work of agriculture and in many cases preferred farming to off-farm work, they assumed new duties to enhance family security. For men whose wives worked, the farm routine was often disrupted, with children assuming more duties and men often doing more housework and child-rearing. As one Iowa farm family reported in 1959, the children started supper while the father who remained at home prepared his own noon dinner and attempted "to be on hand when the children get home from school."

Women's growing contributions to farm family income and the fact that more women than ever before were identified as farm operators was the new social and economic reality of agriculture. And yes, the changing position of women in agricultural production and the broader contours of postwar feminism mattered in farm advertising, resulting in a conspiracy of silence. As the
number of women in agriculture grew, they remained largely invisible in farm advertisements, and men’s bodies in those advertisements grew bigger.

The growing size of American farms also heightened the perceived need for changing representations of farm men. While the total amount of cropland in the United States was largely stable in the postwar period, with some exceptions for the federal Soil Bank and Conservation Reserve Programs, the average farm size grew significantly. In 1945 the average farm was approximately two hundred acres, and by the early twenty-first century the average size more than doubled. Of course, that average obscures even more dramatic changes in the amount of land controlled by a single operator through the combination of ownership and renting. Furthermore, a growing share of production came from only a handful of ever larger farms. The demand to spread less labor over more acres was an appeal for a bigger man.

The final trend that bears on the transformation of images of agrarian masculinity is the very real sense that rural people shared of becoming an endangered minority. At the end of World War II, approximately 20 percent of the American population was engaged in agriculture, while by the mid-1970s only 5 percent were farmers. Historians John Shover and Gilbert Fite recognized this trend in their book titles, with Shover’s *First Majority, Last Minority* published in 1976 and Fite’s *American Farmers, The New Minority* in 1981. Today, it is a hackneyed truism to note that less than 2 percent of Americans are engaged in production agriculture, but it is no less significant for its banality. Historians have focused on the implications of this trend in terms of productivity, land use, environment, technology, and the decline of farm neighborhoods and small-town Main Streets.

Yet for all of our scholarly attention to this demographic transformation, we have missed some of its social and cultural significance. While the number of farms declined and the size of farms increased, the scale of technology has increased, with ever larger tractors, seed drills, spray booms, and combine heads at work on the land, there has been a corresponding desire on the part of advertisers to represent farmers as bigger, too. These representations have served as a balm for those whose vision of rural masculinity has fractured from within and without.

David Danbom, in his popular textbook on the history of rural America *Born in the Country*, concluded by asking if the differences between the farm lifestyle and the urban/suburban lifestyle matter much anymore. Rural people shop online, watch Netflix and HBO, and share the same social media platforms, school curricula, and fast-food restaurants as urban people. Many small-
town newspapers that once helped define those communities and their issues are gone. Even the *Des Moines Register*, once a statewide paper that covered agriculture and rural communities, abandoned its separate farm section years ago, leaving rural subscribers with less corn and more Kardashians.

If farm work became more managerial and businesslike than it used to be, then even the contours of the farmer’s year have been somewhat flattened, putting a premium on the ability to interpret data and act on it, regardless of season or task. Farmers really have come to be businessmen, albeit without the business suit. So how much is different between town and country? The biggest difference that remains may well be the advertisements that target farm producers.

For advertisers, the motivation to reassure farm men and boys of their physical prowess is clear. The substitution of models for actual farmers allowed those advertisers to sculpt the image of farmers in ways that positioned their products and the men that used them as all-powerful. We do not know what this visual feedback meant for farm men and boys. Visual culture theorists tell us that images not only reflect a viewer’s reality but also shape the viewer. From our vantage point, we can see that when those men and boys looked at publications directed toward their work, they observed a very narrow version of masculinity, one that remained backward looking and defensive. This iteration does not augur well for the future of masculinity in the countryside. In *Left Behind: Decline and Rage in Rural America*, sociologist Robert Wuthnow argued that rural Americans share a sense of grievance, a resentment toward Washington and outsiders who, they believe, control their lives. 39 The disconnect between the rhetoric of rural people as victims that Wuthnow examined and images of farmers as powerful producers in advertisements is fuel for frustration, rage, and toxic masculinity.

Regrettably, this discussion of the context for changing representations of masculinity has many limitations, most notably that it is more speculative than substantiated. The International Harvester archives do not contain materials relating to the development of the Bigger Man campaign. Few observers, advertisers, or farmers publicly discussed their concerns or anxieties about the place of manhood in the transformation of farming. Furthermore, much of the source material used here is primarily midwestern and reflects corporate interest in appealing to white farmers. The intersection of rural patriarchy and Christianity is also untouched. The Biblical injunction for man to exercise dominion over the earth and for man to be the head of the house as Christ was the head of the church propped up a particular version of masculinity that
was also undergoing challenges and change. Despite these caveats, this essay is an effort to move our discussion of rural masculinity forward by connecting social and demographic changes with the new technology on the land.

Advertisers provided cover for a rapidly shrinking minority of Americans who performed less physical labor than their fathers or grandfathers did. No one had to tell farm men that they were businessmen and skilled technocrats; they understood that fact better than outsiders who saw them as hayseeds and hicks on television shows such as *Green Acres* and *Hee Haw.* Telling tales of “man vs. weed,” “Bicep” herbicide, and being a “bigger man” who could use a “big stick” assured farmers that they remained powerful producers despite pejorative media depictions and the pervasiveness of labor-saving machines and chemicals. The companies that paid for and developed these advertising campaigns affirmed the real technical expertise and business acumen that modern agriculture required. Farm readers, however, could see in those representations an idealized farmer who was muscular and physically powerful, even more powerful than the previous generations of farmers who actually lived in a world of sustained physical toil.

NOTES

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3. Toby Ditz cautioned scholars writing the history of masculinity about framing narratives in terms of constant crisis and fragility. If men were so besieged and so fragile, Ditz observed, “It is a wonder they ever got out of bed in the morning, and yet they constructed to their own benefit urban, industrial economies and imposed imperial systems straddling the globe at enormous cost to others.” Mary Louise Roberts elaborated, offering a healthy reminder that prevailing forms of masculinity were not necessarily in perpetual crisis. Instead, she countered that men were experiencing damage, a distinction that allowed for a far greater range of perception and response. Colin Johnson expressed it this way: “the history of masculinity is also a history of anxiety regarding the real or imagined loss of power and privilege.” For the purposes of this essay, the work of advertisers to create a hyper-physical form of rural masculinity represents an attempt to repair gender damage and loss. Toby L. Ditz, “The New Men’s History and the Peculiar Absence of Gendered Power: Some Remedies from Early American Gender History,” *Gender and History* 16, no. 1 (Apr. 2004): 6; Mary Louise Roberts, “Beyond ‘Crisis’ in Understanding Gender Transformation,” *Gender and History* 28, no. 2 (Aug. 2016): 358–66; Colin R. Johnson, “Masculinity in a Rural Context,” in *The Routledge History of Rural America*, ed. Pamela Riney-Kehrberg (London: Routledge, 2016), 163.

4. It is important to state that scholars have noted the presence of multiple rural masculinities. I recognize that there were and are multiple masculinities at play in the countryside, but the purpose of this essay is to deal with representations rather than masculinity on the ground. Hugh Campbell and Michael Mayerfeld Bell, “The Question of Rural Masculinities,” *Rural Sociology* 65, no. 4 (2000): 532–46.


7. Push-button technology dated to the late nineteenth century when, as Rachel Plotnik has argued, it represented a particular version of modernity that satisfied the desire for instant gratification and masked the messy power relations of process and power. See Rachel Plotnik, *Power Button: A History of Pleasure, Panic, and the Politics of Pushing* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018). After World War II push buttons received a major boost, with auto manufacturers such as Chrysler incorporating push-button transmission as standard features in 1956 models.


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