

Here Today, Here Tomorrow

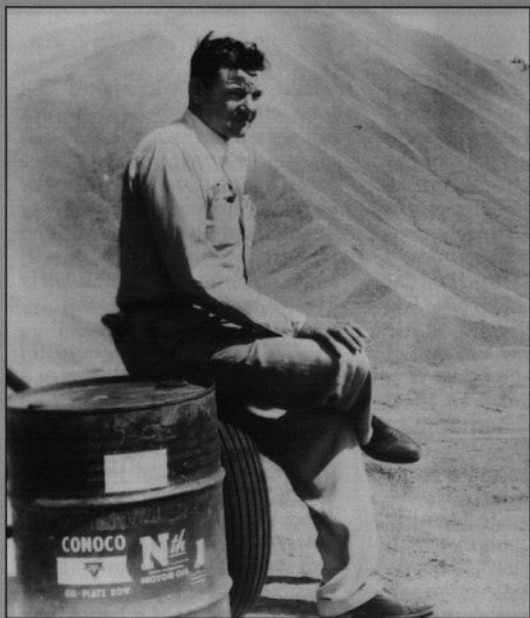
G-K Farms in the Dust Bowl Years, Thomas County, Kansas

by Craig Miner

Farming in semiarid and always unpredictable western Kansas has been and always will be an adventure and a risk. The parameters of the challenge and the strategies for coping with it during the pioneer period of the late nineteenth century have been documented in some detail. However, such documentation has been less thorough for the equally interesting tractor era of the twentieth century, with its technical and organizational innovations. The long-term appropriateness of the entire enterprise of capitalizing on nature by establishing and developing an intensive wheat monoculture in this region has been questioned seriously by scholars despite the obvious short-term "success" of Kansas farmers in transforming it from buffalo range to breadbasket. This questioning began in earnest during the Dust Bowl era when various government studies, conducted in the face of seemingly irreversible devastation, suggested an alternative future use of land for the Plains, and it has continued among historians, officials, planners, and ideologues ever since.¹ Although many critics are sympathetic to the small-scale and primitive family farm as purveyor of yeoman virtue and ecological sensitivity, their attitudes change when high technology, serious business administration of land production, and the corporate form of capitalism are involved. The image then becomes one of a menacing New West of company towns, absentee overseers, mechanical abuse, and dominance of a system that cares

Craig Miner is the Willard W. Garvey Distinguished Professor of Business History at Wichita State University. His publications include *West of Wichita: Settling the High Plains of Kansas 1865-1890* (1986) and *Wolf Creek Station: Kansas Gas and Electric Company in the Nuclear Era* (1993). Dr. Miner is the president of the Kansas State Historical Society, Inc.

1. See particularly Donald Worster, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), and *Under Western Skies: Nature and History in the American West* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), particularly the essay entitled "Grassland Follies: Agricultural Capitalism and the Plains"; Wes Jackson, *New Roots for Agriculture* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1980), *Altars of Unhewn Stone: Science and the Earth* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1987); Wendell Berry, *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture* (New York: Avon Books, 1978), and *Home Economics* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1987). Interestingly Kansas is a center for this kind of thinking, as it was for Garvey and Kriss's alternative farming visions.



John Kriss became partner and operator of G-K Farms in Thomas County during the 1930s–1940s. A decade after the difficult Dust Bowl years, Kriss is flanked by an ample wheat crop harvested in Thomas County in 1947.

Ray Hugh Garvey survived the Dirty Thirties, and with John Kriss formed one of the largest wheat empires in Kansas. This snapshot captures Garvey with his children in ca. 1921.



little about either people or the sustainability of the land. However, synthesis, often with clear Marxist overtones, frequently precedes analysis. Careful case studies of the specific social, economic, political, and individual human dynamic have been relatively rare, as are analyses of the more recent introduction of new forms of farming into environmentally fragile regions. The image in John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* of the goggled, faceless, aimless maniac sitting on his out-of-control Caterpillar crawler, and bound helplessly by the bank to force the poor but virtuous farmer off his forefathers' land is powerful, but unspecific and nonhistoric.² To evaluate properly the twentieth-century Plains farming experience requires not only descriptions of the system, but study of the people who participated in it and the changes it wrought in the places they lived.³

One such place was Colby, Kansas, a flat region close to the Colorado border in the north-west corner of the state. The topography, geography, and climatology of Colby and Thomas County had always encouraged

large holdings, complex organizations, and mighty machines. Colby is closer to Denver than to Kansas City, and nearly in the mountain time zone. If Kansas is a land of extremes, western Kansas is Kansas double-dipped. The record high rainfall in Kansas occurred in 1951 at Mound City—65.87 inches. The low occurred in 1910 at Colby—6.62 inches.⁴ Because a period of crisis often illuminates everything that is at stake, an ideal time period in which to examine twentieth-century techniques in Colby is the 1930s, when blowing dust and a national depression made economic farming there as perilous as it ever had been or was likely ever to be. As for characters, few are more satisfactory or better documented in the time and place than John Kriss, a farm manager, and Ray Hugh Garvey, a large landowner and entrepreneur. Together during these years they preserved and operated a farming empire that, when it expanded into eastern Colorado at the end of World War II, yielded some of the largest, if not the largest, wheat crops ever harvested by a single organization.

During a fifteen-year period, Kriss and Garvey created an enormous and important historical archive with their everyday business correspondence between Garvey's residence in Wichita and Kriss's operations in Colby. Garvey, who was to apply his business genius in several areas, was restless, wanted constant feedback, and "sweat-

ed the details." He wrote Kriss long letters usually twice a week but sometimes twice a day. Kriss wrote less often and more briefly, but saved most of the correspondence which sixty years later gives unparalleled insight into the details of survival farming during the Dirty Thirties in western Kansas.

Their organization did not technically form a corporation: it was a partnership called G-K Farms. But beginning as it did with six thousand acres and eventually expanding to one hundred thousand acres, it had all the earmarks of modern big farming and was definitely run by businessmen, like a business and for a profit, and not as a hobby or a family retreat. The partnership hired and supervised many employees who were not family members, used the latest technology, and without government prodding and purely in its own perceived self-interest, pioneered advanced dryland farming techniques designed to preserve the soil asset for generations far beyond its own. G-K engendered its share of bitterness and even hatred around Colby, the type directed at all large and supposedly wealthy organizations in their time and in hindsight. But the story of its specific dealings with the Dust Bowl puts a human face on the issues and provides unusual detail that any responsible analysis must take into account.

The depression and the accompanying Dust Bowl era were a surprise in many ways to farmers who thought that new technology and advanced eco-

2. John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*, 14th ed. (New York: Viking Press, 1958), 13. First published in 1939.

3. Something similar to this suggestion is working itself out in the social sciences as the Marxist "dependency theory" analysis of Third World underdevelopment is being thrown into question. New "historical comparative research" is leading to "regional choice theory," which lends much more respect to the complexity of causes of development or lack of it and rejects the monolithic conspiracy theories that are now just being applied to the American West viewed as a sort of "internal" Third World. See, for example, Edwin Rhyne, "Dependency Theory: Requiescat in Pace?" *Sociological Inquiry* 60 (Fall 1990): 381.

4. Homer Socolofsky and Huber Self, *Historical Atlas of Kansas* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1972), 3-4.

nomic strategies had forever blunted the wrenching cycles that had always been characteristic of agriculture. With distinctive western bravado, everyone agreed that crops had been worse, weather had been hotter. Fears became jokes. For instance, it was said that the "[jack]rabbits are the most fierce they have ever been known to be and a hunter is in actual danger of being attacked by the great herds of the powerful wolf-like jacks if he ventures out alone. . . . Some fear is felt for the safety of the inhabitants of western Kansas should all the jack rabbits in Thomas and Logan counties congregate and in mass formation attack a town."⁵

Overall, times were good and technological wonders abounded in the 1930s. After all, Colby, a village of 1,896 souls in 1929, had its own light plant and used profits from it to eliminate city taxes.⁶ People gawked at the M-10000 Union Pacific streamlined train, with its air-conditioning and shatterproof glass windows, crossing western Kansas at eighty-five miles per hour. They were amazed by knee action suspensions, flathead V-8s, Technicolor movies, Du-Art permanents, and tone control on radios. Even the weather in past years had been cooperative. In May and June 1928, Colby had ten inches of rain. "Ray Hugh Garvey," the local editor wrote in September 1929 after a soaking

two-inch rain, "who always comes back to town just after a good rain, drove up through the mud from Wichita last Saturday."⁷

But the technicians, including political wizards such as Franklin Roosevelt, seemed helpless to influence the economy of the 1930s, which went straight downhill. And all the while something ancient and basic—the land and the weather and the crops—turned dreadfully dark: nothing mechanical or human stood a chance against nature's withering force.

The spring of 1930 was the driest in Thomas County since 1910: the market price of wheat deteriorated apace. In 1931 the wheat price sank to fifty cents a bushel in Colby, and the heat seared everything that farmers might have to sell. On September 5, thermometers registered 108 degrees in Colby and 111 in Hays. Temperatures exceeded 100 degrees for ten days straight, causing "the people of Kansas to look with growing apprehension toward the blazing daily sky and to wonder when relief from the heat will come."⁸

The next year the dust storms started. The worst of the 1932 storms could not compete in horror, however, with one that swept through in late May 1933. It was, said the editor of the Colby newspaper, "the most terrible and terrifying dust storm this vicinity ever saw." The gale blew cars off the road, upset trucks, spawned torna-

does, killed fourteen people, and brought a "Stygian darkness in mid-afternoon." Sustained winds of fifty miles per hour spawned gusts even higher, and the air came alive with static electricity. The blades of windmills turned into balls of fire that sparked and crackled like the masts of ships at sea against Saint Elmo's fire. The wheat was scorched, tree leaves withered, and as for garden flowers, "they crumpled in the hand like dead and blew away like powder." While city fathers built a Greek temple at Fike Park and *King Kong* played at the Lyric, most thoughts centered on the great black rolling dust storms that killed even the pasture grass. Winters offered no relief. They blew in dry and acrid with record bitter cold, falling to twenty-five to thirty degrees below zero in Colby. Former opera singer Marion Talley, whose move to Thomas County had been a staple of local publicity, rented out her farm and did not seem to visit Colby anymore.⁹

The surest sign of hard times locally was the changing attitude of Thomas County's most active booster, Ray Hugh Garvey. Garvey had been building a land empire in the county since he arrived there in 1917 as an attorney, and although he had moved to Wichita with his family in 1928, continued with large active farm operations and land sales. Garvey first sold property for a land company, then began buying and selling on his own, and eventually hired people to farm his inventory in hope of

5. *Oakley Graphic*, cited in *Colby Free Press*, February 3, 1927.

6. *Colby Free Press*, May 17, 1928; *Colby Free Press-Tribune*, July 18, 1929.

7. *Colby Free Press*, June 21, 1928; *Colby Free Press-Tribune*, September 12, 1929.

8. *Colby Free Press-Tribune*, September 16, 1931, April 10, 1930, August 12, 1931.

9. *Ibid.*, May 24, 1933.

BARGAINS

-- in --

Real Estate

We have

Ten Thousand Acres

—of—

Northwest Kansas Land

but we wish to reduce our holdings only 20 percent. In addition, however, we have some choice listings and options that we can sell at bargain prices, which look cheap now and will look a lot cheaper a year from now.

We have large farms, small farms and small farms controlling acreage around them that can be rented.

Write or see

Garvey Land Co.

COLBY, KANSAS

and

201 Union National Bank Building,

WICHITA, KANSAS

Address inquiries to the Wichita Office.

R.H. Garvey began building his land empire in Thomas County when he arrived there in 1917. His agricultural business was in full swing by the 1920s when this advertisement appeared in Garvey's newspaper, the Thomas County Cat.

either higher sales prices or better farm income in the future. Not only did he eventually create one of the largest farming operations in the history of the West, but in time successfully entered the oil business (exploration and retail service stations), the real estate and construction business in Wichita (through his company Builder's Inc.), the investment business (through Amortibanc, one of the largest such companies of the 1930s), and the construction and operation of grain elevators, which by the 1950s encompassed more than two hundred million bushels of storage capacity.¹⁰ In short, by 1929 Garvey had already established himself as a Kansas entrepreneur of considerable fame and clout, and he was to become, before his death in 1959, perhaps the most significant, successful, and wealthy business-creator in the state of Kansas. By all accounts, his mind worked at a genius level, his business instincts were uncanny, and his organizational ability, although kept nearly entirely in the file cabinet of his own mind, enormously sophisticated.

Garvey does not fit the stereotype of grasping capitalist, although he could pinch pennies and was opportunistic and hard-headed enough. He was, for example, clearly a long-term thinker who lived modestly, engaged in business mostly for the adventure, and sought wealth

primarily for his family in future generations. He was a steward of the land and environment, even at a short-range sacrifice of income (which arguably he could afford more than some), at a level far more advanced than that of most of his contemporaries and much ahead of that of the small farmers around Colby in the 1920s and 1930s. "Never in history," Garvey wrote in 1931, "has there been a more favorable opportunity for a farmer than in Thomas county, if he wishes to trim his expenditures to suit his income, which every business man must do, and start farming on a 30 or 40 year basis, not just for this year or next year."¹¹

However, discouragement overtook even Garvey in 1933. The Colby editor commented that "Ray H. Garvey of Wichita ventured back into town the first of the week and dared to hang around for a couple of days, but he was pretty tame about his rain-making reputation compared to the confidence he used to exude in large quantities whenever he rode into town on the tail of a timely shower." Garvey had, the editor said, begun "to lose some of the pristine self-confidence that has always been one of his most charming characteristics."¹²

The first six months of "the ungracious year of our Lord, 1934" were the driest in Thomas County history, with the highest average temperatures

and evaporation rates. Whether it is the sun spots, the wrath of the Almighty, a punishment for our sins past or present or just the logical conclusion of a weather cycle," the newspaper said, "is unimportant to this discussion at this time."¹³ In July 1934 Colby hit 111 degrees (Salina registered 121 degrees—a Kansas record), while out of the southwest "there came perhaps the hottest wind that ever scorched the face of a human or made the corn curl up tightly to conserve its ebbing life." Starving jackrabbits wobbled into Thomas County from Colorado, but farmers could not afford the ammunition to shoot them. Wheat prices slumped again after a little rally, but, noted one resident, "so far as most people in this territory are directly concerned, the slump in the price of wheat means little one way or another because they have none to sell."¹⁴ If the weather did not give farmers a chance to produce again soon, their traditional way of life would probably disappear forever. In the midst of the emergency, Ray Garvey and John Kriss got together.

John Kriss lost his father in a railway accident in 1913, and in 1920 he moved with his stepfather and family to Kansas in response to a glowing magazine story, probably written by Ray Garvey, about "The Man from Thomas County" (a farmer named Jake Lewallen) who had made a fortune in farming. For the Kriss group it was otherwise. John's parents chased

10. Garvey's career is summarized in Olive White Garvey, *The Obstacle Race: The Story of Ray Hugh Garvey* (San Antonio: Naylor Co., 1970). For some of his later enterprises and the transition to the next generation, see Craig Miner, *Garvey, Inc.: Expectations to Equity* (Wichita: 1992).

11. Colby Free Press-Tribune, May 6, 1931.

12. Ibid., July 19, 1933.

13. Ibid., June 6, 1934.

14. Ibid., August 15, July 18, 1934.

another panacea to Arkansas in 1923, and teenage John stayed behind alone in rural Thomas County. He lived at first in the kind of abject poverty only rural dwellers understand, but slowly progressed by working at odd jobs around the country in the winter and as a hired man on farms during the farming season. Although he saved enough to buy some land in the early 1930s, John, newly married and with a small son, experienced rough times. He was reduced to farming the one quarter he owned and renting only one other quarter, while trying to supplement his income by laying tile and doing plastering work. For a time he rented out the house in town he had built for his family and moved them in with his wife's folks at Levant.

One might say Kriss was mostly potential at this point. He had been forced to quit school in the eighth grade, but his previous record at the Omaha public schools indicated a good mind with a particular affinity for mathematics. Tall, handsome, and strong, he had a reputation for high moral character and capacity for extreme hard work. Kriss combined strong entrepreneurial instincts with sound judgment and willingness to take important responsibility. His experience in the 1920s included working for several large tractor farmers who not only used power machinery, but to some extent employed summer fallow techniques, rare in the area at that time. This involved leaving part of the land out of production each year and curtailing the weeds to conserve moisture and

build nutrients for the next crop without the expensive and, in the long-run, doubtful expedient of pump irrigation.¹⁵

Unlike Kriss, Garvey never had farmed any land. In the 1920s, however, he owned and contracted to farm a large piece of land. Land could best be sold, he knew, when it was covered with growing wheat, and wheat paid the taxes and maintained his inventory against better times in the future. The Mutual Farming Company, Garvey's vehicle in the 1920s, became defunct in the early 1930s in part because it was a corporation, and 1931 Kansas legislation in the state's Populist tradition forbade large-scale corporate farming. It also failed because Garvey's operator in Mutual, Claude Schnellbacher, was not a likely candidate to cut cost sufficiently to meet the depression crisis.¹⁶

When John Kriss contacted him in 1933, Garvey, unable any longer to make it rain, was working his six thousand-acre land empire long distance through twenty-two tenants. He thought the New Deal farm program would likely be disastrous, saying that "when you take their handouts, you submit to their tender disciplines." He was unpopular with some in the area,

excoriated as an absentee "suit-case farmer" although he had lived in Colby for many years, in western Kansas much of his life, and was clearly an entirely self-made man.¹⁷ He badly needed a single local presence who could represent his interests uniformly and effectively, and who had unquestioned respect in the community.

Kriss and Garvey began a long and detailed correspondence in the early months of 1933 as the nation waited to see what the new president, Franklin D. Roosevelt, would do with the farm question. "Do you think you could handle the men and machinery," Garvey wrote Kriss, "and produce wheat on the summer fallow plan so that we could make a profit at 25¢ a bushel, if so on what basis?"¹⁸ By March, Garvey was asking him:

Exclusive of your salary and exclusive of the repair and depreciation bills, I wish you would estimate how much per acre it would cost to plow, to one-way, to list, to ridge bust, to throw in the furrows, to harrow with a common harrow, to harrow with a spring tooth harrow, to drill with lister drills and to drill with furrow drills. I want your estimates on the cost of each of the above operations, how much oil and grease per acre, how much for boarding the men, including the payment of the cook, how much labor per acre.

15. John Kriss, interviews with author, June 6, November 8, 10, 11, December 8, 9, 1990, December 4, 1991.

16. Garvey, *The Obstacle Course*, 70, 89, and passim; Wayne C. Wingo, *History of Thomas County, Kansas, 1885-1964* (Colby, Kans.: Thomas County Historical Society, 1988), 82; Kriss interview, June 6, November 10, 1990.

17. Garvey, *The Obstacle Course*, 88-89.

18. R. H. Garvey to John Kriss, January 27, 1933, Kriss family records, John Kriss personal collection, Colby, Kansas. (Hereafter all letters cited are from the Kriss family records.)

Garvey estimated they could hire men for fifty to seventy-five cents a day, "and of course you know that eggs and meat and other food is quite cheap for feeding the men."¹⁹ The letters went on until April 1933 when Kriss was finally hired. "I told him there was more to farming than land and tractors," Kriss said later, "and he knew that. . . . No doubt I needed him, but he needed someone like me."²⁰

Not one farmer in a thousand could have responded adequately to the questions Garvey posed about farming, viewed not as a traditional avocation, but as a commercial and competitive business in the hardest of economic environments. Kriss, however, had a mind far too active to spend hours on a tractor gazing into space or daydreaming, and he covered the back of Garvey's letters with calculations. While Kriss "didn't like to get his hands dirty" in actual mechanical repairs, he had a deep, instinctive understanding of engineering and economics. He already had figured out the answers to many of the questions, calculating for instance the number of rounds it took to cover the fields, the most efficient operating methods, and even (although he had not figured it in quite the detail Garvey wanted) the life expectancy and replacement costs of the machinery and the quantity of gas and oil they used. All this went into letters to Garvey who

wrote back, "You have a good mind and think well with it."²¹

After the letter barrage, Garvey came to Colby and met with Kriss in person at the Service Oil Station that Garvey owned. Kriss wanted to give him some references. Garvey laughed. "No," he said, "I know you, John, from all those letters."

The two men then entered into negotiations for a contract. Kriss wanted a ten-year contract. Garvey refused. Kriss then argued for five, but Garvey could not be persuaded beyond a year or two. Kriss wanted a percentage of the profits in addition to a salary. Garvey hesitated on this point; Kriss was in no position to dicker. The first contract gave Kriss a salary of sixty dollars a month in the summer and twenty in the winter, plus a portion of the crop on certain fields. After one year the deal was altered to give Kriss a straight 10 percent of the profits overall, if any, in addition to his salary. Initially Kriss had a fifty-dollar limit on what he could buy without checking with Garvey. Various other restraints were placed on him that eventually were loosened as experience deepened the trust. The time finally came when Kriss gave Garvey a list of things he wanted permission to buy, and Ray just waved it aside saying, "You're running this."

"This" was a partnership named G-K (Garvey-Kriss) Farms. The young man who had never

gone to school in town, and remained little known there until his marriage in 1930, now had the biggest if not, under the dusty circumstances, the most enviable farming job in the county.²²

Almost immediately the two men faced a political challenge. During FDR's first one hundred days, beginning March 4, 1933, the Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA) was passed with a key feature of allotment. In return for price subsidies, farmers agreed to plant only a certain part of their acreage. How to determine that allotment, however, was a source of debate for some months. The debate and the delay posed a major problem to G-K Farms. The allotment decisions were based on average past acreage, average past yields, and a government calculation of domestic need for wheat. Dual jurisdiction existed between Washington and the county wheat associations, which administered the program locally. But the preference was to decentralization to the county, where Garvey found no sympathy from the local board.²³

In addition, the AAA rules created problems for farmers using summer fallow techniques, to whom abandoning acreage to meet the allotment was not an answer. The ground that was to be planted had been prepared for more than a year,

19. Ibid., March 2, 1933.

20. Kriss interview, November 24, November 10, 1990.

21. Ibid., November 10, June 6, 1990; Kriss family, interview with author, December 4, 1991.

22. Kriss interview, June 6, November 10, 1990.

23. Agricultural Adjustment Administration. *The Facts About Wheat: A Review of the Wheat Situation as it Affects Wheat Growers of the United States* (Washington, D.C.: Agricultural Adjustment Administration, 1935).

Throughout the 1930s, dust storms plagued farmers who, like Garvey and Kriss, struggled against nature's devastation.



A dust storm turns day to night in downtown Colby (above), and (left) clouds of dust roll across fields in western Kansas.

and much expense had been incurred before any planting began. Garvey and Kriss proposed to the local board that they be allowed to plant their summer fallow land the first year of the program—that is, technically to be overseeded—and then cut back the second year so that their average planting met the allowed allotment. Bitter debate ensued, and Garvey appealed to Washington. Finally the local board turned down the compromise. Given that it would have had to abandon twenty-six hundred acres of summer-tilled land already planted and growing before the final decision was made early in 1934, G-K Farms believed it had no choice but to stay out of the AAA program the first year.²⁴

Garvey was outspoken about government and the program, sometimes in print in the local paper, creating an uncomfortable situation for Kriss. Rumors suggested that Kriss had to be crooked to get along as well as he did and to work with Garvey. Jealousies arose over the money he spent in the stores and discounts the implement dealers gave him. In retrospect, Kriss now believes that the local criticism reflected a desperation born of hard times. He compared it with the rabbit hunts around Colby during the depression

when men vented their frustrations by clubbing to death thousands of rabbits after they had been driven into a wire fence.²⁵ Certainly the public mind tended to apply a double standard, discriminating against the rich or powerful and employing government programs to force redistribution of income or equalization of result by handicapping those talented enough to be successful. This seemed particularly appropriate in the public mind because Garvey had been so outspoken against the government programs in which he now proposed to participate. Still, the fairness of this double standard and the ultimate impact of such an attitude on the true welfare of the entire community are open to serious question.

The 1934 harvest was poor, and Garvey grew bitter. He wrote Kriss in April 1934 that he planned to visit Colby "and would be very cheerful if an old time rain would coincide with my arrival there, but I am afraid the Brain Trust has regimented rain in Northwest Kansas and plowed under every fourth rain." The goal of the AAA, he said, was "state socialism controlled by young intellectual bureaucrats rather than recovery."²⁶

Garvey always asserted, however, that he would play by the rules even though he did not invent them. Consequently Kriss moved to participate in the AAA program the next year, and meanwhile to do everything possible to minimize losses. The lister was a

standard tool of help. Originally used for planting corn, it created ridges in fields and thereby slowed the blowing by breaking up the wind. Farmers had to use the listers frequently to prevent a citation from the government "dust commissioner" for contributing to the severity of the great dust storms. "I said we probably could not farm that well unless we farmed a whole township," observed Kriss, because the rest would always blow.²⁷

Survival was possible because the severest droughts did not come annually back to back; 1933, 1935, and 1937 were terrible years, but 1934 and 1936 provided just enough relief to maintain a spark of hope. But even in the best of these years, great care had to be taken, expenses cut to the bone, and the economies of scale and efficiencies of centralized management that the G-K structure provided used to the maximum. Garvey's diversity of interest also helped. Kriss worked in the winter (beginning in 1934-1935) collecting bills for Service Oil Company on commission (a thankless task) and running the bulk oil station to supplement his farm salary. "After the wheat was planted," he said, "if it wasn't blowing, I had time to do other things."²⁸

One of G-K's advantages was its strict reporting, its careful accounting of every cost, and the matter-of-fact attitude of both Kriss and Garvey that allowed them to see their true

24. This brief summary of a complex story is from Kriss interview, November 23, 1990; John Kriss statement in "Brief containing explanation of the G-K Farms, a partnership attached to signed allotment contracts," [1934], Kriss family records, and articles and letters by R. H. Garvey in the period. See *Colby Free Press-Tribune*, August 29, 1934, for some of Garvey's public comments.

25. Kriss interview, November 23, 1990.
26. Garvey to Kriss, April 26, 1934.

27. Kriss interview, November 23, November 25, 1990.

28. *Ibid.*, November 23, 1990.

business position without a misty sheen of romance about the family legacy or the rural good life. Kriss hardly lived like an executive or worked like the public image of one. The utmost frugality was the rule. Garvey and Kriss both examined the Experiment Station records at Colby carefully and made detailed estimates of the likely weather, based on historical precedent, so as not to spend anything unnecessarily. "Of course, we have got to stop the soil from blowing," Garvey advised, "but until we get ample moisture, I do not want to spend very much, if any, money on planting any crops there for I do not think there will be any crops raised until they get a hell of a lot of rain."²⁹

Kriss had no assurance of long-term policy, and he needed to adjust day to day. Garvey wrote Kriss in the summer of 1935:

If you have a fault at all, John, on farming, it is in making your plans and then sticking to them, regardless of weather or other conditions. If you would reconsider your farming plans and try to figure out every two or three weeks where you could eliminate part of an operation or something . . . it would be a lot better.³⁰

The frugality rule applied especially to machinery and its

repair, although without it the operation in the longrun was doomed. Garvey tended to react in the extreme to every major purchase, and he put great pressure on Kriss to justify the need for it. Nothing was assumed. In 1935 Kriss wrote Garvey:

I'm sorry you thought I had developed a machinery-buying complex. I told Dave [W. D. Ferguson, a Colby banker] that in about five days time the rain and weeds had put us a month behind with our work and that our North Sherman County work would be quite late because we have to look after our listed ground first. Dave said, "I think you ought to buy a tractor every time it rains. Garvey has a lot at stake out here and you'd better telephone him."³¹

Correspondence flew between Colby and Wichita regarding every technological advance that might make machinery achieve more for less. Rubber-tired tractors proved themselves in the 1930s, and Kriss quickly gathered statistics on their performance, both new models and older models reequipped with the tires. He attended many tractor tests and advised Garvey on the efficiency of various models, not just in general but in specific technical terms ranging from weight to horsepower to gear ratio.³² Pennies mattered.

One year Kriss proposed to Garvey to cut all the wheat himself, rather than to hire custom cutters for part of it as usual. "This sounds ridiculous," Kriss remembered, "but I intended to cut everything that made two bushels an acre." That year Kriss made an "if come" deal with Garvey. Kriss would pay the usual one-fourth rent on the land if the crop made it, but not otherwise. That allowed him to take the risk of cutting. Kriss thought a two-bushel crop would make the rent. He got in the combine bin with a half-bushel basket, knowing that he would have to fill it four times in a half mile. He did not make it. He could not pay the rent, and did not even get back his cutting expenses.³³

The day-to-day details were wrenching. Kriss wrote Garvey on October 15, 1934, regarding the status of their first venture in raising sheep; he reported that the animals were doing well

but it gets drier here every day and we have had a lot of damaging winds. Today is one of the worst I have ever seen in Kansas, the air is full of dust. I can't tell how long the wheat pasture will last but I am sure we can't get the sheep fat on what we have unless we get rain soon. So far we have only lost one. It has been too hot and windy for them, however.³⁴

Two days later he wrote hopefully of clouds and fog, but gave an otherwise discouraging report:

29. An example of this type of letter is Garvey to Kriss, February 25, 1935. Garvey could recall from memory the crop year patterns since 1918, and often wrote Kriss about the similarities between the current year and another year, including the amount and success of the harvested crop.

30. Garvey to Kriss, August 26, 1935.

31. Kriss to Garvey, June 15, 1935.

32. *Ibid.*, March 23, 1936. Kriss advised that G-K's current tractors were not geared to get the maximum advantage from rubber tires but said, "we will probably want our next power to be thus equipped [*sic*];" see also, for example, Kriss to Garvey, March 26, 1936.

33. Kriss interview, November 23, 1990.

34. Kriss to Garvey, October 15, 1934.

All of our wheat has been planted for some time and there may be less of it alive than I think there is. It is hard to tell whether some of the sprouts and roots are dead or just dying. I have been as optimistic as possible but to say the least the last three weeks have been very discouraging. If we don't get rain out of this spell of weather we may as well face the facts and wonder what will be the position of the G-K Farms in the spring if this winter turns out to be like the winter of 1932-33. Monday was a terrible day and I am listing now where three of our neighbors' fields started over ours. The wind started in the forenoon, was bad by noon and kept it up until 10:30 or 11:00 that night.

He advised redrilling the wheat if rain did not come soon. G-K Farms' bank balance in November was two hundred dollars. "Sometimes when it stops raining in a country," Garvey wrote in March 1935, "it takes a long time to start again and it has already stopped over eighteen months in Thomas County."³⁵

Kriss was not a literary man, and sometimes descriptions were too painful. "It is needless," he wrote once, "for me to go into detail about the dust storm we had Feb. 21."³⁶ The detail that did come through was discouraging enough without embellishment. In March 1935 Kriss wrote that he had brought his hired men in

from the fields because they were seldom able to work in the blowing dust:

One of my men was in the field four hours after the storm hit March 15th. He was within 50 or 60 yards of the shack most of the time. The storm struck so quickly that it was almost fatal to anyone unable to reach shelter of some sort quickly. This boy stood by his tractor and kept his handkerchief wet with water from the radiator to breath through. . . . There will soon be funds available through the relief administration so every one can list, if the wind lets up a little or we get a little rain so we can see.

By May Kriss and his crew had listed six thousand acres.³⁷

The harvest in the summer of 1935 was a disaster. Tractors over the county were not in good enough shape to do much listing, and to do so the government required a poverty oath to get aid for the needed oil and gas. In fact, nothing good happened to that wheat crop all year. On February 21 a storm closed the rural schools in Thomas County, and at 12:30 P.M. day became night in Colby.³⁸ In March a seven-year-old boy at Winona died in a dust

storm. In April a high-pressure system moving into Kansas from the Dakotas brought dust that looked like a wall of muddy water, inky black at the base and dark brown at the top. Hundreds of ducks, geese, and birds fled before it when it crashed into Dodge City in the afternoon with sixty mile per hour winds, bringing total darkness for forty minutes, and semi-darkness for the next three hours. During March and April 1935 Dodge City had twenty-six dust-laden days. A Garden City housewife wrote:

All we could do was just sit in our dusty chairs and gaze at each other through the fog that filled the room and watch the fog settle slowly and silently, covering everything. . . . Our faces were as dirty as if we had rolled in the dirt; our hair was gray and stiff and we ground dirt between our teeth.

The University of Wichita Department of Geology estimated that five million tons of dust hung one mile thick over the thirty miles of that city, or about 167 tons per square mile. Rain falling through a dust storm in April formed into mud balls. Some people pointed to the Bible for an answer. In Deuteronomy they read, "The Lord shall make the rain of thy land powder and dust; from heaven it shall come down upon thee, until thou be destroyed." A Southern Plains newspaper joked: "No doubt there has been sufficient disobedience in this Western country to justify the Lord in almost anything he might do to us."³⁹

35. Ibid., October 17, November 22, 1934; Garvey to Kriss, March 25, 1935.

36. Kriss to Garvey, February 23, 1935.

37. Ibid., March 24, May 13, 1935. R. H. Garvey was caught in his car in this storm on the way back to Wichita, although he mostly kept ahead of it until he was almost home. He reported that several people had died of dust pneumonia. Garvey to Kriss, March 25, 1935.

38. R. Douglas Hurt, *The Dust Bowl: An Agricultural and Social History* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall), 36; *Colby Free Press-Tribune*, March 20, 1935.

39. Hurt, *The Dust Bowl*, 36-38, 55-56.



Despite continued efforts, farmers fought an uphill battle against wind and erosion. In 1934 Kriss wrote to Garvey, "it gets drier here every day and we have had a lot of damaging winds. Today is one of the worst I have ever seen in Kansas."



In March 1935 a front-page story in the Colby newspaper reported that some claimed the entire Plains would become a desert, and that "there is much temporary evidence to support these sad complaints." No rain worthy of the name had fallen for two years, and parts of southwest Kansas and eastern Colorado resembled the rippling sand surface of the Sahara. "There is plenty of good sound reason for the pessimism that is the most obvious sentiment of a great many people this year," wrote Herb Fryback, an occasional contributor of a local opinion piece entitled "Cyclone Corner":

Certainly, there is little indication of those good old days "when every prospect pleases." Western Kansas is a drab, hag-ridden area with little evidence of the spring season. Many feel that this whole area has returned to the primitive desert from whence it came, and many others openly advocate its desertion.⁴⁰

Irony laced even the positive notes: "Conditions could be a lot worse than they are here. . . . We were well to the edge of the 'dust bowl' and the fear of flood is never very acute. Just lucky, that's all."⁴¹ One late spring day the Colby paper ran a one-liner: "Weather, more of the same—Nuff said."⁴²

The G-K enterprise was most discouraged. Kriss found it hard to make ends meet, and

Garvey shifted into a severe retrenchment mode. Still, they never engaged in serious talk about selling out, and they always retained the vision that wealth could be gained for both partners in a better future if they could keep their heads now. Garvey's other enterprises, his personal frugality in consumption expenditures, and his management skills maintained a continuity and holding power that allowed the business in its uncertain environment to be run on averages and for the long-term in a way that a family farm never could be. "Well, I guess if we didn't raise any wheat this year," Garvey wrote with an attempt at humor, "we did raise plenty of dust so it wasn't a total blank after all especially if the Government will give us a dust allotment. . . . I am sure the expression 'not so dusty,' and the song, 'It Ain't Gonna Rain No More' are not very popular there right now."⁴³ It was hard to smile through cracked, dust-parched lips.

Kriss adjusted as he always had; he worked harder and more efficiently. But he also moved toward becoming an entrepreneur in his own right by changing his personal time and talent allocation. In the spring of 1936, over Garvey's objections, he began farming, as a partner sharing expenses and profits nearly fifty-fifty for a second large landowner in Thomas County: banker W. D. Ferguson. Garvey was nervous about Kriss working for him on a part-time

basis, and Kriss somewhat resented being treated as a hireling rather than a professional. However, despite much rhetorical interchange, neither ideology nor policy ultimately ruled Garvey or Kriss; rather it was the bottom-line market test. Garvey recognized results, and Kriss continued to get results despite being an exception to a number of rules. Garvey and Ferguson were good friends, and Kriss performed so well for them both that the "two masters" arrangement worked. "It didn't break up the friendship between Garvey and Ferguson," Kriss remembered, "but I'm sure it strained it a little."⁴⁴

The harvest of 1936 was better but not good. Kriss did everything he could to maximize the few spring rains by working the land, but dust storms still blew in. One dust storm in late May lasted three days and two nights without a break. Still Kriss had his night crew in the field at 3:00 A.M., trying to minimize the damage. Garvey had heard rumors of a 50 percent crop loss and asked John to call him at his home any evening at 11:00 P.M. to report his estimate. Kriss found it hard to judge, but he guessed the crop would likely range between eight and ten bushels per acre. The harvest was early, the weather dry, and by the middle of July the wheat was completely harvested.⁴⁵

44. Kriss interview, December 9, 1990; see also Garvey, *The Obstacle Race*, 110-14.

45. Kriss to Garvey, May 28, May 6, 1936; Garvey to Kriss, June 19, 1936; Kriss to Garvey, June 24, July 19, 1936. In a letter of August 3, Kriss reported that the Jasperson quarter had made 1,231 bushels and forty

40. *Colby Free Press-Tribune*, March 27, May 1, 1935.

41. *Ibid.*, June 5, 1935.

42. *Ibid.*, April 24, 1935.

43. Garvey to Kriss, April 17, 1935.

With the better crop, higher market prices (some wheat sold for \$1.25 per bushel in Chicago, and much for ninety cents to a dollar), and government payments now that G-K had signed up for the program, not only did Garvey receive his rent payment in 1936, but Kriss, for the first time, made a little on his 10-percent-profit deal. He reported in December that \$5,666 rent had been paid to Garvey interests through the crop sale, and that Kriss's share of the crop, after deducting his share of the expenses and 10 percent of the seed they planted that fall, amounted to \$893.41.⁴⁶ From Kriss's tax records it is difficult to determine the exact income and expenses applicable to individual years because wheat was sold at different times and expenses were taken at different times to minimize the reportable income and the tax bite. Relative improvement, however, was evident through the late 1930s.

Garvey also was pleased with G-K's 1936 success, and he demonstrated this by putting all his remaining land, some of which had still been with other tenants, in Kriss's charge.⁴⁷ The price increases after harvest helped especially. Garvey could not help adding:

Three years ago Professor Roosevelt and his Brain Trust

pounds, and would sell for seventy-four cents a bushel the day it was hauled and ten to fifteen cents more by August. That would be approximately 7.7 bushels per acre, assuming that the quarter was all planted.

46. Kriss to Garvey, December 27, 1936.

47. Ibid., December 7, 1936.

were claiming that the machine age had enabled us to produce so much crop that we just couldn't use it all at a reasonable price, with the result that we had hunger in the midst of plenty. Two years ago when the drouth hit the west they suggested that they might have to move the people of the high prairie section back to the Tennessee Valley. This year the Tennessee Valley also has a drouth so they have not yet been able to announce our destination. Personally, I believe they ought to do something about this hot weather.

On a more mundane note, Garvey calculated their gain:

I think we are very fortunate to get as much wheat as we did and probably it will not need to go much higher for us to make a little money on this year's crop. Twenty-eight thousand bushels at a dollar is more profitable than a hundred thousand bushels at twenty-eight cents to the grower although it doesn't distribute as much labor money or help the country as much. Will you now disband subject to call all of your organization except a small nucleus until it rains?⁴⁸

Yet while twenty-eight hundred bushels seemed like an abundance of wheat, the allotment basis for Garvey was about six thousand acres, making an overall average of fewer than five bushels an acre. Expenses

ran higher in a bad year than in a good one due to fuel, repairs, and tractor wear that resulted from the listing required to keep out of the grasp of the dust commissioner. Although Kriss and Garvey did not emphasize the importance of the government subsidy checks that made up part of their profit, they recognized the subsidy's importance: "Since we will all have to pay our portion of more of the New Deal expense," Garvey wrote Kriss, "it is very nice to get a little subsidy."⁴⁹ The \$6,109.27 paid to G-K Farms by the AAA in 1936 was the largest amount ever paid on one contract in Thomas County.⁵⁰ Unquestionably it stood as a source of local enmity toward G-K.

Garvey analyzed of course:

The last four years have been very discouraging years. On paper it would seem that six thousand acres of summer fallow should produce an average of one hundred thousand bushels per year, but we have discovered that it will not do it when the average rainfall is ten inches instead of eighteen a year. . . . We apparently do not lose much money when we get a little crop as in 1934 and 1936, but we lose our entire investment when we get a total failure as in 1933 and 1935. Some of these times this should be offset by handsome profits.

The net result, according to Garvey, was that in three years the acreage had raised only sixty

49. Ibid., December 7, 1936.

50. Kriss to Garvey, December 5, 1936.

thousand bushels of wheat (not much more than a three-bushel-per-acre average), "which has given you [Kriss] a very light income and has given us a rather heavy loss."⁵¹

Kriss reported net income on his tax return for 1936 for the first time since the depression began.⁵² But his future and the future of Kansas wheat farming, slowly emerging from its greatest natural threat, remained uncertain. Between 1925 and 1930 more than five million acres—an area seven times that of Rhode Island—had been plowed for wheat from the prairie sod of the Great Plains. Chain farms, like chain stores, had then seemed the wave of the future. The dust humbled that hope, but the spirit of the survivors, such as Kriss, remained. As one eastern reporter wrote:

Out in this blast of dust, bitten by it, hidden by it, their denims, their hands and faces matted with the grime of it, the men of West Kansas whistle, and go right on sowing wheat. The very life of Kansas, they say, is the wheatlands. Western Kansas will raise wheat at a hogfeed price to the end of time if need be, say its biggest farmers, and make money and keep the world in bread.⁵³

Any detailed discussion of the later career of John Kriss, both with R.H. Garvey and on

his own, lies beyond the scope of this article. However, hindsight in brief is helpful in evaluating the depression experience. Western Kansas did not revert to desert. As the rains returned in the early 1940s, Garvey and Kriss not only maintained their farm empire, but expanded it to include, in the immediate post-war years, much land in eastern Colorado so arid that they met considerable resistance from the locals and the government soil conservation service to buying and plowing land for wheat that many thought should, after the Dust Bowl, revert forever to pasture. After mastering the politics of that situation in much the same way as they had to deal with the AAA in the 1930s, the pair worked more than one hundred thousand acres of wheatland in Kansas and Colorado and a large sheep operation with the techniques they had perfected during the depression decade. Rain and high prices made it, in the near term at least, an unqualified success. Kriss himself in 1947 harvested more than a million bushels of wheat, worth more than two million dollars and using two hundred combines on G-K Farms land—the largest crop ever harvested by a single individual.⁵⁴ He went from being one of the poorest citizens of Thomas County to one of its

wealthiest. His financial planning problems changed from how to pay for his next meal to how to reinvest or delay earnings to avoid the 90 percent personal tax rate in his high bracket.

Kriss proved himself as competent in that situation as he had been in the adversity of the 1930s, well able to capitalize on what he preserved. As Francis Bacon once pointed out, fortitude is the virtue of adversity and temperance the virtue of prosperity.⁵⁵ John Kriss had them both. By 1947 Kriss personally owned nearly as much land as Garvey had when the two started operations together in 1933.⁵⁶

But the weather in the late 1940s was as much an anomaly as it had been in the 1930s, and success in the arid High Plains was no trick. They called Kriss the "Wheat King," but he could give no orders that would change nature one whit. Instead, he studied at its feet, using his special gifts of intelligence and memory, and he adapted arguably as completely and successfully as any scientific ecologist or outspoken environmentalist. He studied too at the feet of Garvey, the businessman and entrepreneur, and combined his un-

55. Francis Bacon, "Of Adversity," in *Francis Bacon: Essays and New Atlantis* (Roslyn, N. Y.: Walter J. Black, 1942). This essay was first printed in the third edition of Bacon's essays, published in 1625.

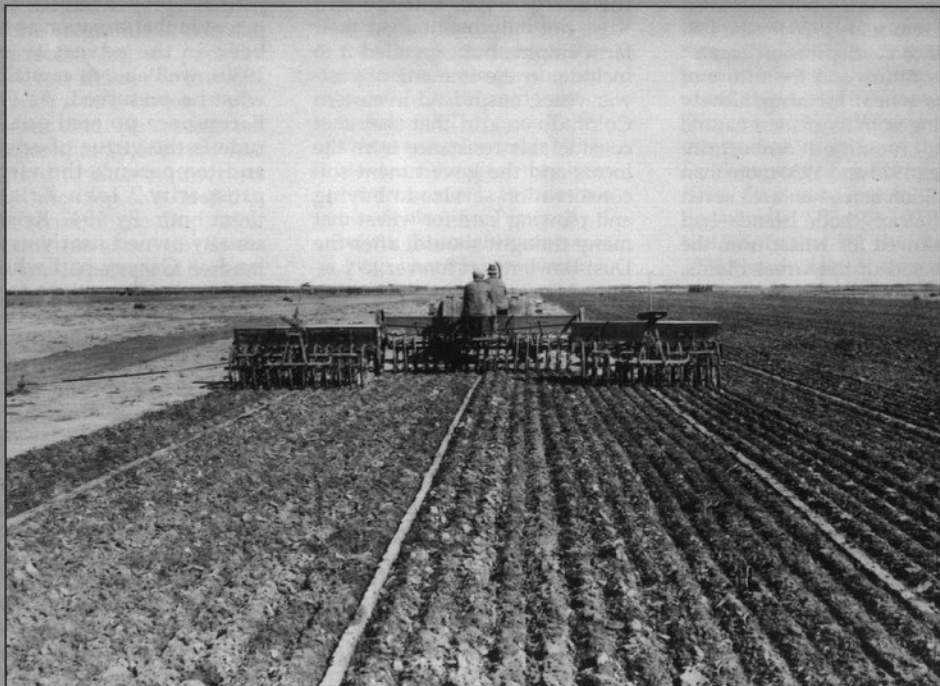
56. Garvey and Kriss separated in 1943 and the Kansas land was turned over to Ernest Fogelman. The operation for a time was called Garvey Farms. In 1945 Kriss took over the Kansas land from Fogelman and added the Colorado acreage to an operation again run as G-K Farms. The G-K partnership effectively ended at the 1947 harvest when R.H. Garvey turned the Garvey-owned farms over to his son James.

51. Garvey to Kriss, July 25, August 13, 1936.

52. John Kriss, income tax return, 1936, Kriss family records.

53. Vance Johnson, *Heaven's Tableland: The Dust Bowl Story* (New York: Farrar Straus and Co., 1947), 146, 149.

54. A summary of the later history of G-K is Ralph Wallace, "Miracle in the Dust Bowl," *Reader's Digest* 51 (November 1947): 74-77. Craig Miner's manuscript biography of Kriss, tentatively entitled "Reaping the Wind: John Kriss and the Wheat Farming Business in Kansas and Colorado, 1920-1950," includes three chapters, "The Break," "Colorado," and "Harvest Time," that document these years in detail.



As the rains returned in the early 1940s, Garvey and Kriss not only maintained their farm empire, but expanded it, buying and planting land in wheat that some thought would be useful only as pasture. In 1947 Kriss harvested more than a million bushels of wheat on G-K Farms land—the largest crop ever harvested by a single individual.

derstanding of profits with his knowledge of the prairie to create a sustainable land- and weather-based business.

Kriss was a developer in the best sense of that word. He and Garvey did not talk like environmentalists.⁵⁷ They did not love the government and central social planning. They definitely were driven by long-range self-interest and the possibility of wealth and profit, which is different than saying they were greedy. Their history throws into question the current trend of thought that capitalism itself was the bane of the American West. Their achievements illustrate Adam Smith's doctrine of unintended consequences, and shows that wealth can be created by innovation and application without robbing the opportunity of either current competitors or future generations.

John Kriss would have had more reason than most to blame any personal failure on an exploitative or "rigged" class-based economic system. Instead he took responsibility for his own destiny at a young age and used an open system to change himself and his situation, and to create, through

enterprise and effort, the wealth he later enjoyed. A prototypical American rags-to-riches story, Kriss chafes at government intervention of any kind, and feels that capitalism is not the problem but the solution. His historical career and its results, not his rhetoric, however, are the materials that must be analyzed in evaluating that conclusion.

At eighty-seven, John Kriss's mental involvement remains unchanged, and he and his sons still farm fifteen thousand acres of their own land in Kansas and Colorado. Their incentive to preserve it is in their ownership and their ability to pass down a valuable asset and the skills to exploit it responsibly into the indefinite family future. With R. H. Garvey there was no room for self-deception: production reality was obvious, and the calculus was for the long term—for permanent production under weather and soil conditions that Garvey had studied and recorded carefully since 1917 and Kriss since the early 1920s. They opted for large-scale farming because conditions lent themselves to that method. Additionally, they operated through a single manager rather than disparate tenants because their specific experience showed this the most

effective means, providing one had a John Kriss to serve as manager.

Kriss never became an industrial slave. He sought out Garvey, negotiated his own deal with him, and changed the terms as conditions changed. His move into the Ferguson partnership in 1936 indicated that, although Garvey might have preferred Kriss's complete personal dependency, the final test was economic gain, whatever the pattern leading to it. What developed was in essence a true partnership of owner/operator—more a partnership of equals than the vastly unequal employer/employee, owner/operator relationships of traditional imagery. G-K seemed to create miracles, but its principals were by no means dreamers, nor were they robbers in for a quick milking of an advantageous situation with the intent to sell out at a high figure and move on. For both men, mentally, psychologically and operationally, G-K Farms represented a "here today, here tomorrow" business, just as they had planned it.⁵⁸ [KH]

57. Kriss interview, January 27, 1990.

58. Ibid., January 21, and July 15, 1992; see also Tom McNeal, letter to the editor, *Colby Free Press*, July 19, 1917; Kriss to Mrs. R. H. Garvey, November 23, 1959.