

The Happy Farmer of Harrison Machine Works and His Evil Twin

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The cover of *Leslie's Weekly* for August 5th, 1909, carried a political cartoon by E. N. Blue and this caption: "The only man who is undisturbed by panics. The happy farmer whose bank account is yearly swelled by the sale of big crops at good prices." Blue's drawing satirized a well-known trademark of the threshing industry and was created during a time of national economic gloom.

The Panic of 1907 persisted into 1908, and business remained moribund for several years thereafter. The country's nerves were on edge. In a climate of fear and suspicion, Americans worried that there might be worse times ahead. In 1909, *Leslie's Weekly*, a heavily illustrated news magazine that was founded in 1852 and that ceased publication in 1922, assigned Blue the task of casting farmers in an unfavorable light. Why blame farmers? Were they getting rich at everyone else's expense?

A look at history will help to explain what Blue's cartoon was intended to convey. The Republican platform of 1908 included a plank calling for tariff reform. It was assumed that such reform would lower rates. President William Howard Taft called Congress into special session to make good on the Republicans' promise. New York Congressman Sereno E. Payne sponsored the bill, which the U.S. House of Representatives passed speedily. While tariff reform was underway, Midwest Republican insurgents voiced their objections that the existing tariff structure—on which the new tariff bill was based—robbed financially disadvantaged rural people to pay wealthy Northeast business interests and monopolistic trusts. Senator Nelson W. Aldrich, was a millionaire businessman from Rhode Island who knew the ins and outs of tariffs. He craftily rewrote Payne's bill to bait the Midwest's delegates to Congress. While seeming to conform to

the Republican platform, Aldrich lowered protections for farmers and raised rates that favored Northeast businessmen. The Republican Party split over the issue. The ensuing debates in Congress dragged on and became public. A highly compro-

Kirshman, nicknamed "Uncle Tom." The Indiana Manufacturing Company acquired the trademark when it bought Uncle Tom's patent for a windstacker that he had invented and that the Harrison firm had manufactured. The Indiana Company purchased several additional patents so as to have a monopoly on the best possible form of windstacker. By an agreement between Harrison and Indiana Manufacturing, Harrison did not have to pay the Indiana company the customary licensing fee. Uncle Tom died in 1905, but his portrait graced the circular decal on thousands of windstackers across North America. People throughout the country referred to the caricature as the Happy Farmer.

Blue conjured the Happy Farmer's evil twin. The artist gave him Uncle Tom's hat and

whiskers. Blue suggested Uncle Tom's tie by a shadow and his suspenders by a vest. Where Uncle Tom's gesture complemented the slogan "It's the farmer's friend and no mistake," Blue placed in the evil twin's grasp a bank booklet with fat checks protruding. The straw clenched between the evil twin's fiendishly grinning teeth might have been intended to brand him a hayseed. Gone was Uncle Tom's look of beneficence; in its place was a triumphantly diabolical stare. Blue's art insinuated that beneath the surface of the supposedly moral farmer was a greedy, hypocritical opportunist.

There is ample irony in the fact that a monopolistic firm placed the Happy Farmer decal on its windstackers, but, ultimately, no satirical cartoon by a New York magazine could besmirch the character of Thomas Kirshman, an honest working man in Illinois. As long as there were windstackers, the countenance of Uncle Tom stood for the beatific face of the American farmer.



Left: The so-called "Happy Farmer" trademark of the Harrison Machine Works that originated in the 1890s (from the cover of *The Iron-Men Album Magazine* for November–December 1959). **Right:** The Happy Farmer's evil twin from the cover of *Leslie's Weekly* for August 5th, 1909.

mised Payne–Aldrich Bill, which Aldrich and many of his supporters saw as offering too many protections to farmers, was passed on the 9th of April, 1909, and Taft reluctantly signed it. Incidentally, the split among Republicans led to the election of President Woodrow Wilson, a Democrat, in 1912.

The editors of *Leslie's Weekly* sided with Aldrich and the old guard Republicans and lobbied a visual attack against Midwest Republican insurgents, who had taken a high moral ground while upholding tariff protections for farmers. With the promise of bumper crops stirring stock speculation, *Leslie's* published Blue's cartoon in early August.

Blue chose as his subject a trademark that was widely recognized throughout what was then a predominantly agricultural United States. The trademark, which originated in the 1890s in the advertising department of the Harrison Machine Works in Belleville, Illinois, caricatured beloved Harrison worker Thomas