THREE

It Came from Bentonville: The Agrarian Origins of Wal-Mart Culture

Bethany E. Moreton

Back in 1999, when *Fortune* magazine was celebrating the turn of the millennium, it went looking for the "Businessman of the Century." The ultimate victory of the sentimental favorite was never in doubt: who but Henry Ford, pioneer of mass production, could plausibly stand for the entire international economic order of the previous one hundred years? On the way to the winner's circle, however, the editors highlighted contenders from other sectors of the economy, including semifinalist Sam Walton, the founder of Wal-Mart.[1] Three years later, Wal-Mart topped the magazine's annual rankings of the world's largest corporations, and it may well be that when the magazine is selecting its Businessman of the Twenty-first Century, it will have to reach back to Walton for a belated tribute. In the meantime, the contest encapsulates our current analytical dilemma: Ford, we can all agree, set a paradigm for an entire social formation in the earliest decades of this past century. Its constituent parts, its long-term consequences, and its ultimate demise have been around long enough to attract deep, nuanced analysis; but what came next?

As Supreme Court justice Potter Stewart so arrestingly remarked of obscenity, we may not be able to define it, but we know it when we see it. It's the service economy: fast-food nation, McWorld, the consumers' republic. It's globalization: the Lexus under the olive tree, the lasers in the jungle, the Tibetan pilgrims following the Chicago Bulls. It's post–Cold War American hegemony: the new world order, the end of history, the clash of civilizations.[2] In some circles, it travels under the nom de guerre of "post-Fordism," presenting us with a rare instance of harmony between the readers of *Fortune* and the readers of imprisoned Italian Communist Antonio Gramsci. The period from 1914 until 1973, they agree, was characterized by mass production and mass consumption of consumer durables; planned power sharing on the part of big business, big government, and big labor; and social standardization through bureaucratic institutions, nuclear families, and a homogenizing nationalism. The period since 1973 has relied increasingly on the "niche" production and consumption of ever more disposable items, a retreat from the state regulation and social safety nets that stabilized the boom-and-bust business cycle, highly flexible labor markets and work arrangements, an explosive acceleration of circulating capital and credit, and a social and cultural emphasis on difference.[3] But the term "post-Fordism" itself suggests the limitations of the concept: it is a negative definition, tempting us to measure the new terrain by the norms of the familiar one. "Wal-Martism" can plug this conceptual hole in the middle of post-Fordism. The specific case of the auto industry drew analytical attention to components of modernity—the regimentation of time, for example, or the creation of consumer desire. Wal-Mart deserves a hearing on the same terms. We should ask not just how it differs from Ford or GM, but what original inputs created the "Wal-Mart Way."

This essay—part of a larger project—considers one of those key inputs: the company's actual geographical home in the Ozark Mountain region of Northwest Arkansas. It argues that Wal-Mart did not halt the march of industrial modernity with *Hee-Haw* anachronisms. Even at its supposed midcentury zenith, the high-wage manufacturing sector depended on a host of informal economic arrangements that have outlived it, and none more successfully than Wal-Mart.[4] The supposed paradox of Wal-Mart—the riddle of the high-tech hillbillies, the mystery of rustics who can tote a Bible in one hand and an electronic scanner in the other—actually masks a genuine historical problem: how did the world's largest corporation grow from the most violently antimonopoly section of America? How, in fact, did the "red" and "blue" actors in this drama switch sides?

In the 1930s, two of today's most vociferous Wal-Mart critics—*The Nation* magazine and the retail union—helped lay the groundwork for Wal-Mart's future dominance, while the small Arkansas towns that epitomize the company fought tooth and nail to prevent its advent. For Wal-Mart to thrive, it had to overcome a pair of entrenched local objections to its business model: suspicion of the captain of industry, and loyalty to republican manhood. In meeting these twin challenges, Wal-Mart pioneered a managerial culture that has proved downright cutting-edge.[5]

The Wal-Mart Paradox

Today, even the most casual reader of the national press has encountered some version of this formula: Wal-Mart is the biggest company on the planet. Its sales on a single day recently topped the GDPs of thirty-six sovereign nations. If it were the Independent Republic of Wal-Mart, it would be China's sixth largest export market, and its economy would rank thirtieth in the world, right behind Saudi Arabia's. And then the punch line: it's from a little bitty town in Arkansas where you can't even buy a beer![6] Bentonville, Arkansas, always rated this kind of mention in the business press as the unlikeliest of places to produce a world-class player. "The paradox," marveled one representative commentator in 2002, "is that Wal-Mart stands for both Main Street values and the efficiencies of the huge corporation, aw-shucks hokeyness and terabytes of minute-by-minute sales data, fried-chicken luncheons at the Waltons' Arkansas home and the demands of Wall Street."[7]

A more useful interpretation of the "Wal-Mart paradox" comes from within its own management. In Wal-Mart circles, no single story of the company's early years was more treasured than that of the Chicken Report. Since the early 1970s, Wal-Mart had courted investors with laid-back annual meetings featuring fishing trips and barbecues, and by the mid-eighties the national analysts could not ignore the home office's overtures. The result was an irresistible audience of slightly bewildered city folk, struggling to comprehend the company's magic. With encouragement from Walton, Senior Vice President Ron Loveless elaborated on one of management's typical in-house gags and presented it to the attentive crowd. "People often ask us how we predict market demand for discount merchandise," Loveless began, "and you've heard a lot of numbers today. But there is more to it than that. We raise a good many chickens in Northwest Arkansas, and we've come to depend on them for what we call the Loveless Economic Indicator Report. You see, when times are good, you find plenty of dead chickens by the side of the road, ones that have fallen off the trucks. But when times are getting lean, people stop and pick up the dead chickens and take 'em home for supper. So in addition to the traditional methods, we try to correlate our advance stock orders with the number of dead chickens by the side of the road." With elaborate graphs, Loveless demonstrated the entirely fictitious relationship, gravely explaining the peaks and valleys of chicken mortality, describing one anomalous spike as a misleading head-on collision between two chicken trucks outside Kosciusko, Mississippi, and projecting slides of a uniformed "Chicken Patrol" inspecting a bird's carcass on a two-lane country road. "And the audience sat there nodding and frowning and writing it all down!"[8]

Wal-Mart delighted in playing up the supposed contrast between hillbilly Arkansas and high-tech big business. But if we read this juxtaposition as paradoxical, we deserve the drubbing that the Chicken Patrollers dished out. In fact, the reputed "antimodernists" have shown a consistent talent for innovation. The rural South embraced distance commerce back when it meant mail-order catalogs and global cotton markets.

An Ozark farm in the late 1970s. Small-scale farms supplied many of Wal-Mart's early employees, both in management and in hourly positions.
Courtesy of Shiloh Museum of Ozark History, Springdale, Arkansas

Fundamentalist preachers first seized the new technology of radio and then cable television to create a deterritorialized community of the faithful. The Moral Majority mastered direct mail to build a new political constituency. And, indeed, the small-town retailer set the technological standard for a global industry.[9] These Sunbelt enigmas are not examples of some odd hybrid, "half . . . defender of traditional lifestyle, half entrepreneurial innovator."[10] They are in fact unadulterated innovators, for their carefully cultivated traditionalism itself represents a radical new creation. Like every such invented tradition, it clothes itself in stridently archaic imagery. To accept this version at face value, however, is to seriously underestimate its capacity. Wal-Mart and its host culture indeed embody many paradoxes, but they do not include fried chicken and terabytes.

The Ozarks: Wal-Mart Country

If nothing much springs to mind when you hear the term "Ozark Mountains," you are probably not a country music fan. The world's largest country attraction outside of Nashville is Branson, a Missouri Ozark town that caters to retirees looking for a good surf-and-turf combo and a mid-afternoon show by the Oak Ridge Boys. A spin through Branson will quickly alert you to a related Ozarks trait: the area's extraordinary ethnic homogeneity. Northwest Arkansas and southern Missouri have historically been among the whitest places in the country—over 95 percent white as late as 1996. The African American proportion of the population in Wal-Mart's Benton County has stayed under 1 percent since the close of the Civil War.[11] Moreover, the oldest waves of American immigration predominated—eighteenth-century English and Scotch-Irish, pre–Civil War Germans. Like much of the South's rural interior, the region remained virtually untouched by the southern and eastern European immigration waves of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Catholics and Jews who made up the industrial workforce in the North.[12] In the wake of that immigration, during the high tide of American eugenicist sentiment, the Ozarks enjoyed a brief vogue as a reserve supply of "old-stock Anglo-Saxons" who needed only to be taken off ice to reinvigorate the nation with traditional republican virtues of thrift, self-sufficiency, hard work, and quaint Elizabethan speech patterns.[13]

Like the Appalachian counties farther east, Wal-Mart's Ozark homeland avoided the pathologies of widespread tenancy and monocropping that characterized the South's old plantation zones. On the better lands, a diversified farm economy built around grain, fruit, and livestock obviated the need for extensive holdings and massive labor reserves that commodity row crops demanded: family labor and modest capital could suffice to coax a stable living out of a 125-acre farm.[14] But the success of this economy depended on the constant out-migration of surplus adults and the low consumption levels of those who remained behind: measured in access to electric power, farm machinery, running water, phone service, or automobiles, the Ozarks in 1930 ranked at the bottom of America's consumer hierarchy.[15]

The penetration of railroads in the 1870s meanwhile began a long process of transforming the mountains: the unlovely economic bases of lead mining and timber clear-cutting denuded hills and removed the forest game reserves that had supplemented small-scale farming on thin soil. Pell-mell extraction produced a " 'quick-rich, long-poor' " pattern of underdevelopment, and the families on marginal farms became a reliable source of part-time labor in their struggle for solvency.[16] This one-foot-on-the-farm strategy had proved its utility in many previous settings where labor-intensive innovations sought a toehold: the earliest textile mills in the United States explicitly targeted the unmarried daughters of New England farmers. Twentieth-century boosters of the New South likewise assured restless northern industries that low wages suited their citizens just fine, since the family collard patch could make up the difference.[17]

Ozarkers stood outside the major currents of international migration until very recently, but they played a major role in circulating domestic migrants. Route 66, the storied highway that carried "Okies" and "Arkies" into the San Joaquin Valley, passes right through Wal-Mart country.[18] Though the area earned its reputation by flushing landlocked white folks downstream toward the Golden State, the Ozarks also diverted the stream inward to its own counties. While the "sick old people from Iowa" poured into 1920s Los Angeles, the Ozarks of the same era attracted hardier midwestern "city clerks and tradesmen" who had wearied of "the precariousness and routine" of indoor occupations. Many of these migrants responded to romantic promotional brochures that touted the restorative virtues of the self-sufficient rural idyll. Marshalling their life savings, these enervated desk sitters bought marginal land sight unseen, then went bust trying to plant apple trees in chert.[19]

But there was more to the Ozarks' appeal than just slick PR. The midwesterners responded to the powerful pull of the independent farm at a time when the perils of large-scale bureaucratic enterprises were all too apparent. In a 1934 travel article, celebrated muralist Thomas Hart Benton christened the area "America's Yesterday." With the country's today grim and its tomorrow uncertain, this paean to a preindustrial, pre-urban, pre-immigrant America located our collective past in a decreasingly representative white rural enclave. If the Ozarks sheltered "the very last of our fathers' America," then our fathers must all be Scotch-Irish farmers—not slaves, not immigrants, and not factory hands.[20]

World War II put an end to the dream of small farm independence for all but the most ideologically committed. Pricey new chemical, mechanical, and biological inputs—herbicides, automatic tomato pickers, hybrid corn—took up the temporary slack in the labor market and made farming so capital-intensive that only increased acreage could support the great leap forward in mechanized production.[21] But for those who did not need to wrest a living out of their acreage, farming could still serve as an attractive "lifestyle choice," especially now that it came equipped with flush toilets. Thus by the 1960s the Ozarks had become one of the country's few four-season retirement destinations, a back-to-the-land Florida without the bikinis. Retirement communities fueled the area's staggering 81 percent population increase between 1960 and 1998, and its oldest resort town, Bella Vista, Arkansas, served as something of a national prototype for this new industry.[22] Weary midwesterners forwarded their Social Security checks to their new addresses near the region's artificial lakes, courtesy of the Army Corps of Engineers.

These migrations to Wal-Mart country drew people who disrupted some local patterns and exaggerated others, but who at least could plausibly imagine the Ozarks as their yesterday. The first serious crack in the region's monochromatic demographics came only very recently. Between 1990 and 2000, the two-county heart of Northwest Arkansas saw an almost tenfold increase in Mexican and Central American immigrants attracted by the boomtown construction pattern and the ubiquitous poultry-processing plants.[23] The plants are only the most visible tip of an agribusiness revolution uniquely suited to the area's small-farm allegiances: contract chicken growing. In this system of mass protein production, farmers receive tens of thousands of day-old chicks, raise them in a computer-controlled climate according to a rigidly standardized schedule, and then return the broilers and fryers to Tyson Foods for processing by Spanish-speaking immigrants—a kind of factory farming for the outsourced era. As one such grower put it, "This isn't farming. It's going to a job in your back yard."[24]

Contract farming nevertheless testifies to the enduring appeal of the landowning dream. In the Ozarks, far from both plantations and steel mills, the vision of independent country living remained a plausible goal for native-born whites in the twentieth century. The economic substance may have drained from the farm, but at least the form remained, and the money would have to come from waiting tables during the high season in Branson or hauling chicken nuggets to California. Low consumption, constant movement, and a long commute to off-farm waged labor were the price you paid to live in the country and work anywhere but a factory.

What's the Matter with Arkansas? Antimonopolism in Wal-Mart Country

Potential obstacles to Wal-Mart's success may suggest themselves in this quick sketch of Wal-Mart country, but we do not need to deduce them on our own. The area's inhabitants made their objections explicit in the regional tradition of antimonopolism. At the turn of the twentieth century, large-scale enterprises like Wal-Mart scored abysmally low marks in its future territory's estimation of social worth. Upland Arkansas, southwest Missouri, and the eastern sections of Oklahoma, Kansas, and Texas all hosted the nation's most vigorous popular protests against huge economic "combinations." The strikes and rebellions of 1886 that posed the nation's greatest collective challenge to industrial capitalism spread out of Sedalia, Missouri, future home of an early Wal-Mart.[25] The People's Party likewise grew up in the giant retailer's backyard. From towns like Searcy, Arkansas, and Cleburne, Texas—future sites of Wal-Mart's automated distribution centers—Populists demanded a variety of government mechanisms to prevent the growth of corporations and trusts.[26]

While the central hero in this struggle was the farmer, the small country merchant enjoyed a brief but dramatic moment as the emblem of rural virtue. The vehicle for his symbolic career was the anti–chain store movement of the 1920s and 1930s. The movement provoked a policy battle that claimed headlines around the country and ultimately spawned New Deal legislation that could have ended Wal-Mart's career before it even began.[27]

Understanding the anti–chain store movement as anything but an outbreak of protectionist crankery requires grounding it in the antimonopolist tradition. Its ideological origins lie in the nineteenth-century Populist critique of the new industrial economy. Well into the nineteenth century corporate charters remained a privilege rather than a right: the limited liability and diffusion of ownership they represented could claim legal protection only insofar as they served the public interest. But as mass production demanded increasingly vast organizations of capital and management in the 1880s and 1890s, the Supreme Court vested corporations with legal personhood under the Constitution and established a new category of protected property in the form of expected return on investment. The corporation entered the twentieth century as an immortal supercitizen.[28]

This cataclysmic reorganization did not proceed unopposed. Though rural Americans had never dwelt in an Eden of subsistence farming, the world of commercial agriculture at least retained an aura of noble Jeffersonian independence—all the more so as the seemingly endless supply of "vacant" land abruptly ran out in 1890 and the nation's population tipped from rural to urban. The successive waves of agrarian revolt that swept the South and West ever more sharply identified the industrial "combinations" as illegitimate actors, expressing a general distrust of distant corporations in the folk idiom of economic evil: malevolent international cabals, adulterated money, shady dealings. Congressional hearings and muckraking journalists regularly demonstrated that such charges often had a depressing basis in fact, but at the end of the day even the most rigidly law-abiding corporation could eat a Jeffersonian yeoman for lunch. A cooperative of indebted farmers could not match the capital-generating capacity of a publicly traded company.

Yet antimonopolism did not expire on the marginal back forties around Cleburne and Searcy. Though their electoral victories in local and state elections were short-lived and ultimately overshadowed by their defeat in the presidential campaign of 1896, the Populists endowed much of subsequent Progressive-era policy with their agenda. Professional economists might have been extolling the virtues of big industry, but legislators and congressmen were dancing to the farmers' tune. In the compromised versions of the antitrust acts, the agrarians' antipathy became national law just in time for the production demands of World War I to legitimate massive corporations in fact if not in principle.[29]

Tolerating corporate industry as a necessary evil was nevertheless a far cry from accepting it as a positive good. Although the dynamo had its bards among both socialists and capitalists, the republican yeoman ideal was firmly enshrined in the national mythos. The early twentieth century saw intense concern with maintaining the countryside as a healthful wellspring of national virtue, endlessly resupplying cities with fresh-faced Anglo-Saxon plowmen and milkmaids. In good times and bad, the countryside retained an emotional claim upon the nation that the teeming industrial cities could not equal. In the various forms that the periphery's agrarian challenges took, the economic villains remained relatively stable: distant northeastern bankers and megacorporations with a stranglehold over the country's credit and distribution systems. The challengers saw their cause not as impinging on a competitive free market but in fact as preserving competition by denying the combinations their unfair economies of scale. In a society of self-identified producers, this logic commanded wide loyalty.

Small country merchants walked a fine line in this cosmology. While early Farmers' Alliances classed them among the producers, their relationship to monopoly distribution could tip them into the villain's role in agrarian morality tales.[30] Moreover, until the Federal Reserve system and the Farm Loan Act ushered in a liberalization of credit in the 1910s and 1920s, rural merchants often doubled as informal banks, a position ripe for abuse among the South's many innumerate sharecroppers.[31] Looking back on the career of the small-business stratum from the vantage point of 1951, C. Wright Mills pointed out that while farmers' moral authority had produced the federal giveaway of land through the Homestead Act, Congress had never undertaken national regeneration through the distribution of small retail stores.[32] Thus the small merchants' bid for yeoman status was in part a conscious appropriation of their farmer customers' own sterling reputation. In the century's early decades, after all, even giant monopolies strove to clothe themselves in the mantle of rural producerist virtue and put a human face on their superhuman economic organization. To hitch their star successfully to the farmer's wagon, the anti–chain store activists had to convince a broader base than merely the movement's immediate beneficiaries. Their success in winning support—particularly in what later became Wal-Mart country—illuminates an important chapter in that company's prehistory.[33]

The Chain Menace

Seen in the *longue durée* of American economic history, the fact that requires explanation is not the coming of chain stores but rather the persistence of small shops into the twentieth century. Like the family farm, the corner store was already a visible throwback to observers in the 1920s. Since the advent of widespread railroad and telegraph access in the nineteenth century, the trend in distribution had moved steadily toward greater efficiency, standardization, and central control. Inevitably, efficiency meant compressing various points in the distribution chain. First wholesalers and their representatives displaced innumerable small peddlers, then after the 1870s themselves felt the pressure of mass retailers large enough to deal directly with manufacturers. Depending on where you stood in this process, the charge of monopolism and unfair dealing sounded salient at different historical moments.

The urban department stores, the first mass retailers of any influence, faced cries of foul play from their small, single-line competitors in industrial cities of the Gilded Age. Reeling from the cataclysmic depression of 1893, Chicago's small merchants used their influence in the city council to fight giants like Marshall Field's, but like their counterparts in New York and Massachusetts, they ultimately failed to carry their argument in state legislatures. Wal-Mart country played little part in this first debate over centralized distribution, since the department stores were confined to larger cities. A decade later the mail-order companies challenged southern and midwestern country stores. Despite fierce nationwide opposition from rural shopkeepers and wholesalers, the catalogs' future was assured with the congressional approval in 1912 of extended parcel post service, by which taxpayers underwrote rural consumption.[34]

The anti–chain store movement of the late 1920s and early 1930s offered vigorous and, for a time, effective resistance, dwarfing all previous attempts to arrest mass distribution. And while today the opposition to Wal-Mart comes from "blue" stalwarts, in this earlier battle the positions were reversed. Wal-Mart's unique contribution to post-Fordism rests on this genuine paradox.

Attack of the Independents

In 1929, the year of the Crash, the antichain movement could claim over four hundred local organizations, with dozens of issue-specific newspapers and radio stations as well as traveling lecturers in the pattern of the Farmers' Alliance—or, more ominously, on the subscription plan of the revived Ku Klux Klan.[35] A poll from 1936 found that 69 percent of the public had a negative impression of chains, with the highest proportion of ire in the South and Midwest. The "chain store menace," marveled *The Nation,* was "the question most talked of below the Ohio."[36] Between 1925 and 1937, 916 antichain bills were introduced in state legislatures, and fully 50 became law. After this outcry produced two separate high-profile federal investigations of chain practices, congressmen from Arkansas and Texas sponsored the federal antichain bills that passed in 1936 and 1937. An additional bill that would have essentially taxed large chain operations out of existence—called by its supporters the "community preservation bill" and by its detractors the "death sentence bill"—came close to passing several times before falling victim to wartime changes.[37]

Much of the organized opposition to chains came, unsurprisingly, from small merchants themselves, but what is striking about the movement of the early Depression years is how much public support it garnered in other quarters as well. Though the agitation predated the Crash, the economic calamity that followed focused hostile attention on the machinations of big business of all stripes, granting a second wind to the previous generation's antimonopolism. The small merchants' hostility, like that of the farmers themselves, rested on a specific vernacular definition of monopoly. Small-scale commercial growers insisted that their family farms merited public protection against the predatory efficiencies of the factory farm, regardless of the effects on consumers' food bills; the independent merchants likewise drew the focus away from consumer choice and substituted the suite of symbols bequeathed to them by the nineteenth-century fight against railroads.[38] In the long run, this fundamental conflict of interests between low-budget shoppers and small-scale retailers was resolved in favor of the former; but with the citizen not yet fully transmogrified into a consumer first and foremost, the question could remain in debate for most of the decade.[39]

Just as the small retailers' case was made by many outside their ranks, so the chains could call on allies from the rational champions of progress. *The Nation* magazine announced in 1930 that "a new battle on evolution is raging in the South" in which the small merchant represented the "fundamentalist position" against the chains, exemplars of "modernism."[40] Reason was clearly on the side of the latter, in *The Nation*'s opinion, and small-town shopkeepers needed to come to grips with their own extinction: "In the age of greatest efficiency there must be three classes of people, the consumer, the producer, and a minimum number of citizens involved in distribution."[41] Certainly there might be some problems along the way, *The Nation* conceded, but the market would handle those: "The wages in chain stores for employees other than managers are inadequate and will eventually be raised. The chains will realize that it is to their own advantage to pay their labor well."[42]

The choice of metaphor—evolution versus fundamentalism—serves as a timely reminder that the progressive opinion makers were quick to see slack-jawed backwardness in arguments that today sound downright radical. Writing of the literal antievolutionary sentiment of the early twentieth century, historian Ed Larson points out that theories of natural selection were widely used to justify "laissez-faire capitalism, imperialism, and militarism." Eugenicists were proud to claim Darwinian theory; the fundamentalist position, by contrast, defended the weak and the economically superfluous that rational science would render obsolete. The textbook at stake in the 1925 Scopes "Monkey Trial," *Civic Biology,* calmly pointed out that if the retarded, the insane, the criminal, and the epileptic members of the human family were animals, "we would probably kill them off to prevent them from spreading."[43] Similarly, the small-town independents were expected to understand that their continued existence represented a drag on the natural economic order, and if a few eggs got broken on the way to maximum efficiency, so be it. They could always get a job at the A & P.

And when many of them did, they had a good chance of being represented by a union. Among the major opponents of the federal antichain "death sentence" bill were the two unions representing retail stores. Patrick Gorman, president of the Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen, convinced the American Federation of Labor to come out against the bill in 1939 by pointing out that "in the southern states . . . for years we failed to organize the smaller grocery men and meat market men. In the South they chased us out of their stores." But now A & P had signed contracts in over a dozen southern cities—more proof that chain executives could be counted on to see reason.[44]

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In contrast to this enthusiastic support, the heart of the antichain critique comprised two cherished Populist tropes. One axis of argument grouped various suspicions of "foreign"-owned big business generally, with "foreign" implying not international but simply distant and unfamiliar. While the idiom could easily slide into paranoid anti-Semitism and racism, the distrust was often honestly come by. The sections of the country that opposed chains most vociferously had suffered at the hands of northern railroads, eastern banks, and industrial monopolies that demonstrably extracted wealth in a semicolonial relationship with the hinterlands.[45] "I don't want to be bolshevistic," wrote one Texan in support of Depression-era antichain legislation, but "it certainly is no permanent relief or progress for the government to create temporary jobs and distribute money and in a few days it all wind up in Chicago or New York City in the hands of a few extremely wealthy men, owners of the chains and utilities."[46] The leading congressional champion of the independents pointed out that while 200 companies controlled more than half the country's corporate wealth, fully 180 of them were located in the North, leaving only 11 in the West and a mere 9 in the South: "How a true Texan can favor ownership and control of local business by Wall Streeters, I cannot understand."[47] Members of the Ku Klux Klan in Clarke County, Georgia, railed against the chain owners as a "Little Group of Kings in Wall Street" and warned that Jewish and Catholic immigrants were using the chain to pauperize native-born white Protestants.[48] Employing a familiar metaphor for rural Protestants, a 1937 ancestor of the *Left Behind* books cast chain stores as evidence of the imminent Apocalypse.[49]

The suspicion of distant "foreigners" was echoed in charges of shady business practices: mere efficiencies of scale were not thought sufficient to produce the price differentials between chains and the "independents," as the owner-operated stores tellingly dubbed themselves. Such savings must come either from sly, thumb-on-the-scale tricks of the constantly relocated "gypsy" chain managers, or from the kind of illegal collusion that had brought on the original antitrust legislation at the turn of the century. Referring to the evidence of volume discounts publicized by a Federal Trade Commission inquiry into the A & P chain, a wholesaler made the connection explicit: "Some years back the railroads indulged in this practice, making secret concessions to the larger shippers, giving them an advantage over the average man. . . . ANY CONCERN LARGE AND POWERFUL ENOUGH TO EXACT CONCESSIONS

THAT CANNOT BE EXTENDED TO EVERYONE HAS NO RIGHT TO EXISTENCE."[50]

The other polestar of antichain agitation likewise derived from the symbolic power of yeoman independence. The original political virtue of the landowning head of household lay in his literal self-possession: he could participate in the public sphere because he called no man master. The implicit corollary to his independence was the legal *dependence* of the other members of his household: women, children, and in various times and places, servants, tenants, or slaves. By the 1920s, with independent farming a distinctly minority occupation in the United States, the independence could adhere in other forms of proprietorship, provided the illusion of self-command remained. Thus the chains, owned by stockholders and managed "scientifically" according to the standardized principles of Taylorism, raised the specter of "a nation of clerks." The least industrialized sections of the country might see their sons fall prey to the same dehumanizing factory discipline as the immigrant masses of the North and East, working for the Man rather than epitomizing him.

Thus a generation before the man in the gray flannel suit offered a bogey of the standardized postwar salary man, middle-class Americans could gaze with horror on the specter of the permanent retail clerk. This man-boy would be relegated to the lifelong status of a "helper," classed by one outraged observer alongside such effeminate professionals as typists, stenographers, and secretaries. Chain-store employment could potentially strip him of political manhood in the form of the franchise, through constant mobility that prevented registering to vote. Even his physical masculinity could fall victim to the chains' downward pressure on wages, for he could not earn enough "to marry and have a wife and children, and thus must miss ninety-nine percent of nature's program of life."[51]

The economic logic of mass distribution demanded that many nineteen-year-old clerks would stay in that lowly condition throughout their productive years, never becoming the pop of a mom-and-pop. "[Chains] stifle opportunity for local boys," charged a proponent of chain taxes in the classic middlebrow organ, the *Reader's Digest*. "Their clerks stay clerks. . . . [A chain] doesn't want bright boys—it wants plodders, dutiful machines."[52] Klansmen warned that chain monopolies, by shutting out the option of small-business ownership, were enslaving American children and turning young men into "automatons."[53] An Arkansan wrote his senator, "Do you really believe rugged individualism can be revived without legislation to destroy the 'Octopus' movement" of chain retailers?[54] Decked out in an apron, subjected to time-and-motion studies, trapped behind the produce counter of the Piggly Wiggly—the sturdy yeoman was indeed imperiled.

Wal-Mart, an economic colossus exemplifying unprecedented industry domination, thus arose in the heartland of fiery antimonopolism; from the massive railroad strikes of the Gilded Age, through Populism and the chain-store battles of the Second New Deal, the Southwest cast its lot with the ideal of small-scale agrarian independence. In order to make its home in the old Populist countryside, Wal-Mart had to overcome the twin objections to chain distribution: its remote, faceless ownership and its threat to white rural manhood. In successfully meeting these challenges, Wal-Mart shaped the Sunbelt service sector and claimed Henry Ford's national mantle.

The Boss as Everyman

The American hinterlands had long personalized their resentment against the megacorporations as hostility to the individual robber barons of the Northeast. To rid the corporate structure of its conspiratorial associations, the Sunbelt needed to put a different human face on the company. In the Sunbelt's boom years, Northwest Arkansas produced many examples of the boss as Everyman, the multibillionaire captain of his industry who made a point of wearing his egalitarianism on his sleeve. Conspicuous underconsumption marked the rise of Ozark chicken king John Tyson, whose son and grandson dressed in the khaki uniforms of their employees. The region's mighty trucking empires were founded by men in overalls with grade-school educations. These successful Ozarkers pointedly declined to acquire trophy wives as their fortunes grew, and instead publicly credited their original spouses as full partners in the family business. This was often no more than the literal truth: Mrs. Helen Walton's family money, for example, bankrolled the original discount stores, and her degree in economics was a solid asset in all the Waltons' enterprises. As urban, coastal America came to look less and less like Northwest Arkansas, these entrepreneurial titans insisted ever more firmly on their Ozark identities. In the local phrase, they never forgot what they came from.

This populist stance went a long way toward humanizing some of the world's biggest corporate fortunes. During the heyday of the Fordist economy, auto companies poured vast resources into the fledgling PR field in an effort to make a gigantic corporation into "something personal, warm, and human"; advertising strove to convert AT&T into a "friend and neighbor" or the GM headquarters into "the family home."[55] In contrast, the down-to-earth Mr. Sam was himself an ad for Wal-Mart, not least of all in the financial markets. Wal-Mart wooed stockholders and analysts with home-style barbecues, canoe trips, and bus tours of the stores. Warren Buffett promoted Wal-Mart stock early and often, in his Reagan-era role as the wholesome old-stock Nebraska populist to Michael Milken's corrupt urban insider.[56] Little Rock's Stephens Inc., the largest investment bank outside of Wall Street and an IPO underwriter for all four major Ozark firms,

Making a sale, Lake Dick, Arkansas, 1938. Photograph by Russell Lee.
FARM SECURITY ADMINISTRATION/OFFICE OF WAR INFORMATION, LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

stressed its own farm-boy roots and Arkansas loyalties. Rather less was said of its original business in speculating in guaranteed municipal bonds during the Depression.[57] At least these fortunes were not running off to build libraries in Pittsburgh or business schools in Boston. They stayed within sight of the old home place.

As with so many Sunbelt success stories, these resolutely humble men could represent their companies in part because they initially headed entrepreneurial rather than corporate empires. With their family members, they owned and controlled the businesses in lieu of stockholders and salaried managers. Walton took pains to describe the decision making of Walton Enterprises as a family gathering, evoking an idealized kitchen table to Americans who increasingly dined alone at the drive-through window: "Sometimes we argue and sometimes we don't," he wrote, but decisions were made in the private sphere. Moreover, since "everybody gets the same" share, economic justice was achieved in one family.[58] Likewise, Walton's aversion to publicity for the company was figured as resenting an intrusion into the family's private business; ExxonMobil would have had a hard time making the same argument. As the visible creations of individual families, the Ozark companies remained plausible carriers of the myth of the independent producer. Each firm wore a family surname proudly: no "General" this or "International" that for Tyson Foods, Jones Truck Lines, or Walton's Family Centers.[59]

Founding Father

While the entrepreneurial pattern of "local boy made good" went far to answering one populist critique, it actually fit the other Ozark magnates much better than it did Mr. Sam.[60] The Walton family history exemplified the Southwest's growth pattern, in which government largesse turned into individual virtue by the addition of sweat equity. Walton's father and grandfather served as postmasters, a form of federal patronage that provided a steady if hardly munificent wage amid the vagaries of farming. His uncle staked out a free land grant when the federal government drove Indian owners out of Oklahoma and made white settlers a gift of the territory. Homesteading, the federal subsidizing of the yeoman ideal, laid the basis for what was to prove a much longer-lived wealth engine in the future Sunbelt: not small-scale farming but land speculation. Two generations of Waltons profited from the loans and mortgages that underwrote land booms, taking time out to farm only when World War I guaranteed a government market for their crops at peak prices.[61] For their part, the Waltons worked hard with the capital their government furnished and became legendary for thrift: "He could squeeze a Lincoln until the president cried," exclaimed one longtime employee of Sam's father.[62] The family inspired more respect than affection, driving relentless deals, yet never crossing the line into dishonesty. And while their living was more comfortable than most, it was hardly extravagant.

Walton's biography of finance, inherited security, and public inputs is hardly the stuff of a convincing Horatio Alger tale. Clearly the Walton past would have to change to meet the needs of the present. A host of mythologizers relentlessly forced Walton's personal history into the threadbare rags-to-riches plot line. Typically a "family tradition of hard work and thrift" stands in for actual material hardship.[63] The national economic disaster of the Depression and the regional one of the Dust Bowl are elided into Walton's personal biography. "While still a child, Walton moved with his family from one town to another in Missouri, where he observed Dust Bowl farms. He promised himself he would never be poor."[64] Though his father was in fact repossessing those farms for the family mortgage company, Walton's childhood somehow converges with that of the busted farmer, not the moneylender. "It pained Thomas Walton [Sam's father] to have to take a man's land from him when the crop failed to come in," one hagiographer hazarded, though "these defaults added up to thousands of acres of land under the Walton name."[65] In 1989, when Walton's judicious division of $7.2 billion among his four children dropped him from number one to number twenty on the annual *Forbes* list of the four hundred richest Americans, fully 40 percent of his fellow superrich had inherited their money. A billionaire with a job helped maintain the legitimacy of the entire category.[66]

Since Mr. Walton's passing in 1992, when both presidential candidates paused to offer tribute, Wal-Mart has made a conscious policy of reinforcing its identification of founder with company. Banners in the company auditorium repeat the sayings of Chairman Sam. His handsome visage smiles gravely down from the walls, and clips of his firsthand advice are played for employees and stockholders alike. Former employees speak of him with unfeigned warmth, and even union-minded workers argue their case as an attempt to "restore the respect for the employees that was Mr. Sam's vision."[67]

The streak of fond paternalism is not confined to company insiders. Elsewhere, the family analogy successfully replaced the managerial one. Walton's best-selling 1992 "autobiography" debuted to a million-dollar Father's Day promotional campaign with life-sized Sam Walton cutouts, patriotic window dressings, and radio ads during *Country Countdown*.[68] The 1995 novel *Where the Heart Is*—an Oprah's Book Club selection and later a successful movie—features seventeen-year-old Novalee Nation, pregnant, deserted, and broke, who makes her home in an Oklahoma Wal-Mart. She lives there clandestinely for two months, keeping a careful log of what she owes Wal-Mart for the canned goods and toiletries she uses, and dramatically gives birth to "Americus Nation" in the store. Sam Walton subsequently visits the madonna and child in the hospital, and in the absence of the baby's father, he ensures their economic future. Explaining that the publicity has been good for the company, Walton absolves the single mother of her consumer debt and promises her a job in the Wal-Mart itself once she recovers.[69]

Not many of the superrich would be welcome at a young mother's bedside, but Walton was "no Donald Trump," an *Arkansas Gazette* reviewer pointed out in 1990.[70] "A billionaire everyone can love" declared *USA Today*.[71] "A televised version of Walton's life would resemble the 'Andy Griffith Show,' not 'Dallas.' "[72] Tourists on their way to Branson make a pilgrimage to the Wal-Mart Visitors' Center, the exquisitely restored five-and-dime that Walton operated on the Bentonville Square in the 1950s. Many become visibly emotional at the sight of Walton's 1979 Ford pickup. Reports one of the center's longtime docents, " 'The comment I hear most is 'Oh, I wish I could have met Mr. Walton.' "[73] Eat your heart out, Bill Gates.

The identification of Wal-Mart with Sam Walton allowed his personal reputation to stand in for the company's. Walton very publicly cultivated company policies that stressed transparent procedural ethics. Wal-Mart's buyers could not accept so much as a paper clip from a manufacturer's representative. In the waiting room at the Bentonville headquarters, visitors and employees alike can help themselves to a cup of diner coffee, but they are expected to insert 15¢ in a box to pay for it. Rather than install a coin-operated dispenser, the company makes its point by charging on the honor system. In expressing their distrust of an economic *structure*—monopoly corporate distribution—the prewar critics of chains had used the idiom of conspiracy: "sharp dealers" who struck backroom bargains in the shadows of skyscrapers. The postwar solution was a sober, thrifty, churchgoing Anglo-Saxon, the ideal patriarch of our fathers' America.

Redeeming a Nation of Clerks

But what of the other populist nightmare, the impotent, servile clerk?

From the earliest days of the chain menace, some independent merchants had sought to join the chain rationalization of storekeeping rather than beat it. Indeed, A & P's fifteen thousand–plus stores began as a single tea shop in New York, Woolworth in a five-hundred-square-foot vacancy in Lancaster, Pennsylvania.[74] Only a few early, well-capitalized innovators could surf the wave of the retail revolution, however; for the rest, the path to strength in numbers lay in banding together. Their solutions echoed earlier attempts to meet big distribution with self-organization. Nineteenth-century farmers had organized rural cooperatives, some of them explicitly socialist, to bypass the parasitical merchants. By the 1920s, the impulse had moved further down the distribution chain. Organizations like the Independent Retail Grocers Association and the Rexall Drug network joined together multiple small stores to bargain with wholesalers for the same volume discounts and advertising budgets as chains; even some cooperatives gave up the nonprofit fight and affiliated with these "voluntary chains."[75]

Wal-Mart's own direct ancestor, Butler Brothers, followed a related path. Having grown from a Boston dry goods store into one of Chicago's dominant wholesalers of general merchandise for the central and western states, Butler Brothers joined an increasing number of wholesalers who operated retail franchises to compete with variety chains. To the prospective franchisees, the firm offered management services that mirrored the chains' own central planning: a location bureau to scout out likely store sites; start-up loans to outfit the new store; circuit-riding "experts" to advise the merchant on every detail of operation from window dressing to bookkeeping. Butler's massive Chicago warehouse even housed a model store on its thirteenth floor, which its retailers could visit for an object lesson in modern, chain-style presentation.[76] These innovations built upon the "Success in Retailing" guides the firm had long published for their customers, making the element of control more concrete.[77]

Whether the voluntary associations stretched up from existing retailers into the wholesaling function or down from established wholesalers into stores, however, the catch was the same. The price of survival was submission to chain managerial practices. The proprietor's independence gave way incrementally to distant, salaried experts who monitored every detail of his operation and even provided the start-up loans to enter the business. The distinctions between working *for* a chain and working *like* one became harder to discern, narrowing to the point of a vague gesture of respect for the franchisee's self-mastery. "Each Ben Franklin store owner is given advice, help, suggestions and service from Butler Brothers," ran one labored argument from 1957, "but still each owner is free to carry out his own individual ideas and store policies, as long as they do not violently disagree with the Ben Franklin policies or standards. . . . Dealing with each voluntary chain member as a separate store owner with ideas and a mind of his own is a far cry from that of a national chain where power of control is absolute."[78] In a move familiar to Cold War logic, the authoritarian regime prospered by contrast to the totalitarian one.

Even this soft regimentation irked Ben Franklin's largest franchisee, Sam Walton,

Springdale, Arkansas, Wal-Mart in the 1970s, probably just before Halloween. Note the clutter and the manual electric cash registers.

COURTESY OF BETHANY MORETON

who with his brother James ("Bud") had built up sixteen of the stores in small towns around the Ozarks.[79] Walton, a talented and experienced merchant with a degree in business, flouted many of the Butler Brothers rules designed to ease the entry of new shopkeepers into the field. The break between them came when Butler Brothers resisted the postwar discount store, a new format that relied on high turnover and low overhead to offer national brands at cut rates. The company's resistance was hardly surprising, given its fundamental identity as a wholesaler. Butler Brothers refused to finance Walton's discount experiment. Instead, using his wife's family land and her trust fund as collateral, he borrowed enough money from a Texas bank to open the first discount store himself.[80] To duplicate its success, Walton would have to employ the dreaded nation of clerks.

During the Depression, the New Deal's economic administrators had referred to the independents as the "Mama, Papa, and Rosy stores."[81] The owner, in other words, managed the labor of his female dependents. This model in turn grew out of traditional agrarian economies, in which the household was the productive unit and its male head legally owned the labor of all its members. The uneven advance of women's legal rights to their own earnings left the home-based business in limbo. Generating income in a family enterprise was akin to domestic service, which the law still assumed a woman owed her husband.[82] In a mom-and-pop store, Pop was management, Mom was labor. And when the chain removed ownership, it substituted and exaggerated this psychological wage of male mastery.

The industrial management model traced its ancestry back to the nineteenth-century military innovations that coordinated and supplied mass mobilization, with a correspondingly male command hierarchy. But the decentralized service sector provided a different structure: hundreds of widely scattered male managers supervising women and young men. Rather than taking orders from machines, like the deskilled factory operatives, or from other men, like the "generation of bureaucrats" that so alarmed commentators in the fifties, these men gave the orders. A Wal-Mart store replicated not a Prussian army division but a farmhouse: dozens of waged women in smocks, overseen by a salaried store manager in a tie. The men could hold the symbolic position of Papa while the women remained Rosy.

"Like a Family"

When many hourly veterans of Wal-Mart's early years speak of their working lives, one sentiment recurs with startling regularity: "I loved working at Wal-Mart," they say emphatically. "It was like a family."[83] This simile is not generic: pressed for examples, a woman might mention the personal support she received upon the death of a parent, or the constant round of break-room baby showers.[84] Children and husbands were such frequent visitors to the stores that everyone knew who went with whom; special events like in-store fashion shows or craft fairs pulled into service every family member old enough to walk. The company could win an employee's bedrock loyalty by accommodating her hours to her children's school day—a perk few parents would take for granted in any field. In the context of small towns, extended families, and long-term marriages, women compared Wal-Mart's stable, sociable hourly jobs to the lonely monotony of ironing or chicken processing, not to the brutal schedules and constant mobility of Wal-Mart's well-compensated male managers. And while it took a federal court battle to force Walton to pay even minimum wage to his stores' staff in the Ben Franklin days, many employees from Wal-Mart's biggest growth years found the pay competitive if not munificent. Moreover, the constant stock splits rewarded the same stability that they valued themselves.[85] Raised on farms that were rapidly losing their viability, many women of Wal-Mart saw the company's terms as a reasonable bargain that allowed them to stay close to home and accorded with their own essential conceptions of their responsibilities.

But to treat the enthusiasm for a familial workplace as a purely economic choice among limited options is to miss the power of Wal-Mart culture. Despite free-market neoliberalism's infatutation with *homo economicus,* this autistic rational actor would be turned down cold for a job as a Wal-Mart greeter. A service economy patterned on a pastoral family is not supposed to make sense in the arid pseudoscientific fantasies of economics, in which every human being is imagined as a profit-maximizing, rights-bearing isolate.[86] Rather, the agrarian model resonates with an entire worldview that figures the family as the divinely sanctioned plan for any human structure—the church, the nation, the law.[87] When Wal-Mart CEO Lee Scott defends the company's low wages by asserting that few employees are trying to support a family on them, he admits what many of his critics themselves have argued: outside of the desert island that neoliberal economics assumes, we all conduct our survival strategies within a web of human relations.[88] If for many the ideal unit of analysis is the family, figured as an intrinsic whole made up of complementary differences, then paradoxically the champions of communitarian social policy wound up arguing for the lonely, isolated, self-interested individual. No wonder their message often fell on skeptical ears.[89]

Thus with managerial authority naturalized as a gender trait, the paradigmatic company of the service economy sidestepped labor conflict. Many women experienced important elements of their work as caregiving, a valued if underpaid skill within the family ideal, and the manager's substantial salary mirrored the domestic arrangement.[90] Nowhere was this conflation of management functions and adult masculinity more obvious than in the occasional moments of ritualized inversion—the store turned upside down for "Ladies' Day." As celebrated in the Elton, Missouri, Wal-Mart in 1975, Ladies' Day featured elections among the hourly employees for the women in their ranks to assume the positions of store managers and assistant managers.

> The first business of the day was coffee made by Jesse Lutz, in place of the ladies. . . . The regular Friday morning meeting was conducted by Karen and her [elected] assistants . . . for one day the ladies were to be addressed as Mrs. or Ms. . . . Windows were washed by Jerry Pate, Assistant Manager, and the refrigerator was defrosted and destroyed by Ray Olive, another Assistant Manager. . . . Approximately 25 red light specials were conducted by Mr. Olive and Mr. Lutz. They also, complete with smocks, ran the cash registers when business increased. . . . Thanks to the co-operation and sportsmanship from the men at No. 44, Ladies day was a huge success![91]

On other special occasions the shared common sense of gender difference was reinforced with exaggerated symbols of rural patriarchal authority. Men found an extraordinary array of costumes that allowed them to arm themselves with dummy weapons from cowboy pistols to SWAT automatic assault rifles. Hardly a month passed without the display of a trophy deer, a birthday shotgun, or a champion bass. Rather than feminizing the nation of clerks, Wal-Mart provided a stage on which to perform the contrast between men and women.

The current class-action lawsuit charging pervasive gender discrimination at Wal-

Mart focuses on the company's record in the past five years. But using data going back to 1975, one of the plaintiff's experts concludes that, at the end of the twentieth century, Wal-Mart store management remained more overwhelmingly male than its competitors a quarter century before. "Such long-term persistence," wrote economist Marc Bendick, "is further evidence that the shortfall in female employment observed in 1999 reflects attitudes and practices deeply embedded in the organization's corporate culture."[92] A lawyer concurred: "Wal-Mart is living in the America of thirty years ago."[93]

Or is it thirty years ahead of the curve instead? Wal-Mart is not a throwback, dragging its feet on an inevitable modern road to a sex-neutral economy. To the contrary: seen in a broader context, the North Atlantic's brief experiment with stable, high-wage industry and rights-based culture was the exception, whose future remains uncertain at best. Thirty years ago, the economic hybrids that had grown up in Fordism's shadow began to flourish in the full sunlight of deindustrialization. The unwaged household labor and part-time work that supported the American breadwinner ideal came out from the shadows, and the rural families of the South and West entered the new economy with a patriarchal cosmology ready. By adapting the management/labor dyad to a "natural" male/female hierarchy, Wal-Mart simply performed another of the Sunbelt's classic sleights of hand. Like postwar evangelicalism, the country music industry, or the Republican Party's "Southern Strategy," the region's service sector spun traditional straw into radical new gold.

To meet the region's populist objections to corporate capitalism, Wal-Mart pioneered an economic breakthrough that Saskia Sassen argues undergirds globalization generally. Whereas historically the workers in the nation's leading economic sector—let alone its leading company—have constituted its natural "labor aristocracy," the Arkansas discount store broke this connection.[94] Today the patriarchal organization of work ranks as a hallmark of the global economy, from maquiladoras of young Honduran women embroidering swooshes on shoes to the immigrant-owned family motels and convenience stores that dot the United States. While snowbound capitalists and communists alike raised the assembly line to the status of cultural icon, the South was looking for the next new thing. Managers retooled their agrarian birthright as the symbolic heads of household, the Jeffersonian "masters of small worlds," and the Sunbelt service sector added one more brick to the edifice of the new world order.[95]