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Economics Begins with the Farmer

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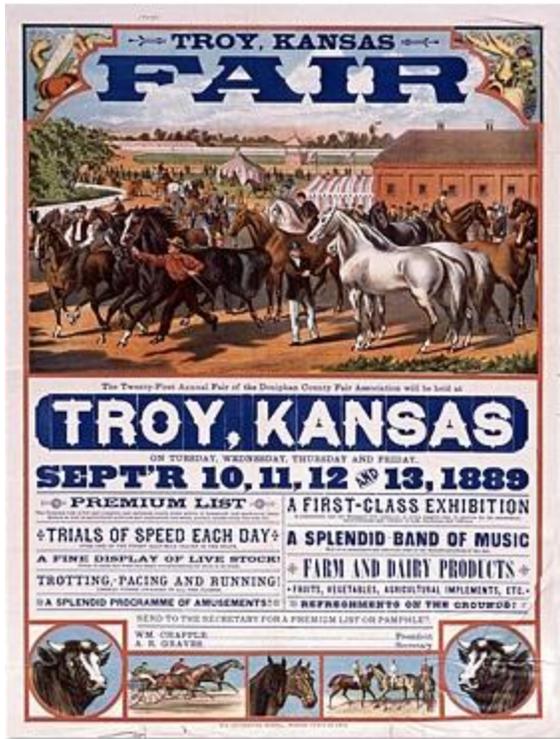
HISTORY PART 84 IN SERIES: [239 DAYS IN AMERICA](#)

IN 1912 AMERICA, the long process of twentieth-century urbanization was just beginning. In spite of the rapid growth of urban industries — the garment factories of the East Coast, the automobile manufacturing plants in Detroit, the steelworks of Pennsylvania and Indiana — most Americans still lived and worked on farms. Such rural vitality was on dazzling display during the National Irrigation Congress in Salt Lake City.



A threshing crew in western Kansas, circa 1900-1919. (Kansas Historical Society)

After spending the day on September 30, 1912, attending the opening convention at the Mormon Tabernacle in Temple Square, visiting the State Fair, and watching the bright lights of the electrical parade that evening, Abdu'l-Baha departed Salt Lake City on October 1 at 2:50 p.m. for the final leg of his long train journey to San Francisco. The train steamed forty miles north to stop in Ogden, Utah, then headed due west over the briny waters of Great Salt Lake on the Lucin Cutoff Railroad Trestle, a fifty-one mile long shortcut built across the middle of the lake in 1904.



A poster for the annual agricultural fair in Troy, Kansas, 1889. (Kansas Historical Association)

Throughout his trip in America, Abdu'l-Baha had spoken in general terms about the economic issues that plagued the nation's growing industrial society: widespread poverty, industrial slavery, the need to avoid coerced equality, and the missing moral principles — such as generosity and service — that were required to balance competing interests. But in Montreal on September 3, to a meeting of Socialists, he had laid out economic prescriptions in more detail. As the train sped toward San Francisco on October 2 and 3, he wrote to clarify his position to Agnes Parsons. "My explanation," he told her, "has been mis-reported in the papers." Unlike the presidential candidates, whose arguments began with the macro-economic debates of national industrial growth and international trade, Abdu'l-Baha placed farming at the center of the discussion. "The question of economics must commence with the farmer," he wrote, "and therefrom reach and end with the other classes . . . for the farmer is the first active agent in the body politic." A self-sustaining rural economy, he seemed to say, must underlie a sound national one.



A wheat farmer in Russell County, Kansas, among his crop of winter wheat in the fall of 1912. (Kansas Historical Society)

In 1912 the primary source of government revenue was the protective tariff: a tax levied on foreign goods at the national level in order to protect American industries. What to do with the tariff was the most important issue in the presidential election. But at the local level Abdu'l-Baha identified seven sources of income for the local treasury, perhaps the largest of which was a set percentage of the harvest and one-third of the value of all mining activities, presumably including oil. He also proposed a tax on personal net income after necessary living expenses were deducted. Out of this balanced income, the local treasury would be responsible for funding education, the infirm, and the department of public health. It would also use its funds to supplement the incomes of the poor. Anyone whose income could not meet "his absolute needs essentially necessary for his liv[e]lihood . . . provided he has not failed in effort and exertion," Abdu'l-Baha wrote, "must be helped from the General Storehouse that he may not remain in need and may live in ease." Any excess revenues remaining locally after these expenditures were made, would be forwarded to the national treasury.



**The wife of a Texas tenant farmer in the Panhandle, 1937.
Photo by Dorothea Lange. (Library of Congress)**

comfort and happiness." And, as he had explained to the Socialists in Montreal, such a mechanism on the local level would retain differing levels of wealth in each community. Although Abdu'l-Baha opposed legislated equality, the *Montreal Daily Star* reported on September 4, "all had the right to share in the general well-being."

Abdu'l-Baha's bottom-up approach to a self-sustaining rural economy, and his emphasis on its priority in each nation's economic health, counters much of twentieth-century development thought. It was only in 2007 that the urban population of the planet surpassed the rural. The urban bias of development thinking around the world over the past half-century has impoverished rural communities, drained resources from agriculture, reduced the status of farmers and their political power, and driven the destruction of the global environment.

Read the next *239 Days in America* article: [Abdu'l-Baha Reaches the City by the Bay](#)

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This article was originally published on October 2, 2012 at 239Days.com, a social media documentary following Abdu'l-Baha's 1912 journey through North America. © Jonathan Menon, 2012. This article may not be republished without prior written permission. Contact info@239Days.com.

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WRITTEN BY



Jonathan Menon is writing a biography of Sarah J. Farmer (1847-1916). Her battle to forge an American identity to respond to the modern world is a saga of gender, religious diversity, and the social movements that shaped America's... [Read more](#)