

LEXINGTON WHEATFIELD

DRY FARMING—THE HOPE OF THE WEST

A METHOD OF PRODUCING BOUNTIFUL CROPS, WITHOUT IRRIGATION, IN SEMI-ARID REGIONS

BY JOHN L. COWAN
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Nearly one third of the entire area of the United States, exclusive of Alaska and our insular possessions, consists of vacant public lands regarded as naturally unsuited to cultivation on account of insufficient rainfall. In at least ten Western commonwealths the public lands constitute so large a portion of the total area as to dominate their economic character. Great belts of territory are frequently in a condition closely bordering on anarchy. Cattle-owners and sheep-owners struggle for possession of lands belonging to neither. Forests are burned and looted. Legislators, governors, judges, and minor public officials are elected and corrupted at the dictation of the cattle-kings; and laws are passed, repealed, enforced, or disregarded to suit their interests. Legitimate settlers are discouraged, driven off, or bought out for a song. Agriculture is confined, almost, to small and scattered bits of irrigated land. The vacant public domain now con-

sists of about 900,000,000 acres. Of this area probably 70,000,000 acres are absolute desert, of sand, alkali, rock, and inhospitable mountain peaks, on which no useful vegetation is found, and which will probably never be of any considerable economic value to mankind, excepting for their mineral resources. Approximately 96,000,000 acres may be described as woodland, sparsely covered with trees, individually of small value, but yet useful for firewood, fence-posts, mine timbers and similar purposes; and some 70,000,000 acres are heavily timbered, and of inestimable importance to present and future generations, not only for lumbering, but also for the conservation of the water-supply. Possibly 70,000,000 acres may be reclaimed by irrigation, and thus brought to a high state of productiveness. There will then remain more than 300,000,000 acres, useful, according to commonly accepted ideas, only for grazing. However, the vacant public lands

comprise only a part of the region of deficient rainfall known as Arid America. To these must be added the great railroad grants, the allotments of school lands to the several States, and the princely domains that have passed into the hands of private owners. In Texas alone there is an area of unimproved and uncultivated land almost equal in extent to the whole German empire. With the exception of Washington, western Oregon, the northern half of California, and small portions of Idaho and Montana, the term Arid America includes virtually all the land between the one-hundredth meridian and the Pacific. Leaving out of consideration the portions that extend across the Canadian and Mexican boundary-lines, it covers a territory extending north and south for

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a distance of 1200 miles, and east and west for 1300 miles, embracing four tenths of the total area of the republic and containing not less than one thousand million acres of land. To this may not improperly be added the so-called sub-humid region, between the ninety-seventh and the one-hundredth meridian, in which occasional seasons of sufficient, or even superabundant, rainfall are followed by years of drought, when scorching winds shrivel up the growing grains and grasses upon which depend the hopes of the farmers. Over almost exactly one half the area of our country, therefore, the rainfall is insufficient for the successful cultivation of the ordinary crop plants—by ordinary farming methods, at least. Agriculture, wherever attempted at all, partakes of the nature of a hazardous speculation, generally resulting in disaster, or at best in a meager and hand-to-mouth existence; and grazing, backed up by ample capital and resources, is considered the only safe and profitable pursuit. This vast area in which grazing is the principal in-

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