Years ago, as I was researching my dissertation, which became the book *Custom Combining on the Great Plains*, I realized that my study was the sequel to a book that had not yet been written. *Custom Combining* portrayed itinerant custom wheat harvesters, thousands of whom have practiced their profession up and down the plains since World War II as an elite, as plainsmen nonpareil. They represented to me the ultimate in mobility and flexibility in employment of resources as an adaptation to life on the plains. But they have never numbered more than a few thousand. As I probed the earlier history of harvesting and threshing, although I was concerned with it at first mainly as background, I uncovered a different saga. This one involved not just thousands, but hundreds of thousands, even millions of plains people in the United States and Canada. It was the story of harvesting and threshing on the North American plains before the advent of the combine. It is the story I tell in this book.

My intent here is primarily descriptive: to tell what harvesting and threshing were like before the combine. This sort of description inevitably turns expository and analytical, because the mass of detail is so great and because the relationships among the parts are as complex as the prairie. The historian in me strives to make sense of it all through categories and causations.

Moreover, I cannot quell the thought that this description touches the heart of the culture of the plains, and the Great Plains of North America are my abiding interest and my home. As I uncover the head and shoulders of harvesting and threshing, I feel like some nineteenth-century Yalie come to Kansas who has unearthed a great lizard, the report of which must substantially augment the sum of paleontological knowledge. I want to describe the animal I have found and in so doing make
possible a sounder, more comprehensive historical interpretation of life on the North American plains. I claim the continental plains of the United States and Canada as the scope of the work, but I cannot claim to do equal justice to all parts. The plains are broad, and intensive research everywhere is an endless agenda. I do not think I have done falsely by any section, even where I may have done slightly. (I should also note that monetary amounts in this book are in either Canadian or U.S. dollars, depending on which country I am discussing.)

I owe thanks to people from Texas to Alberta. Many of them are archivists, librarians, and curators, of course, who were just doing their jobs, and I do not think I taxed any of them too heavily for this project—except maybe Steve Hanschu, interlibrary loan librarian at Emporia State University. So as I mention him, he stands for all you other good foresters.

Besides those people who loaned photographs to me, several individuals graciously opened private manuscript collections, and to them I tender thanks beyond words. Moses H. Voth, Hartford A. Lewis, Spike Jensen, and Mr. and Mrs. Lowell Ayers—you will find your names in the notes.

So will you—Milo Mathews, Alexander Boan (again), George Hitz, William J. Lies, Ted Worrall, J. A. Boan, A. O. Krueger, Ned McKinney, and Guy Bretz. Although the notes say you sent me only questionnaires, we exchanged much more. The questionnaires were simply introductions, after which I was amazed again and again at how you replied conscientiously to the thick yellow sheets of individual questions I mailed to you.

Two fellow scholars, John Herd Thompson of McGill University and R. Bruce Shepard of the Fort Calgary Museum, allowed me to steal data from tables in their publications, and I thank them. Thanks likewise to the editors of three fine scholarly journals who allowed me to cannibalize parts of my articles that appeared in their columns and use them in this book. The articles were “Adoption of the Combine on the Northern Plains,” South Dakota History 10 (Spring 1980): 101–18; “Folklife of the Threshing Outfit,” South Dakota History 16 (Spring 1986): 18–34; “The Header Stack-Barge: Folk Technology on the North American Plains,” Social Science Journal 24 (Autumn 1987): 361–73; and “The Adoption of the Combine on the Canadian Plains,” American Review of Canadian Studies 16 (Winter 1986): 455–64. The last article was coauthored with R. Bruce Shepard, who deserves credit for its contributions to this work.

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was doubly blessed to have the help of two excellent computer hands—Jacqueline Fehr of the Division of Social Sciences and Nancy Gulick of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences. My wife, Lotte, put in many hours of proofreading and other assistance.

Having mentioned photographs, I feel compelled to defend their integrity as documents by explaining the origins of their captions. The photos came from myriad sources, public and private. Some were unidentified, some were identified orally by informants, and for those identified in writing (usually on the backs of the photos), the scrawls themselves were of uncertain provenance. Having no clear or consistent provenance to preserve, I composed the captions, which are intended to link with my text. Cover up the captions, and the photos become pure documents again.

Finally, let me explain the title of the book. I am not one to shy away from an alliterative phrase, but there is more to the title than that. The bull thresher represents capital, particularly machine capital; the bindlestiff represents human labor. These two elements came together in wonderful and peculiar ways in harvesting and threshing on the North American plains.