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Book Review: Women of the Northern Plains: Gender and Settlement on the Homestead Frontier, 1870- 1930

Angel Kwolek-Folland
University of Florida

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Women of the Northern Plains: Gender and Settlement on the Homestead Frontier, 1870-1930. By Barbara Handy-Marchello. St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2005. viii + 205 pp. Photographs, tables, notes, bibliography, index. \$32.95.

Focusing on the history of North Dakota farm women from the years of settlement and community-building to the transition to an industrial, consumer economy, Handy-Marchello argues that North Dakota farm marriages of necessity were economic partnerships throughout this period. This gender equality, dictated by the needs of family survival coexisted, however, “in tension with the social order” premised in patriarchal relations. Traditional attitudes present in the ethnic background of settlers, local Christian churches, and the ideals of professional agriculturalists reinforced social gender subordination. Although a wide variety of ethnic groups settled in North Dakota, for example, all of them shared a culture that assumed male dominance in both public and private life. While the author makes no claims that her findings can be generalized beyond North Dakota, and in fact emphasizes the unique aspects of settlement in the state, she does acknowledge the many similarities among farm women’s experiences throughout the U.S. in this period.

Six chapters provide an overview of Dakota history and geography, along with women’s experiences of marriage and family, work, community formation, economic impact, and institutional efforts to educate “progressive” farmers expressed by the Country Life movement, agricultural extension offices, and the Farmers’ Institute. Sources include interviews (such as those done by the Works Projects Administration), published and unpublished memoirs, and federal and state government records, including information from the census, agricultural commissions, and county extension offices.

This is the first monographic treatment of North Dakota farm women in this period and, as such, a welcome addition to the literature

on women in the Great Plains. It is a gracefully-written, well-researched, and historically informed account that draws careful distinctions among women of various ethnic groups and covers a range of women’s experiences. While it is informed by the literature in women’s history and thus of use to professional historians, it should also appeal to the general reader. Compelling stories of individual women are used throughout to illustrate and illuminate the overall picture provided by statistics and general trends. The book argues persuasively that North Dakota farm women found ways to express their desires and fill their needs even within social confines that legally and socially made them subordinate to the men of their families and communities.

ANGEL KWOLEK-FOLLAND

Department of History and Center for
Women’s Studies and Gender Research
University of Florida