

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

---

Great Plains Research: A Journal of Natural and  
Social Sciences

Great Plains Studies, Center for

---

February 1995

**Review of *Farms, Mines, and Main Streets: Uneven Development  
in a Dakota County* by Caroline S. Tauxe**

David B. Danbom

*North Dakota State University, Fargo*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsresearch>



Part of the [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#)

---

Danbom, David B., "Review of *Farms, Mines, and Main Streets: Uneven Development in a Dakota County* by Caroline S. Tauxe" (1995). *Great Plains Research: A Journal of Natural and Social Sciences*. 205.  
<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsresearch/205>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Research: A Journal of Natural and Social Sciences by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

**Farms, Mines, and Main Streets: Uneven Development in a Dakota County.** Caroline S. Tauxe. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1993. x+276 pp. Notes and bibliography. \$39.95 cloth.

Anthropologist Caroline Tauxe's *Farms, Mines, and Main Streets* is a study of the impact of energy development in Mercer County, North Dakota. Mercer County's rich deposits of lignite became the focus of attention by energy companies and policymakers during the energy crisis of the seventies. Already the site of several mines and power plants—lignite begins to lose its potency soon after it is taken out of the ground—the county was the focus of intense energy development, the most important facet being the Great Plains coal gasification plant, which converted lignite into natural gas.

Tauxe does not get a good start on this story. She begins with the absurd assertion that "millions of family farms" were lost during the eighties (p. 1) and takes the reader on a murky excursion into "world systems theory." Fortunately, she rights herself shortly thereafter and ends up writing a pretty good book.

Tauxe finds that Mercer County residents were divided and ambivalent regarding the prospect of energy development. Town business people, with their booster mentality, were enthusiastic, while farmers and workers, more distrustful of outside business and more comfortable with their lives, were dubious. While local people might influence energy development at the margins, though, it was going to happen, and most ended up making their peace with it, however grudgingly.

The energy boom proved a mixed blessing at best. Real estate prices soared and business was good, but more aggressive outside entrepreneurs proved more adept at taking advantage of opportunities than Mercer Countians. The population surged, but the social character of the county changed as first construction workers and then urban-oriented professionals came in. Long-time residents felt like strangers in their own county and complained that neighborliness and the sense of community were gone. Problems abounded. Impact aid failed to cover exploding costs for public facilities. Alcoholism, crime, child abuse, and other social pathologies became more pronounced. Coal companies were better at ripping up the earth than they were at reclaiming it. And public officials were co-opted by the energy companies with disturbing ease.

By the time the energy boom busted in the mid-eighties, though, the county was dependent on it. With farmers fading into relative insignificance and union labor in retreat, the companies were the powers in the community. Now towns that had been courted by eager corporations a generation before pathetically searched for ways to keep energy development alive.

This is a story that has been repeated, with variations, throughout the Great Plains. We want economic development, but we sense that it will change us and that in the process of developing we will lose some of the things that money cannot buy.

Tauxe tells this story well. She lived among the people of Mercer County and she understands and sympathizes with them, but she has not let that sympathy destroy her scholarly objectivity. Readers will find that her story rings true, and that is adequate reason for high praise. **David B. Danbom**, *Department of History, North Dakota State University, Fargo.*