

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

---

Great Plains Quarterly

Great Plains Studies, Center for

---

1987

## West of Wichita: Settling the High Plains of Kansas, 1865-1890.

David M. Emmons  
*University of Montana*

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



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

---

Emmons, David M., "West of Wichita: Settling the High Plains of Kansas, 1865-1890." (1987). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 330.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/330>

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 Quarterly by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

*West of Wichita: Settling the High Plains of Kansas, 1865-1890.* By Craig Miner. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1986. Photographs, maps, notes, bibliography, index. vii+303 pp. \$19.95.

Craig Miner's new book is a social history of the settlement of a specific Western region. In methodology and manner of presentation it resembles other "new" social histories. It is interdisciplinary and based on the social scientists' modeling techniques. Miner cites European historians and, what is more remarkable, one can imagine them citing him. He uses unconventional primary materials—manuscript censuses, tax records, and the reminiscences of the "ordinary" people whose story he tells; he concentrates on the material lives of those people, "the fellows at the bottom," Bertolt Brecht called them, the ones,

according to T. E. Lawrence who "did not write the dispatches." His focus is, perforce, regional. Social history does not permit of broad historical canvases splashed with unsupported and often meaningless generalizations. Its practitioners understand that nets cast deeply yield more than those cast widely, that the scope of the topic does not determine the significance of a book but rather the intelligence with which the topic is explored and the care with which its lessons are applied.

Miner succeeds in meeting these important criteria and his success is all the more important because his topic is Western and rural. The best of the new social histories have been of urban and, usually, industrializing peoples. Occasionally these sorts were found in the West—in Kansas cattle towns, or California mining camps after the gold rush, in the Jewish sections of Portland, the Italian enclaves of San Francisco, or the Irish working-class neighborhoods of Denver. But "West" in each of these instances had only geographical meaning; it had almost no historical meaning at all. In other words, good historians (not a Western historian among them) decided that our understanding of community development or ethnic assimilation or immigrant working-class adjustments to industrialization would be forwarded by the study of these social phenomena in limited contexts. Who can deny that they were right? That those contexts happened to be Western is less even than coincidental; it is irrelevant.

But Miner chose for himself a different mission. He would write the history of a people for whom "West" had significant environmental and social meaning. Grasshoppers, an unpredictable rainfall pattern, Plains Indian raiders, land promoters—the stuff of Plains history—were central to their lives. Miner treats each of these topics, some of them, the response to Indian raids for example, with true originality and insight. He was not, of course, the first to do this. Everett Dick came before him—with his broad canvas and unsupported generalizations. But Miner's is a far more sophisticated and subtle analysis than Dick's.

The history of the settlement of Western Kansas has an intrinsic interest and Miner knows that. He functions, however, as a historian dealing with a Western topic, not as a Western historian; his book makes clearer the settlement process wherever and whenever it took place. He does not seek out the esoterica of the settlement experience. He looks for the ordinary. What heroism he describes is not that mythical variety attached to the "Conquest of Frontiers" but the resilience of a people adjusting to a world different from what they had known. There is a universality to that: call it the unhorsing of Western history.

Western historians would do well to follow Miner's lead, to look for those aspects of the Western experience that illuminate broader historical themes rather than those almost always fictive aspects that are thought to separate the West from the rest of the known world. That is the path to restored respectability. They could then remove that heavy chip from their shoulders and get on with the central work of the trade: writing the history of the Western parts of the United States only as it has meaning beyond its limited boundaries of time and space. They could then write without apology, confident that their work, like all good history, would inform our understanding of the processes that make up all cultures and societies, all peoples and nations. Miner's is such a history.

DAVID M. EMMONS  
Department of History  
University of Montana