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Review of After the West Was Won: Homesteaders and Town-Builders in Western South Dakota, 1900-1917

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After the West Was Won: Homesteaders and Town-Builders in Western South Dakota, 1900-1917. By Paula M. Nelson. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1986. Map, photographs, notes, bibliography, index. xvi + 220 pp. \$22.50.

After the West Was Won is about pioneering in western South Dakota on land unsettled by agriculturalists before 1900. Lakota hunters and Texas ranchers had lived successfully in this land of bountiful grass. Agricultural settlement, however, was a story "of dreams and ambitions thwarted" as farmers and townspeople alike learned "to make a virtue of living with less" than did those who had pioneered earlier frontiers.

Paula Nelson fails to develop the strong ecological theme suggested in her introduction, but does produce a quite readable social history. The symbolic Turnerian frontier may have been closed, but as a practical matter land did remain in 1900 for those still imbued with the pioneer spirit and encouraged by modern technology to ignore environmental lessons learned by others. As Nelson tells it, sociability promoted successful homesteading and town building. The small communities and the loneliness of the plains forced an intimacy measured by the numerous occasions of social intercourse reported and by the boundless energy with which settlers constructed schools and churches and established commercial and cultural associations. As the true nature of this land of gumbo soil became evident after the drought of 1910-1911, however, success was of necessity redefined and

represented by the image of a hardened, self-reliant people.

Nelson relies largely and appropriately on letters, memoirs, autobiographies, and newspapers, augmenting these with a selection of local and county histories. She has gleaned considerable everyday detail and is especially good at describing the social drama of the drought, noting how newspaper editorialists, boosters to the end, blamed victims for their plight. Nelson identifies strategies for dealing with the changed environmental circumstances: emigration, relief, alternative employment, or changes in agricultural practices. But mostly, she argues, people came to accept less and to disdain those who wanted more from the land than it could give.

Nelson is at her best in her affection for the people and the region and her recognition of the gumption it took to settle and stay. She is less clear, however, about locating claims and assembling land or about establishing the economic linkages that fostered towns. In the ecological context within which the book is framed, too little attention is given to developing agricultural ecologies suited to this "last great frontier."

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