

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Great Plains Quarterly

Great Plains Studies, Center for

Spring 2001

Review of *European Immigrants in the American West: Community Histories* Edited by Frederick Luebke

Jon Gjerde
University of California, Berkeley

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



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

Gjerde, Jon, "Review of *European Immigrants in the American West: Community Histories* Edited by Frederick Luebke" (2001). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 2219.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/2219>

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.

European Immigrants in the American West: Community Histories. Edited by Frederick Luebke. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998. Select bibliography, index, illustrations. xix + 193 pp. \$45.00 cloth, \$19.95 paper.

European immigrants, Frederick Luebke argues correctly in his introduction to this collection of previously published essays, have been all but ignored by Western historians. Earlier Turnerian historians expected European immigrants to assimilate because this accorded well with their American frontier narrative. "New Western historians," focused as they are on race, also overlooked Europeans. Because European immigrants were "white," these revisionists of Turner similarly anticipated the Europeans' assimilation into the white majority. For their part, labor historians who have concentrated on class have rued the failure of Western workers, in part because of their attachment to ethnic group, to develop a potent class consciousness. This neglect is curious, Luebke reminds us, because the Western United States was the site of a disproportionate numbers of European immigrants. To address the oversight, this volume brings together a disparate group of community studies situated in "the West." It pays attention to those both in rural and urban residences (including Italians living in San Francisco), people in disparate occupations (from Irish hardrock miners in Montana to Jewish merchants in Portland, Oregon), and group experiences ranging across the past four centuries (from Spanish colonizers in seven-

teenth-century New Mexico to South Slavic miners in the twentieth century). Many of the selections will be familiar to Great Plains historians, including Robert C. Ostergren's view of settlement patterns of Swedes in South Dakota, Carol K. Coburn's consideration of gender in a German Lutheran settlement in Kansas, Josef J. Barton's comparison of Mexican and Czech settlers in Texas, and Royden K. Loewen's juxtaposition of two Mennonite communities in Nebraska and Manitoba.

As significant as this collection is, it fails to address several vexing questions about its subject. The organizing theme is community histories of disparate groups moving from Europe to a place considered to be the "West." Yet what is the West? North Dakota and San Francisco and many locales in between. Those who moved, moreover, left a place called "Europe." Yet what is comparable between seventeenth-century Spaniard conquistadors and nineteenth-century Swedish peasants besides the fact that they left "Europe" to live in a region defined today as "the West"? As such, the unifying theme of Europeans and the West in this volume in many ways is a reification of places of origin and of new residence. That understood, this is nonetheless a valuable sampler of remarkable recent research on European ethnic groups in a place called the West, a subject that continues to be overlooked by historians. As such, it is a valuable contribution to the history of the Great Plains and "Western" history generally.

JON GJERDE
Department of History
University of California, Berkeley