

University of Nebraska - Lincoln
DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Great Plains Quarterly


Great Plains Studies, Center for

Fall 2012

Review of *Toward a More Perfect Union: The Settlement of Union Township, Clay County, Kansas* by James R. Beck

Bruce R. Kahler
Bethany College - Lindsborg

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

 Part of the [American Studies Commons](#), [Cultural History Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

Kahler, Bruce R., "Review of *Toward a More Perfect Union: The Settlement of Union Township, Clay County, Kansas* by James R. Beck" (2012). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 2809.
<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/2809>

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.

Toward a More Perfect Union: The Settlement of Union Township, Clay County, Kansas. By James R. Beck. Clay Center, KS: Hidden Meadow Press, 2012. xii + 291 pp. Illustrations, tables, photographs, maps, notes, index. \$18.95 paper.

James R. Beck laments the fact that he cannot tell us why the early settlers bought and sold land in Union Township. Although his microscopic land history can illuminate what land was acquired—as well as how, when, and by whom—he says only “social histories provide the flesh of human stories to the bones of deed and mortgage details that are recorded in dusty courthouse record books.” I see no need for apology. Beck deserves our gratitude for sweeping away the dust and revealing the underlying structure of settlement in north-central Kansas.

The chief subject here is the variety of means by which 23,000 acres of the Public Domain in Clay County were slowly but steadily acquired over four decades by private individuals and families. More than half of the settlers were homesteaders. Beck shows us that, despite the sentimental aura that has surrounded this federal program, it was a complex bureaucratic process that surely tried the patience of the pioneers. Other methods of obtaining land included the use of military land warrants, purchase of railroad land, payment in cash, abiding by the terms of the Timber Culture Act of 1873, and buying land the sale of which helped finance public schools.

Beck gleans additional interesting facts from the county courthouse records. Over two-thirds of the homesteaders in Union Township obtained a commercial mortgage in order to invest in their farms and cover living expenses. This was true to form in a state where a remarkably high 72.7 percent of land in 1888 was mortgaged. Unlike Kansas as a whole, however, Union Township had a much higher percentage of foreign-born residents (36 percent to 13 percent), with the largest source of immigrants being England rather than Germany. A surprisingly large number of married and unmarried

women engaged in the real estate market, thereby making a significant contribution to the local economy. The last two chapters, appendices really, meticulously document who acquired what section of land, and whatever biographical information Beck could gather about the original settlers and their families.

A few publication problems impair in a minor way the readability and usefulness of the book. There is no list of maps, graphs, and illustrations; the endnotes are not organized by chapter; and the index could be more complete. There are also several writing errors in the text.

Nevertheless, what we have in *Toward a More Perfect Union* is a work of diligent scholarship and a valuable contribution to our understanding of how the Plains states were settled.

BRUCE R. KAHLER

Department of History and Political Science
Bethany College
Lindsborg, Kansas