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900 Miles from Nowhere: Voices from the Homestead Frontier

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wind-swept plains of southwestern Kansas. Armed conflict, when it did take place, was not characterized by Winchester rifles or deadly ambushes, but by the throwing of rotten eggs and vegetables, as evidenced in the county seat wars of Black Hawk and Marshall counties.

Historians investigating county seat wars in Iowa might consider the role played by frontier newspaper editors, whose investment in their fledgling communities was understandably strong. James Schellenberg has called such early town-site pioneers “inveterate booster[s] of everything local.” It was to their advantage to partner with town promoters in the push for county seat recognition. The editors bet that winning the county seat would result in raised status for their frontier community, along with a larger population, more local businesses, and an increase in subscriptions and advertising revenue—all helping to guarantee the survival of their presses. State law requiring the publication of county legal proceedings and court records on a regular basis in the county seat newspaper also meant a steady and reliable source of income for any county seat editor.

In Iowa, at least, the printed word, which in many cases evolved into bombastic editorial rhetoric boasting the advantages of one prospective county seat community over a rival, was far more prevalent than the deadly western six-shooter. Evidence of this can be found in the heated county seat battles waged in Clayton, Mitchell, Marshall, and O’Brien counties, to name a few. The treasure of Iowa frontier newspapers on microfilm and microfiche in state and local libraries is a boon to any researcher seeking to know more.

900 Miles from Nowhere: Voices from the Homestead Frontier, by Steven R. Kinsella. St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2006. xi, 216 pp. Illustrations, map, notes, lists of sources of letters, diaries, and photographs. \$29.95 cloth.

Reviewer Lori Ann Lahlum is assistant professor of history at Minnesota State University, Mankato. Her research and writing have focused on Norwegian women on the northern prairies and plains.

In *900 Miles from Nowhere: Voices from the Homestead Frontier*, Steven Kinsella uses letters, diary excerpts, and photographs to highlight non-Indian settler experiences on the Great Plains from roughly 1850 to 1920. Kinsella seeks to give “voice” to men, women, and children who moved into the region and wrestled with the landscape as they “settled in search of the personal and economic freedom represented by land ownership” (3). Kinsella sees a direct link between settlers’ experiences and the region today. He views the “independence” of

present-day Great Plains residents and “their suspicion of outsiders” as legacies of the homestead-era experience (16). Moreover, the trials, tribulations, and survival of these “hardy souls” have made the United States “a better and richer place” (17).

A native of South Dakota, Kinsella interjects his personal experiences and his family’s history into the narrative. He understands the Great Plains and has a strong attachment to the region. The bulk of *900 Miles from Nowhere* consists of letters. These letters represent diversity in geography, age, gender, and time period; and they highlight an array of experiences, emotions, and perspectives. The letters depict the triumphs, tragedies, and everyday lives of these settlers. From Iowa, a Civil War veteran pleaded with the governor to assist his family. Grasshoppers destroyed the Lyle family’s 1873 crop, and they risked losing their home. Desperate, William Lyle sought assistance from the state of Iowa, and was ready to ask the president for help. In southern Dakota Territory, May Shrake told her cousin about life on the plains. She wrote about wildflowers and agriculture, work and dances, family and community, insects and animals, settlers and American Indians. Oliver T. Jackson’s letter about an African American community in Colorado represents one of the more fascinating voices. In true western fashion, Jackson served as a booster as he highlighted the community’s economic and social successes. In many ways, the letters are decidedly local, but they also point to broader national and international events, such as westward migration, immigration, the Civil War, and World War I. The 75 photographs richly illustrate the region.

900 Miles from Nowhere is a book general readers will enjoy. As is often the case with this type of book, some readers will want to know more. Who were these settlers? What are their individual stories? In some cases, Kinsella provides a glimpse of individual and family stories. At times, more developed introductions would have helped. For example, with the Shrake letters, Kinsella informs us that May is from Michigan, but the other letter (apparently not signed) could have been written by May or her sister Maggie, and the introduction indicates that the family is from Monroe, Wisconsin. Is this an error or is further explanation necessary? In another case, Kinsella states, “citizenship for Native Americans waited until 1924” (112). By 1924, however, most Native Americans had already become citizens, and the legislation applied to those who did not yet hold citizenship. Despite these quibbles, *900 Miles from Nowhere* is an engaging read and a fascinating glimpse of homestead-era settlement on the Great Plains.