

Agrarian Women: Wives and Mothers in Rural Nebraska, 1880-1940

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ISSN 0003-4827

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Recommended Citation

Larson, Sarah. "Agrarian Women: Wives and Mothers in Rural Nebraska, 1880-1940." *The Annals of Iowa* 52 (1993), 476-479.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.9772>

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States became increasingly a nation of immigrants, corporations, and reform-minded citizens who were destined to fight a morally ambiguous Great War, the vision was challenged, and searching questions were raised about the American national identity.

McConnell skillfully places the GAR in the dominant Anglo, male culture of its time. Indeed, he paints a clear portrait of late nineteenth century conservative morality, and cites major general studies to support his interpretations. In so doing, he also makes an important contribution to understanding why American nationalism has often lacked the linguistic and religious trappings of other nineteenth-century nationalisms. Given this and the GAR's accommodations to the period's dominant social/fraternal norms, it seems a little peculiar that he so often stresses the GAR's insistence on its own uniqueness. Did not other "mainstream" fraternal orders stress their unique virtues? Also, I think McConnell overstresses the disjunction between the GAR's small capitalist worldview and the social reality of the veteran. In the 1880s there was certainly a lot of small capitalism going on and, according to the evidence in his table of occupations, most of these veterans were participating in it (59).

But let me conclude by stressing the virtues of this book. Residents of Iowa, a state with a proud Civil War heritage and a small capitalist tradition, will learn much from this volume about the origins and nature of their civic values.

Agrarian Women: Wives and Mothers in Rural Nebraska, 1880-1940, by Deborah Fink. Studies in Rural Culture. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992. xxiii, 242 pp. Maps, tables, illustrations, notes, appendix, references, index. \$34.95 cloth, \$12.95 paper.

REVIEWED BY SARAH LARSON, HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF WASHINGTON, D.C.

"My mother once described my grandfather's birth in a sod house and his farm childhood by asking me to imagine living in a place without beauty, without diversion, without light, with only work to fill out each day. . . . In Nebraska, women encountered a bleakness that they had not known before" (32-33).

Deborah Fink's *Agrarian Women* is intended as a corrective to the portrait of the frontier West as a place of tremendous opportunity, where homesteading offered women a chance to work shoulder to shoulder with their husbands and gain greater social and politi-

cal power. Fink looks to Boone County, Nebraska, and finds, instead, an agrarian ethos that ignored the hardships and constraints of women's lives, reducing their role to that of uncomplaining wives and mothers.

The agrarian myth traces its roots to Thomas Jefferson, who saw the yeoman farmer as the only truly independent, truly virtuous citizen. Economically self-sufficient, working his land with the aid of his family and the unquestioning support of his wife, the independent farmer was beholden to no one. The rewards of family farming were those of economic stability, domestic harmony, and virtuous children reared in the midst of nature's bounty.

According to Fink, settlers of frontier Nebraska were rewarded instead with the "vast unshelteredness" of the treeless prairie, dismal housekeeping in crumbling sod houses, droughts, grass fires, and constant winds. Those who came in the 1880s, a decade of good rain, were devastated by the drought and farm depression of the 1890s. Lured by free land, railroad promotional brochures, and the unique scientific theory that "rain follows the plow," families found economic instability and bone-chilling isolation on farms scattered across the grassland.

Particularly isolated was the farm wife. Absolutely essential to the success of the family farm, women nonetheless had circumscribed legal rights. Although the Married Women's Property Act was passed in 1871, Fink found few female names on homestead deeds and no records indicating that single women farmed on their own. A woman found entry into the rural economy through her husband, upon whom she depended for both survival and companionship. Unlike their counterparts in the midwestern communities they had left behind, Boone County women rarely had female relatives or hired help living in the house, making them, in Fink's estimation, not only desperately lonely, but particularly vulnerable. No more protected than a city woman from rape and spousal abuse, crippled by her lack of earned income, subordinated by law and custom, the rural wife was insulated from the company of other women, separated from ready help. Fink tells of a farmer who, after repeatedly beating his wife, left her outside in the farmyard overnight with a broken leg. Only the next day was she found by neighbors (79). Even women not actively mistreated were deprived by their virtual imprisonment within the family circle from creating social bonds with other women.

Yet little notice was taken of the shortcomings of family farming. USDA education programs reinforced the separate domains of husband and wife. Progressive-era reformers, determined to

improve the quality of rural life, did so by refurbishing and celebrating the agrarian ideal. Government agencies, bringing relief to impoverished communities during the 1930s and 40s, channeled money through male heads of household, providing little direct succor to women, and then only on condition of their being virtuous and worthy of public assistance. Thus, it comes as little surprise to Fink that rural mothers encouraged their children to abandon the farm for the factory. The agrarian ideal failed because it was founded on a false belief in the moral superiority of rural life and on an implacable subordination of women.

An anthropologist, Fink wraps her study around interviews with thirty-six women and two men in Boone County, Nebraska, supplementing oral histories with diaries and memoirs, letters written to friends and to the federal government, photographs, census records, letters and columns from women in the rural press, and contemporary works of fiction. Fink chose Nebraska because of her own family ties to Boone County, but she argues that the lives she examined speak to the region. Most of the early farmers in Boone County came from the Midwest; more had been born in Iowa than any other state.

Without a doubt, this is an important book. Grippingly written, thoroughly researched, rationally argued, *Agrarian Women* is peopled with rural women whose stories linger. Still, while *Agrarian Women* is the sound of the other shoe dropping, readers who missed that first shoe will come away with an incomplete understanding of the lives of Nebraska mothers and wives. Fink has a dark vision of rural life; while she convinces us of the accuracy of her account, she cannot be equally convincing as to its universality. Fink writes in detail of women who received their only emotional solace from their children, while barely mentioning satisfactory marriages—even then, she suggests that those few loving husbands had little understanding of or sympathy for the workaday lives of their spouses. She pays scant attention to the organizational life of women, such as Homemakers Clubs or the Ladies' Aid, or to the church.

Perhaps because this is an anthropological study rather than a history, Fink focuses primarily on what people did, rather than on what they thought. She notes that childrearing became more complicated and time consuming during the Progressive era (159–61). But while detailing the extra work this engendered, Fink never discusses why rural mothers embraced these changes.

Tellingly, Fink writes in her preface of women in a senior center who, after appearing to agree with general male pronounce-

ments that rural women in the 1930s had little to complain of, proceeded to tell anecdotal stories to the contrary. "The women did not generalize about their experiences. They clearly recognized their own reality, but they were not willing to make general statements about this reality" (xx). Fink, herself, makes those general statements, extrapolating significance from actions against the backdrop of an impressive array of secondary sources but also with the clearly stated intention of debunking agrarianism. *Agrarian Women*, while it definitely and compellingly tells the reality of some rural women, cannot and does not tell the reality of all.

The Changing Image of the City: Planning for Downtown Omaha, 1945-1973, by Janet R. Daly-Bednarek. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992. xii, 292 pp. Illustrations, tables, maps, notes, bibliography, index. \$37.50 cloth.

REVIEWED BY PATRICIA BURGESS, IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY

Janet R. Daly-Bednarek's *The Changing Image of the City: Planning for Downtown Omaha, 1945-1973* will probably not change the minds of those who believe midwesterners are backward, but it shows that being a little behind the times is not all bad. Being slow to jump on the bandwagon (in Omaha's case of urban renewal) may prevent problems as well as cause them.

Daly-Bednarek has written a history of city planning in post-World War II Omaha, but she has placed that history in a larger context. Omaha is clearly tied to the Midwest; its meatpacking industry depends on the animals raised in Nebraska and surrounding states. Omaha also shares experiences, such as suburbanization and downtown decline, with many other cities. Moreover, Daly-Bednarek tells us about the city planning profession to illustrate in what ways planning in Omaha was representative. In constructing her history she calls on standard sources: secondary literature on urban history, city planning, and the Midwest; local, state, and federal government documents, reports, and records; and newspaper articles, among others.

The organization of *The Changing Image of the City* reflects Daly-Bednarek's doctoral dissertation, from which it came. The first and third chapters are overviews of city planning and the New Deal legacy respectively. Chapter two surveys thirty years of demographic, economic, and leadership change in Omaha. The fourth, fifth, and sixth chapters are the real meat of Daly-Bednarek's case study; there she discusses planning for a "traditional" city, a city "in

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