

## Community Formation on the Plains

A Review Essay by Miles D. Lewis

Burnett, Jean. *Next Year Country: A Study of Rural Social Organization in Alberta*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1951.

Jones, David. *Empire of Dust: Settling and Abandoning the Prairie Dry Belt*. Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2002.

Miner, Craig C. *West of Wichita: Settling the High Plains of Kansas*. Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1986.

Nelson, Paula M. *After the West Was Won: Homesteaders and Town-Builders in Western South Dakota, 1900-1917*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1986.

Nelson, Paula M. *The Prairie Winnows Out its Own: The West River Country of South Dakota in the Years of Depression and Dust*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1996.

Voisey, Paul. *Vulcan: The Making of a Prairie Community*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988.

Until relatively recently historical works on the Great Plains focused mainly on environmental determinism, the formation of extractive industries, the impact of transportation (particularly freighting and transcontinental railways), and the political acts that enabled the farmer's frontier. Generally, homesteading and the formation of plains communities has been discussed as a byproduct of those institutions. By the late 1980s American historians, such as Craig Miner and Paula M. Nelson, began explicitly examining the reasons behind successful community formation on the plains. Canadian sociologist Jean Burnett delved into this topic in 1951 and has been followed more recently by such Canadian historians as Paul Voisey and David C. Jones.

In 1986 Craig Miner published *West of Wichita: Settling the High Plains of Kansas*. Miner, through personal accounts and quantitative methods, traces the impressions that Kansas pioneers recorded as they faced the traditional booms and busts

that plague the whole of plains history. His introduction, titled “On Regional History,” gives a strong account of how historians have ventured into regional topics and why this is not a “quaint retreat” into the “local color of antiquarianism (1).” His line of thinking parallels those of Carol and Mike Kamman and other historians who have stressed the concept that regions and sub regions, even within a limited amount of time and place, are more complicated and varied than originally thought and that sometimes connecting with the larger whole of history leads to distortion (on both regional and national levels) as it “glosses over individual peculiarities” that are of historical import (4).

Throughout *West of Wichita* Miner focuses on the common person’s relationship with extreme climatological conditions and how railroad boosters rearranged migration flows so that wheat became a regional specialty crop. He does much to show that prior pioneer conceptions and cultural beliefs made settlement in western Kansas a risky venture against nature, environment, and culture. The railroad played a significant part in bringing new cultures, such as the German-Russians and other Anabaptist groups, to the plains and ensuring regional success at creating towns. He shares this theme with historian Paula M. Nelson.

In two separate works, *After the West Was Won: Homesteaders and Town-Builders in Western South Dakota, 1900-1917* and *The Prairie Winnows Out its Own: The West River Country of South Dakota in the Years of Depression and Dust*, Nelson examines the formation of communities in South Dakota after the homestead rush of the late 1800s. In *After the West Was Won* Nelson contends that prior conceptions of homesteading were thwarted by the drought of 1911. The decline in conceptions such as opportunity through free land and traditional pioneer ideals was heavily influenced by

three factors: topography, soil composition, and climate. These factors contributed to regional failure and caused homesteaders of the West River country to adjust physically, emotionally, and psychologically. Because these communities were so isolated and decentralized, or as Nelson believes, on the psychological margins of broader communities, they had to rely on social aspects like civic organizations and community events to create a sense of community and belonging (xv). This led them to redefine success as something other than monetary. This work is a classic example of the symbiotic nature of the agricultural and urban frontier and regional attempts to form a social organization that would support the individual homesteader.

The drought of 1911 led West River citizens to new assumptions in recognizing the economic insecurity of the region in which they dwelled. The drought caused poverty and depopulation (reaching about fifty percent) which, according to Nelson, are the two greatest threats to social organization. In the wake of the drought, success and failure often hinged on a town being a commercial and economic link on a railway (98). By the end of 1911 the inhabitants of the West River country re-emerged as an ambitious hardworking culture that was not inclined to admit failure or shortcomings, which is the topic of Nelson's continuation study in *The Prairie Winnows Out its Own*.

In her second foray into the West River country, Nelson examines how the region went from promised land to hinterland during the Great Depression. The collapse of the agricultural economy after the First World War yielded regional decline amidst national prosperity while increasing a sense of remoteness and isolation within the West River Country. The Dirty Thirties surpassed the drought of 1911, and governmental solutions, drastically challenged what remained of pioneer ideals. Even though the federal

government informed West River people that dry land farming was an ill fit for the area, the inhabitants continued their attempt to tame the land and create a successful society. According to Nelson, the Depression ended the pioneer ideals of risk-taking, independence, self-reliance, and hard work even though the people resisted the thought of any government aid as being subversive. It was mortifying, insulting, and threatening to the people of the West River country to rely on any entity besides themselves. The emphasis on environment seems to be an American concept concerning community formation as both Miner and Nelson stress it, along with railroad boosting, while Canadian scholars look more towards cultural and economic themes. As shown by Canadian sociologist Jean Burnet, similar situations arose on the plains of Canada as well.

As part of a multi volume study examining the origin of the Social Credit movement, Burnet authored *Next Year Country: A Study of Rural Social Organization in Alberta*. She examined the Hanna area located along the western reaches of Palliser's Triangle in southeastern Alberta. Deemed the "Dry Belt," the Hanna region attracted settlement after 1912, like the West River country of South Dakota, because of an uncharacteristic increase in rainfall and significant marketing from the Canadian Pacific Railroad (CPR). After initial success at forming communities, the area was struck by profound depopulation because of lack of leadership, in the areas of culture and economics, from the ruling, town-based elites. Although the production demands of the Second World War alleviated some socioeconomic problems, the only people that created a successful social organization were German-Russian immigrants, who proved to be particularly resilient to hardship and the class struggle that was present in the area as they

were accustomed to political and environmental adversity in their native land. Miner stresses this construct with the same ethnic group in Kansas with the only difference being geographic location. Their imported culture did much to strengthen rural environments.

Burnet shows that, at least in the Dry Belt around Hanna, “class and clique” were extremely important in community formation (96). Farmers, railroaders, and upper-class merchants and bankers did not freely interact because of their stations in life. Because they did not associate or communicate openly, the upper echelon failed to provide any form of leadership that would have created a strong, stable, and harmonious society in the face of economic and environmental devastation in the 1920s and 1930s. In Burnet’s study, class structure was everything. However, to Canadian historians, such as Paul Voisey, the problems of establishing a successful community were much more tied up in Progressive attitudes, particularly those that apply to commerce and capitalism. He provides striking contrasts with Miner, Nelson, and Burnet in that he circumvents themes like class and environment as significant factors in community formation and emphasizes economic concerns.

Beginning as Voisey’s doctoral dissertation, *Vulcan: The Making of a Prairie Community*, examines the formation of communities in southern Alberta and includes cultural, metropolitan, frontier and environmental hypotheses. Voisey does an excellent job of proving the exception to common myths about community formation. First, he contends that homesteaders were not victims of failed settlement policies; rather the real victims were the farmers who stayed in the Vulcan area after property values fell. Second, rural communities of the region were certainly not sleepy or stable places

concerned with permanent settlement. Small communities were highly mobile and aggressive hubs of commerce dominated by the desire for wealth primarily through land speculation. Vulcan farmers were not ignorant in rejecting mixed farming and specializing in wheat production. Wheat was a stable market crop that the soils and weather of the region supported on a large scale. Third, the greatest depopulation occurred not during the Great Depression, but when property values were still rising significantly enough for homesteaders to prove up and sell at a much higher price. Fourth, the size of regional farms initially increased not because the system kept smaller operations at bay, but because large farms coveted more land in order to cultivate more wheat. Last, Voisey argues that large farms did not fail because of drought, poor prices or over-extension, but rather because labor requirements made smaller holdings more efficient and profitable in the long run and eliminated the need for large acreage.

Voisey also includes an illuminating discussion of social entities such as churches and schools. He effectively argues that they offered poor religious and educational benefits, but provided large-scale, productive social interaction. Churches and schools (both controlled by the metropolis) had a difficult time. It was hard to find teachers and clergymen that could travel (or had the inclination to work in rural areas) to several small towns to spread the gospels of religion or higher education. Despite these facts, both organizations provided business contacts, marriage proposals, and recreational pastimes. Nelson and Burnet also significantly discuss social organizations. Nelson stresses that they were the glue that enabled the West River Country to remain together during times of extreme duress and provided social services in the same way that Voisey discusses. Burnet, on the other hand, asserts that elitist social organization not only failed to create

feelings of community, but also maintained such a strong class-based ideal that they detracted from any type of inclusive and successful social organization. Their cliquish ideals were so strong (particularly regarding railroaders and farmers) that they failed to provide any leadership or forward thinking to keep the Hanna region together socially, culturally, or economically. Unlike most Canadian historians, David C. Jones, stresses that the town of Carlstadt (renamed Alderson during World War I so that the region would not be seen as pro-German) failed mainly because people were misled into settling in the inhospitable south central portion of Palliser's Triangle.

In *Empire of Dust* Jones shows that the Carlstadt region began as an environmentally marginal region that was adequate for small ranches until the late 1890s. After freakish weather patterns that caused a resurgence in vegetation, significant boosterism (from regional, national, and international newspapers and the CPR) and cheap land prices (\$18.20 per acre near Carlstadt while prices ranged from \$47.00 to \$76.00 per acre east of the Dry Belt) attracted a significant number of homesteaders (25). Like the settlers Burnet, Nelson, and Voisey examine, settlers in Carlstadt were not prepared for the environment of Palliser's Triangle. Initial success was followed by extreme temperatures, harsh winds, freezing sleet and snow, alkaline groundwater, and wildfires. The search for water, as in most plains regions, was fundamental in success and failure of farming. Promoters such as H.W. Campbell stressed that farmers were using the wrong techniques for arid climate, and thus harmed the economics and environment of the region. After the region returned to climatic normalcy, as explorers Henry Hind and John Palliser saw it, farms failed and the region faced eighty percent depopulation. After the 1930s, the Carlstadt area returned to small scale sheep and cattle

ranching. Jones's study hints at land speculation as a motivator for immigration, but never fully develops this concept like Voisey. He emphasizes an arid climate, like that of Nelson's West River Country, which significantly contributed to regional failure. Particular class structures never really emerged like they did in the northern reaches of Palliser's Triangle that Burnet examines.

The two common factors that these scholars present are boosters and railroads. Each institution was an effective tool for creating a successful community despite the fact that harsh environments caused many agriculturally based societies to fail. Americans, like William Cronon author of *Nature's Metropolis*, have begun to incorporate Canadian theories on metropolis and culture into their work while Canadian historians have done much to include the environment and frontier ideals into regional studies. All have taken great steps into making the study of community formation into the broader stream of historical thought and removing it from being solely a topic for antiquarians and amateurs. They have provided great synthesis in comparing the region to the broader historical perspective.