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March 11, 2004

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Throughout time, there have been various ways of living on the Great Plains. We are only beginning to understand how those of European heritage fit into the grand scheme of life ways in the region. Written history of the plains focuses on the cattle ranching and grain farms of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The nomadic and village cultures of Native Americans on the plains are also a significant subject in a study of plains life. Other interpretations of life on the plains analyze the role of gender and how it affects the experiences of those who live in the region. These topics have been addressed in texts by historians such as Gilbert C. Fite, Ernest Staples Osgood, Preston Holder, Vernon C. Fowke, and Glenda Riley. These texts represent some of the most significant interpretations of how people live life on the Great Plains.

The Hoe and the Horse on the Plains is a study of the agricultural way of life shared by many Native American groups living on the Great Plains before Europeans came to the region. The other primary way of life on the plains was a nomadic, hunter-

gatherer system that was enhanced dramatically into an equestrian lifestyle by the introduction of Spanish horses.

Village life, especially before the availability of horses to nomadic Indians, was relatively stable. Villages were established along the fertile river bottoms of the plains and archeological evidence has led to conclusions that the complexity of horticulture practice gradually developed among Native Americans over thousands of years. Holder explained that small clusters of families grew to large stable villages containing a higher concentration of people. Even though the villages were stable, they were often vacant for periods of time such as when the people would go hunting or would disperse into small groups during the harsh months of winter.

Holder's work reflects the elusive nature of evidence and the fact that he relied heavily on archeological evidence. Groups of people have been divided into arbitrary language groups and the people's lifestyles have been interpreted through how they buried their dead. As many or more questions are raised by Holder's work as were answered. For example, the complex interaction between village groups and nomadic groups remains elusive. While the disruption of life on the plains due to the horse is covered in the book, it was quick to assume that the horse meant the sure death of the village. Holder also took many other liberties, assuming he understood things about class structure and religion that he probably didn't.

While Holder analyzed the way life was lived on the plains for thousands of years, other historians have addressed the more recent history of European settlement of the plains and prairies. One of the first phases of white settlement of the plains involved the development of the cattle business of the West. Ernest Staples Osgood recounted the

prime years of the rangeland of the frontier from the mid to late 1800s in *The Day of the Cattleman*.

Osgood's *The Day of the Cattleman* is a history of the of range cattle in the American West. Osgood credits the cattleman as having, "...built up a great and lucrative enterprise, attracted eastern and foreign capital to aid him in the development of a new economic area, stimulated railroad building in order that the product of the ranges might get to an eastern market, and laid the economic foundations of more than one western commonwealth" (ix). He traced the early beginnings of the cattle business on the Great Plains to the needs and demands created by people immigrating to the mining fields in the mountains of the West. Early traders sought to meet the great demand for food and work animals and a thriving business soon evolved. Unlike many histories of the cattle business that focus heavily on the mangy longhorns driven north from Texas into Kansas, Osgood's history inclusively addresses northern and Rocky Mountain rangelands and the rise and fall of stockmen's associations.

The rapid population increases in the West, due to the gold rush and presence of the military and wagon trails, created a tremendous demand for beef cattle and draft animals in the mid 1800s. Cattle raised on free rangeland could bring high prices in the boomtowns and frontier villages. The business grew up so quickly that in a matter of a few years, some places were experiencing overcrowded grasslands necessitating the involvement of the local, state, and federal governments to regulate the rangeland.

By the 1880s, low operating costs and high profits had generated a cattle boom. This explosion was encouraged by a combination of a boomer mentality and the

influence of the railroads, which desperately needed to sell off their landholdings to raise money.

The two most important issues that developed as a result of the cattle boom were the organization of stockmen's associations and the establishment of land use practice and regulation. The stockmen's associations were an attempt by the cattlemen to sort out conflicts among cattlemen themselves and also between cattlemen and farmers without the involvement of other parties or methods, such as government regulation. These associations often had limited powers and when they did have power, tended to work in the favor of a few select individuals, rather than the group as a whole. These groups relied heavily on their respective state legislatures for support. Toward the end of the cattle boom, land became a contentious commodity necessary not only for ranching, but farming also.

Osgood's comprehensive history is an essential text on an important phase of Great Plains settlement. Survey histories often overlook the northern plains and the importance of organized associations and public lands in favor of a Texas focused recount of cattle drives, Kansas railhead towns, and debilitating blizzards that ended the cattle boom. An understanding of this text is integral to an understanding of how cattle ranching is tied to the Great Plains region and how it continues to have an effect on the plains culture and economy.

Just as Osgood's book illustrates a significant phase of Great Plains history, so to does Gilbert C. Fite's *The Farmers Frontier 1865-1900*. This book describes a second vital period of Great Plains history, that of farming.

Although the Great Plains region was labeled “The Great American Desert” for decades on maps and in textbooks, many people believed in theories that promised agricultural success, such the idea that rain would follow the plow. However, after many difficult years farmers on the Great Plains were either forced to leave or to develop new technologies and methods for farming in a semi-arid region.

The Homestead Act of 1862 could be considered to be the beginning of modern farm policy. It was hoped by political leaders that the act would allow pioneers to move out onto the land and in a few years productive communities would have been established throughout the region. After a series of droughts, locusts, and hard winters with many people living in extreme poverty efforts at organized relief for plains farmers became popular and necessary. Private, voluntary aid was often available and some charities pushed individuals to provide assistance for starving farm families. Politicians were forced to provide emergency relief, such as Governor William R. Marshall of Minnesota who paid out \$6946 in 1867 (35). Marshall’s money was meant to provide money for food as well as seed for spring planting. Emergencies such as this led to organized movements that sought to change legislation at both the state and federal level to provide relief to the farmers who had often moved out onto their land due to the influence of the government in the first place. State and federal relief was seen as necessary in order to maintain newly established farms and communities and to keep the progression of development at a reasonable rate.

Farming on the plains was subject to a variety of factors. Grasshoppers, drought, low crop prices, and high operating expenses all led to hardship and failure on the farm. There were huge population turnovers on the plains due to the precarious nature of the

farm economy. Some settled areas on the frontier saw periodic declines in their population due to such difficult times (131). Clearly, the population of the Great Plains has been unstable from the initial settlement period of Americans and Europeans.

The Farming Frontier approaches farming on the Great Plains and the American West through an analysis of sub-regions. These sub-regions include: the Upper Midwest, the Central Prairie Frontier, the Red River Valley of the North, the Central Plains, the Pacific Coast, the Rocky Mountains, and the Southern Plains. An important part of the analysis of the sub-regions focuses on Bonanza farming in the Red River Valley and the subsequent Dakota Boom of 1878-1887 facilitated in large part by the railroad companies. This differed greatly from other parts of the West, such as in Oregon and Washington where the lack of adequate transportation networks prolonged settlement.

Regardless of the region a farm family chose to settle in, farm life was marked by great poverty and hardship. Despite this, many farmers were happy and enjoyed some measure of success. This ability to succeed has been credited to an ability to adapt to the plains environment.

Just as Fite's work focused on farming, so to does Vernon C. Fowke's *The National Policy and the Wheat Economy*. While American historians tend to limit their analysis of life on the plains to that which lies within the American borders, Fowke's text features wheat farming on the Canadian prairie.

The National Policy and the Wheat Economy is divided into four parts: Origins and Development of the National Policy; Grain Marketing Problems in Western Canada, 1900-20; The Open Market Rejected; and the conclusion. According to Fowke, Canadians understand the term "National Policy" to mean "the policy of tariff protection

which was put into effect by the Conservatives in 1879” (3). He explained that Canadians associate the term with the more specific Macdonald’s tariff policy that allowed for the development of industry and encouraged nationalism. This was partly in response to contemporary events in America including the Civil War, the push to settle the West, and the resulting advancement of the railroads. In order to protect western Canadian territories from being absorbed into the United States, businessmen and politicians saw the need to strengthen their own regional ties and put their own facilities in place such as building the Canadian railway system. For this, the idea of the National Policy was necessary.

Instrumental to the development of the National Policy was the establishment of the wheat economy. The wheat economy attracted settlers to the interior Canadian provinces and facilitated the development of the region. However, the factors that ruled the wheat economy often placed power in the hands of businessmen in Eastern Canada. Individual farmers not only had to battle climate, drought, over extended resources, but also the monopolistic and unfair pricing policies sponsored by the National Policy. Problems due to monopolistic tendencies, particularly by elevators and members of grain dealers associations, became such an issue that many Canadian farmers in the West advocated a more socialistic policy. This resulted in the rise of co-operative ventures, especially elevator co-ops.

The term “National Policy” refers to an accumulation of acts, laws, and general policies practiced by the Canadian government and businessmen developed over time to support the wheat economy. This policy built railroads, recruited settlers, and promoted a unified nation. However, this left the government with an exceedingly complex set of

regulations with which to manage a significant part of the plains economy. It needs to be remembered that this text is almost half a century out of date and an updated interpretation would be useful. Additionally, a text that made more obvious comparisons and connections between American and Canadian policies would be helpful for American readers unfamiliar with Canadian politics and history, and vice versa. A contemporary context is necessary.

While many histories of the Great Plains focus on the respective economic specialties of the plains, primarily ranching and farming, Glenda Riley's *The Female Frontier* examines how gender affected life and early settlement on the Great Plains. Men's lives were strongly affected by the particular sub-region of the West they lived in, and equally so by the natural resources of that region. Men owned or were employed by logging companies, mining companies, ranches, farms, etc.... This determined the leading factors of their lives. Women on the other hand, while influenced by these factors, did not have their basic responsibilities altered significantly due to an area's local economy.

Riley wrote, "because these women focused their attention upon domestic production, childbirth, childcare, family relationships, and other tasks defined as female, they were affected only secondarily by the resources of an area" (195). Their lives were defined by hard work and domestic duties regardless of where they happened to live. Riley admits that there were some differences between regions, such as the difficulty of obtaining water in some regions for cooking, cleaning, and washing (196), however these differences were minimal in the greater scheme of domestic responsibility.

Riley pointed out that it mattered little if women were single, married, or widowed, where they lived, or what their husbands, fathers, or brothers did for a living. They still were expected to fill the role determined by their gender. They were helpers, caregivers, and civilizers. She divides the book into three primary areas: Home and Hearth on the Prairie and the Plains, Employment and Income Production on the Prairie and Plains, and Community Participation on the Prairie and Plains. Each of these topics is further divided into a chapter dedicated to the plains and prairies each individually.

“Home and Hearth” on the prairie and plains is a study of the hardships women faced in their new environment and how they rose to face the challenges presented them. Climate, insects and animals, Native Americans, financial difficulties, bearing and raising children, isolation, fires, and poor housing conditions all combined to make life exceedingly difficult on the plains and prairies. Despite all of these problems, women often found pleasure in their new homes. They had objects of material culture brought with them from previous locations; holidays, traditions, and rituals to connect family members; recreated social institutions, and newfound friendships and bonds with neighbor women.

“Employment and Income Production” on the prairie and plains examines the economic roles of women. Women worked in education as teachers; as writers, correspondents, and editors for newspapers, journals, and other material; dressmakers, seamstresses, and milliners; entrepreneurs and businesswomen; midwives, nurses, apothecaries and doctors; cooks, maids, and domestic servants; and prostitutes. Many women farmed their own land and filed Homestead claims in their own names. Most of

them helped run the farm and earned money through various efforts, such as selling cream, eggs, and other produce.

“Community Participation” on the prairie and plains focuses on how women were the social and moral keepers in their families and in their communities. Although their role within the community was often on a limited scale, they took part in reform movements such as encouraging women’s education opportunities, temperance movements, abolitionism, war relief; clubs to encourage culture and charity, and suffrage movements. While men still held the primary position in society, women were influential especially on the issues that affected them and their domestic roles the most.

Histories of the Great Plains tend to focus on economic opportunities including ranching and agriculture. Other histories include other cultures, such as the lifestyles of Native Americans. Another important factor that influenced life on the plains was gender. As Glenda Riley pointed out the life of women varied little no matter where they happened to live. Agriculture, ranching, and the difficulties of climate, poverty, and isolation shaped the lives of those who lived on the plains and prairies. All of these histories together lead to a more thorough understanding of what life on the plains has meant to different people at different times. Understanding this history will help us understand the present and the future of the plains also.