

*Community on the American Frontier: Separate but Not Alone.*

By Robert V. Hine. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1980. Pp. xii, 292. Notes, illustrations, bibliography, index. \$12.50.)

Thousands of groups populated the American frontier from the seventeenth to the twentieth centuries, but few of them coalesced into stable and enduring communities. Robert V. Hine wants to know why. Rejecting the traditional historical view of frontier life that touts individualism and self-sufficiency as premier values, Hine adopts a perspective that values community. He examines groups as diverse in goals, practices, and fates as New England Puritans, Mexicans of Alta California, miners, utopians, vegetarians, and anarchists. In general, he asks what factors promoted or undermined community development; in particular, what attention was paid by specific groups to three essential characteristics of community—sense of place, appropriate size, and values held in common.

He finds a few legitimate communities (rather than accidental groupings or chance associations), including the Mormons in the 1840s, German farm colonists in the 1870s, and New England Puritans who "steadfastly practiced the highest levels of community that white Americans have ever achieved . . ." (p. 33). Why these groups succeeded (at least for a time) when others failed serves as a central theme of the book. Puritans realized the importance of face-to-face relationships and "hived-off" when the population got too large. The Mormons and the German farm groups kept their communities intact by stressing values (social and/or religious) that affirmed the precedence of the group over the individual. All three strengthened connections to the community by nurturing in its members an attachment to place.

These three groups are, however, the exceptions. More often, community urges on the frontier fell prey to wanderlust, boosterism, commitment to growth, abandonment of "old ways" for new, the rise of subgroups, and the emergence of clearer class differences. Even under ideal conditions cohesive and strong communities develop only with difficulty, and the American frontier, Hine argues, exacerbated the difficulties by enhancing individualism. The frontier encouraged mobility, individual land ownership, unlimited expansion, scores of get-rich-quick schemes, and the dream of better opportunities just over the next hill. Most important, frontier individualism upset the balance between group and individual that is crucial to the survival of the community.

Hine has written a thoughtful account of a topic too long overlooked. He applies a fresh perspective to well-known information. The book does suffer from several problems because of Hine's tendency to overlook nuance, detail, and complication. He compares groups across time without paying attention to social and cultural changes over time. He draws too easy generalizations about groups. Few colonial historians will accept his monolithic representation of Puritans. Most western historians will reject portrayals of miners or women or any number of other groups that betray no gradations or subtleties.

Finally, although Hine has compiled a fascinating array of secondary works, novels, and published reminiscences, his use of them is disconcerting. Reminiscences and novels offer rich information unavailable elsewhere, but they cannot be taken at face value. They tell a particular kind of truth and must be used with caution. Hine, however, uses scholarly, personal, fictional, and fanciful accounts interchangeably, apparently interpreting one as valid as the next.

St. John's University,  
Collegeville, Minn.

Annette Atkins

*To Build a Canal: Sault Ste. Marie, 1853-1854 and After.* By John N. Dickinson. (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, for Miami University, 1981. Pp. xviii, 204. Illustrations, tables, figures, maps, notes, bibliography, index. \$21.50.)

Construction of public works projects has often required the assembling of people, equipment, and materials at remote locations—the Panama Canal, Hoover Dam, Burma Road. This fine new case study by John N. Dickinson portrays the trials of the promoters, workmen, and engineers who constructed a canal to circumvent the falls of the St. Mary's River in the mid-1850s. Few studies of nineteenth-century engineering construction offer such a lucid view of the “nuts and bolts” of canal building. The book also contributes to an understanding of how the quirks of geology, geography, and hydrology have enormous political, economic, and engineering consequences.

The canal was an effort to overcome one of nature's anomalies. Lake Superior exceeds Lake Huron in elevation by some twenty-one feet, and most of the drop on the St. Mary's River, which connects the two lakes, occurs in a three-fourths-mile-long stretch. Some 74,000 cubic feet of water per