

"public housekeeping." Active Grange women supported temperance and suffrage and persuaded the organization (contrary to assurances of its founders) that this latter cause was a "clear implication of its first principles" (p. 148). They also engaged in a variety of community improvement campaigns through their Women's Committees and their work with the juvenile Grange.

Marti makes use of a wide variety of sources and provides a strong introduction and an informative bibliographic essay, both of which comment upon recent work in the history of rural women and the Grange movement. *Women of the Grange* is a useful addition to the scholarship on rural life.

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*Agrarian Women: Wives and Mothers in Rural Nebraska, 1880–1940.* By Deborah Fink. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992. Pp. xxiii, 242. Maps, tables, illustrations, appendix, notes, bibliography, index. Clothbound, \$34.95; paperbound, \$12.95.)

Rural anthropologist Deborah Fink's *Agrarian Women: Wives and Mothers in Rural Nebraska, 1880–1940* is a provocative contribution to debates among researchers on rural women. Contrary to the view that rural women experienced more egalitarian marriages because of their shared labor and essential economic contributions to the family farm, Fink concludes that rural women in Boone County, Nebraska, were not "insulated from gender oppression," their physical labor (and that of their children) was exploited, and their isolation deprived them of community support that made them more vulnerable to domestic violence (p. 190). Fink has no patience for the continuing glorification of agrarianism. Defining it as "the belief in the moral and economic primacy of farming over industry" and the "superiority of farm life" over urban life, she asserts that this "false" and "irrelevant" ideology, which incorporates women only as subordinate appendages to men, has provided a woefully inadequate basis for public policies (p. 11, 12, 194).

Her case study assesses the impact of geography, class, and gender on the lives of rural women and illustrates why the experiences of agrarian women defy facile generalization. The bleak, treeless, and arid plains of Nebraska presented special challenges to farm families—difficulties not encountered in the more humid cornbelt regions of Iowa, Illinois, or Indiana. Without trees, settlers lived in dugouts or soddies; without water, their crops failed. One finds abundant evidence of neighborliness among rural

women in Indiana, but in sparsely settled Nebraska, Fink argues that isolation was common, especially for poorer women. Landless families moved frequently and failed to develop close friendships and social networks, but even women in more prosperous farm families experienced physical and emotional isolation. By the end of the 1930s Fink notes that only 17 percent of Boone County farms were accessible by graveled or hard-surfaced roads. It was usually men who went to town and saw friends and women who remained at home. The influence of class affected other aspects of rural women's lives: food provisions, housing and furnishings, and most importantly, the nature of work performed on the farm. As in Indiana, women living on marginal farming operations were the most likely to engage in field work themselves and to witness interruptions or terminations of their children's educations because they were needed as unpaid farm laborers.

Fink perceives the 1930s as the pivotal decade for rural women of all classes. "... agrarian life was crumbling," and women found that despite their extra work they could not "ease the burdens of the depression . . ." (p. 129). Boone County women rejected the agrarian life in several ways: leaving farms in large numbers, remaining single, divorcing, and if married, becoming "less tied to the farm economy" (pp. 129-30). Fink's discussion of the fundamental changes in this decade is convincing and based on an impressive variety of sources.

Among the most valuable sources in *Agrarian Women* are Fink's interviews with over thirty-five women. Since the quotations from her fieldwork are so illuminating, it is regrettable that she did not incorporate more of the women's own words into her text. More troubling, her conclusions that struggles to survive led to alienation rather than bonding between husbands and wives and that an intrinsically violent Plains culture, coupled with women's isolation, made them more susceptible to the brutal rages of spouses are based on inadequate evidence and rely heavily on Mari Sandoz's *Old Jules*, an account of her father. Fink's contention that the book about a gifted intellectual who "beat and tyrannized his wives and children" and "refused to do farm work" was widely read in Boone County and that "men admired Old Jules and sought to emulate him" is unsubstantiated (p. 78). Questions about behavior within marriages are crucial in debates on the lives of rural women, but as Fink's generally fine study demonstrates, this private behavior is also the most difficult to document.

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