Curtis's weakness. For example, he suggests that Curtis was naïve about the political nature of the Civil War (135, 159–60, 187), that he was racist (159, 288), and that he let his professional ambition supersede the emotional needs of his family (54, 61, 95, 288–89). Despite these criticisms, however, Shea often comes to Curtis's defense. For example, the troubles that beset the general as he moved his army across Arkansas in 1862 are blamed on his superior, General Henry Halleck, who poached Curtis's men (143–44), overly edited Curtis's reports (139–41), and was obsessed with shifting blame away from himself (177–78). Similarly, when Curtis was chasing the Confederates out of Missouri in late-1864, Shea blames the general's frustrations on everyone else, especially generals Alfred Pleasonton (251–53) and William Rosecrans (254–61). Finally, when addressing the Sand Creek Massacre (the slaughter of approximately 200 Cheyenne and Arapahoe women and children by Colorado militiamen who were under Curtis's authority), Shea exonerates the general despite the fact Curtis told the leader of the Colorado militia force, "I want no peace until the Indians suffer more"—a quotation not found in Shea's book (*Official Records*, ser. I, vol. 41, part 3, p. 462). This unexplained omission of incriminating evidence suggests Shea may have some pro-Curtis sympathies.

Nevertheless, this book's strengths outweigh its weaknesses. Shea is a masterful historian of the Trans-Mississippi West. His research is thorough, his analysis is clear, and his writing is smooth. By tracing the life of Samuel Curtis, Shea takes his readers on a trip through many critical moments in nineteenth-century American history: the Transportation Revolution; Manifest Destiny; the Mexican-American War; the Civil War; and the Indian Wars. Shea does this with skill and style, making this an important book for anyone interested in the Civil War era.

The Fundamental Institution: Poverty, Social Welfare, and Agriculture in American Poor Farms, by Megan Birk. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2022. viii, 288 pp. Appendix, notes, bibliography, index. $30.00 paperback.

Reviewer Maxwell L. Harrison is a PhD student at Iowa State University where his work has focused on rural institutions in the American Midwest, especially school consolidation in Michigan.

Social welfare and dependency have long been topics of study in modern American history. Yet as Megan Birk demonstrates in *The Fundamental Institution*, historians have given surprisingly little attention to poor farms. Poor farms were, in fact, among the most ubiquitous forms of

social welfare in American history; practically every county in the Midwest operated one at some point. Despite this, the attention of most historians has focused upon policies and urban almshouses. Using an impressive collection of published and unpublished sources, including poor farm records, superintendent diaries, census enumerations, newspapers, and other materials, Birk fills this gap by focusing on the period between the Civil War and the Great Depression. She crafts a history of poor farms as institutions "made up of people—not policies" and where "design and function were intimately tied to agriculture" (9). The result is a rich narrative that not only dispels many of the myths associated with poor farms, but also humanizes the people who spent time in them.

Contrary to popular assumptions, poor farms were not penal institutions. Counties acquired farms after the Civil War as investments to fund traditional forms of direct and in-kind relief for needy residents. Buildings often came later. Still, despite officials' vision of Jeffersonian virtues in agricultural living and labor, any hope of having the poor labor on the farms dissipated quickly because most residents were physically incapable of doing the work. Birk demonstrates that a diverse collection of individuals used poor farms as a resource. They ranged from pregnant women who needed a safe place to give birth to sick and elderly people who needed a safe place to die, and everything in between. Young women sometimes took their children to poor farms to escape abusive husbands, seasonal laborers used them for food, shelter, and warmth during the winter months, and men and women alike who suffered temporary setbacks used them to get back on their feet. These and other justifications constituted part of a broader network of "survival strategies" upon which rural people relied during hard times (49).

Regardless of why they entered or how long they stayed, poor farm residents became part of an "institutional patriarchy" (7). At the top of this arrangement were the superintendent and matron, typically husband and wife. Hired to lead a "strange, large household," they had to fulfill a staggering number of roles ranging from farmer, homemaker, lawyer, doctor, nurse, minister, laundryman, and cook (8). Amidst ensuring the success of the farm and caring for the residents, as county employees, superintendents also had to balance the desires of a local board of supervisors. Birk demonstrates that the types of people hired for these roles were as diverse as the residents themselves. Stories of abuse and neglect abounded, but most superintendents and matrons exhibited genuine compassion toward residents. Although entering a poor farm was often an embarrassing decision, the environment the superintendent and matron fostered often provided residents the kinship

and support networks that had collapsed in their communities. For the transient residents who returned at intervals throughout their lives and the elderly and disabled who had nowhere else to turn, poor farms were sometimes their only home.

By the early twentieth century, however, poor farm demographics had begun to shift toward older men. Birk demonstrates that this was because Progressive Era social welfare reforms created alternative forms of relief for pregnant women, children, and the mentally ill. Counties increasingly questioned the pairing of a farm with poor relief, especially as modern agriculture required significant technological and capital investment. When the New Deal shifted the locus of social welfare from local communities to the state and federal governments, it marked the end of poor farms as the "fundamental institution." Those that did not close in ensuing decades became nursing homes or other county facilities.

Birk writes a richly textured, thoughtful narrative reminding us that poor farms were more than just houses, barns, and fields; they were places where people were born, lived, and died, and constituted distinct communities in their own right. Perhaps Birk's most important contribution, though, is her emphasis on the humanity of the people who relied on social welfare. Inability to work did not equal laziness, nor did long-term residency imply systemic abuse. Historians of social welfare, gender, community, and agriculture will find useful insights in this book, as will those who are interested in those dimensions in the Midwest. Although Birk draws on material from across the United States, her analysis centers on Iowa, Kansas, Wisconsin, Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, and Michigan. Her handling of so many sources is commendable, and while Birk acknowledges the book is not comprehensive, she hopes that regional and micro-histories will follow. Thanks both to Birk's scholarship and her detailed bibliography, future scholars have a strong foundation upon which to start.

After Populism: The Agrarian Left on the Northern Plains, 1900–1960, by William C. Pratt. Pierre: South Dakota State Historical Society Press, 2022. Illustrations, notes, index. $34.95 hardcover.

Reviewer Jeff Wells is the Dennis & Vaune Johnson Endowed Chair in U.S. History and associate professor of history at Dickinson State University. His research focuses on the relationship between journalists of the Farmers' Alliance and People's Party and Gilded Age agrarian and labor movements.

After Populism is the culmination of William C. Pratt's more than four decades of research into the agrarian left on the northern plains. Pratt's