

*French Roots in the Illinois Country: The Mississippi Frontier in Colonial Times*, by Carl J. Ekberg. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998. xii, 359 pp. Illustrations, maps, tables, notes, index. \$44.95 cloth.

Reviewer Michael Foret is associate professor of history at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point. His research and writing have focused on the French and Indians in the Mississippi valley during the colonial era.

Carl Ekberg has done it again. *French Roots in the Illinois Country*, like his earlier study of Ste. Genevieve, *Colonial Ste. Genevieve: An Adventure on the Mississippi Frontier* (1985), is a model of social history that masterfully illuminates the French experience in the upper Mississippi valley. Few if any historians have looked at this region as closely or as well as Ekberg. That the French were the first Europeans to settle in the region is an essential part of the warp and woof of "American" history. Carl Ekberg has done a great service by explaining how they did so.

Frenchmen first visited the middle Mississippi valley during the last third of the seventeenth century, and they began to establish a permanent presence toward the end of the century. As interesting and colorful as the stories of La Salle and Tonti may be, however, Ekberg tells here the more prosaic story of the communities settled after 1700 by men and women who came here to make their lives as most people did in those days, by farming the land. Despite similarities to Quebec and Louisiana, the Illinois country evolved in a unique pattern of land use, settlement, and agriculture based on traditional French rural practices. According to the author, the unique configuration of land use in the region had important implications not only for the organization of society, but also the mentalité of the inhabitants.

Ekberg's six chapters revolve around French longlots; Illinois country settlements; open-field agriculture; settlers, servants, and slaves; agricultural practices; and agricultural commerce in the Mississippi valley. Ekberg clearly knows the extant primary sources—French, Spanish, and American—with the intimacy born of decades of study, and he knows how to wring everything he can from them. Ride through the Illinois and Missouri countryside with him, and you know he has learned the land not only as an ideal from the documents, but on many a sweaty or chilly walk over the settlements and farms he writes about. That makes a difference, because he sometimes finds that the reality did not always conform to what the documents described. He also knows the rural France from which these settlers came, which allows him to explain this unique country as no one else can.

The first chapter of this perceptive study gives full credit to scholars from the United States, Canada, France, and even Germany for

their studies of longlots, and presents an overview of French longlots throughout North America. Standing alone, it would serve as an excellent introduction to French settlement patterns in North America. The appendix, which discusses gristmills and river vessels, will appeal to those interested in material culture.

In his conclusion, Ekberg sums up his thoughts about each of the major settlements of the region—Vincennes, Cahokia, Kaskaskia, St. Louis, and Ste. Genevieve—as well as his thoughts on the end of the open-field system, the clash of cultures between French Creoles and Americans after independence, and their differing mentalités. Many will find this last discussion to be too brief. He ends by noting that Thomas Jefferson found village life in France—and no doubt, by extension, in the Illinois country—to be anathema. Jefferson believed that living on their own farms rather than in compact villages would make the villagers happier and more virtuous. Ekberg disagrees. His study demonstrates that village life in the Illinois country was altogether more peaceful and virtuous than in later American Illinois, and that “village and parish life in colonial Illinois did in some sense make the inhabitants of the Creole villages there more rather than less virtuous, if part of virtue consists in respecting the lives and limbs of one’s neighbors” (263).

Anyone who wants to better understand the early history of the middle Mississippi valley needs to read this book.

*Daily Life on the Nineteenth-Century American Frontier*, by Mary Ellen Jones. Daily Life through History Series. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998. xiv, 269 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, chronology, index. \$45.00 cloth.

Reviewer Anne B. Webb is professor of history at Metropolitan State University in Minneapolis/St. Paul. Her research and writing have focused on pioneer and Indian women on the midwestern frontier.

Mary Ellen Jones has written a compact, fact-filled, easy-to-read book on America’s frontiers. After discussing various frontier myths and stressing the complexity of the reality, Jones gives each of the various frontiers—fur trade, explorers’, miners’, and farming and ranching—one of the next four chapters. The Indian experience on each of the frontiers is included as appropriate.

Besides the amount of information in the book, its greatest strength comes from Jones’s ability to pull the reader into the thoughts, accounts, and actions of the people who influenced the times. She does so by using their own words. The book opens with an account of an Indian

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