

New Amish communities continue to spring up in Iowa, Minnesota, Missouri, and Wisconsin. Tourism is growing among midwestern Amish settlements. Yoder's book will help interested readers understand the richness of Amish history, avoiding tourist notions of quaintness and images of "living museums." The Amish are not representatives of a lost past, but users of their history in creating a viable alternative way to live in the modern world. Yoder makes it less possible to consider the Amish a static, never-changing ethnoreligious society.

*Bonds of Community: The Lives of Farm Women in Nineteenth-Century New York*, by Nancy Grey Osterud. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991. ix, 303 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$42.50 cloth, \$14.95 paper.

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In *Bonds of Community*, Nancy Osterud examines the lives of farm women in New York's Nanticoke Valley, especially during the latter portion of the nineteenth century. Osterud argues that these women adopted different strategies from many urban women; rather than accepting the doctrine of "separate spheres," they renegotiated "the terms of gender relations" to modify them "in a more symmetrical and egalitarian direction" (2).

Osterud begins with the settlement of Nanticoke Valley. Here she emphasizes the importance of kin networks. She moves on to the events of rural women's lives, especially courtship, marriage, child-bearing, and widowhood. Next, she considers how work structured women's relationships with their husbands and with other women. In the concluding section she demonstrates that social activities brought women and men together rather than enforcing their separateness.

Osterud analyzed diaries, letters, reminiscences, wills, church documents, censuses, and maps. She also explored Nanticoke Valley's hills and paths, handled artifacts, scrutinized photographs, and visited descendants of the families she studied. From this, she weaves a compelling tale of women and men who worked together, often interchanged tasks, and considered themselves collaborators in the family farm.

Throughout, Osterud writes of "mutuality," "reciprocity," and even "equality" between these women and their husbands. This is not the usual picture of farm marriages, and Osterud is quick to point out that the situation derived partially from the dairying industry that

provided the valley's major enterprise. Dairying drew women and men close, the men usually tending the cows in the field, both men and women sharing milking, and women producing cheese and butter.

But Osterud also suggests that Nanticoke Valley women adopted a *strategy* of mutuality to offset their inequality. In fact, she terms mutuality an "empowerment" strategy. This fits her philosophy that people actively participate in their social and cultural experiences. Yet the term *strategy* indicates a plan, a maneuver, a specific action, and nowhere does Osterud establish that these women *planned* to foster mutuality. Empowerment may have been the result, but whether women seized upon it as a purposeful strategy is unproven.

The concepts of mutuality, reciprocity, and equality also need clarification. It seems inaccurate to apply these terms to Nanticoke Valley women who, when single, were regarded as anomalies; who, even as widows, were denied the right to own land; who purchased goods but whose husbands' names appeared in merchants' account books; who formed numerous single-sex associations and found their activities limited in integrated organizations; who, when older, were less likely to maintain their own homes than were older men; whose husbands sometimes confined, abused, or deserted them; and whose labor was regarded as having less value than men's. Perhaps it is again a matter of definition—a problem for many historians of women who have not agreed on meanings of such words as equality, reciprocity, continuity, and change. Still, if mutuality and reciprocity indicate sharing, commonality, and alternating power, it is hard to understand how these women exercised a significant force in a community in which fathers refused to will land to their daughters. It would have been helpful if Osterud had considered two crucial power issues: women's control over their bodies in terms of frequency of sexual relations and child-bearing and in participation in family decision making. Clearly, women in Nanticoke Valley shared labor, family events, and social activities with their men, but did this result in a degree of autonomy and in empowerment—or simply in sharing?

Certainly, Osterud is persuasive in convincing the reader that something noteworthy occurred in Nanticoke Valley during the late nineteenth century. As she reveals the details of such families as the Rileys, the Gates, and the Béntons, the reader cannot resist admiring the balance some couples achieved. Women spoke well of their husbands, men of their wives, and children of their parents. Women helped in the fields, men helped in the house, and children did their part in both.



Osterud argues that a similar situation may have existed in other areas of the North, largely due to patterns of kinship settlement and nucleated villages, but she wisely stops at the edge of the Great Plains. In so doing, she recognizes the crucial importance of region. What some women's historians call the "holy trinity"—gender, race, and class—is inadequate; region must be added to the litany. In my own work on rural women in the trans-Mississippi West and more recently in Deborah Fink's *Agrarian Women: Wives and Mothers in Rural Nebraska, 1880-1940* (1992), the situation appeared less promising for women.

Fink, a rural anthropologist living in Ames, Iowa, moved temporarily to Nebraska, where she interviewed women regarding their experiences. She disputes agrarian ideology, which proclaims that women "were liberated rather than limited by their service within the family farm." Instead, her analysis suggests that rural women suffered as a result of the structure of farming and rural communities; they felt "widespread dissatisfaction"; they resented their children's labor and circumscribed educations; and they fled the land in significant numbers.

Placing Osterud's Nanticoke Valley alongside Fink's Boone County, Nebraska, not only reveals differences in regional conditions, but indicates the many factors that must be taken into account when analyzing rural women. Osterud's women lived during an earlier era, were similar in racial and ethnic background, relied on long-standing kin networks for support, engaged in dairying, and operated in a well-developed market economy. Fink's women lived in a later period, were highly diverse in race and ethnicity, often lacked long-term kin networks, participated in a grain-and-cattle system, and frequently operated in an emerging market economy.

Osterud's book, then, provides important information for the comparative studies that historians of rural women so desperately need to pursue. Although both Deborah Fink and Dorothy Schwieder have already begun to mine the possibilities in Iowa, many questions still demand exploration. Only by comparing Osterud's work with that of Fink, Schwieder, and others will the total picture emerge.

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