

change. From the marriage evolved the modern self-propelled combine. The results were substantial savings, especially in labor costs. Adoption of the combine was faster on the southern plains than on the northern prairies, and Isern explains the many reasons for this pattern.

The concluding chapter is an insightful essay on the plains. Isern reviews the interpretations of the plains by both American and Canadian scholars. He evaluates the environmental studies of the plains and the prairies and considers the studies of ethnicity and the cultural heritage of the area. All play a role in interpreting the plains.

The notes illustrate the author's complete command of the primary and secondary sources. The book is profusely illustrated with period photographs, one of the features of the study. The demands of both the public and the professional reader are met by the author's graceful writing, full descriptions, interesting narrative, and accurate detail. Thus Isern provides a lucid visual and written account of harvesting and threshing on the North American plains for all readers.

This book is must reading for anyone interested in agricultural history, local and regional history, folklife, and the history of agricultural technology. Scholars in the field will find the book to be indispensable, as Isern's excellent study will be the standard work on harvesting and threshing on the plains for many years.

*Eighty Acres: Elegy for a Family Farm*, by Ronald Jager. Boston: Beacon Press, 1990. xv, 257 pp. \$15.00 cloth.

REVIEWED BY JOHN DE JONG, CENTRAL COLLEGE

"Poetry would have to wait; we were working class" (161). With these words Ronald Jager recalls the unsentimental approach to work on the Michigan farm where he spent his youth in the 1930s and 1940s. In this elegy for his family farm, the time for poetry has arrived.

Formerly a philosophy professor and now a free-lance writer, Jager is a master storyteller who creates strong visual images of places, characters, and activities. Witty lines abound: "We had enough Puritanism bred into us to spoil some fun, but not enough to find comfort in doctrine" (207). Occasionally, the philosopher surfaces to discover meaning in prosaic episodes. A description of the unvarying seating arrangement in the family auto leads to light philosophizing on the value of structure, of which there was an abundance on the Jager farm. But philosophizing is kept well in the background as events are allowed to speak for themselves—to entertain, evoke nostalgic recol-

lection, or enlighten according to the interests and experiences of individual readers.

The historian will find the book most useful for its description of a type of agriculture practiced in the Middle West from the nineteenth century through World War II. "My aim in this book is documentary: to capture and exhibit the experience of being young on a farm—work and whimsy, warts and all" (xiii). Those familiar with Iowa farming will find many similarities as well as significant differences.

The farm Jager describes was a "communal arrangement of small-scale mixed husbandry with its nicely interlocked odds and ends, its balance of land and hand labor and horsepower and livestock and cash crops [beans, potatoes, sugar beets, oats, corn, wheat] and woodlot and tools and family and neighborhood" (248). Although it depended on the sale of products in the market and was thus vulnerable to the market's uncertainties, subsistence rather than profit was its orienting principle. Since the Jager farm had no electricity, no tractor, and no windmill, it truly exemplified labor intensiveness. The cliché, "more time than money," was "a statement of value and not of despair" (251).

Even for its time the Jager farm was not "progressive." Ritual, tradition, lack of capital, and the father's ingrained caution discouraged innovation. This was cause for some generational conflict as Jager and his impatient siblings sometimes urged more progressive ways on their father. Hovering over all of this was the spirit of Dutch Calvinism (Christian Reformed variety), with its two times per Sunday mandatory church services, Bible reading and prayer at every meal, and, most important, a view of life that fostered an ethic of hard work performed as a religious requirement and not as a means to wealth—an ethic "almost perfectly suited to the culture of the family farm" (203).

What seems remarkable today is that all this lasted until the middle of the twentieth century. Undoubtedly the balance it embodied contributed to its staying power. The Great Depression and World War II also extended its life. But after World War II the end came quickly, as dairy farming conducted as an "agribusiness" spread to that part of Michigan. Science, technology, economics, and concepts of progress all contributed to the transition in which neither father nor son participated fully. Jager left to go to college, and the father eased into carpentry.

Those with experience or knowledge of the life described in this book will take pleasure in the nostalgic reflection it elicits. Others will be introduced to an important chapter in the history of the Middle West. All will come to understand that the past described here, both in

its material aspects and in its values, was a unique historical moment that is now irretrievably gone.

*Nothing to Do But Stay: My Pioneer Mother*, by Carrie Young. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1991. 117 pp. Illustrations. \$22.50 cloth, \$8.50 paper.

*In Their Own Words: Letters from Norwegian Immigrants*, edited and translated by Solveig Zempel. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, in cooperation with the Norwegian-American Historical Association, 1991. xviii, 225 pp. Illustrations, maps, bibliography, index. \$39.95 cloth, \$14.95 paper.

REVIEWED BY APRIL SCHULTZ, UNIVERSITY OF NOTRE DAME

Carrie Young's memoir of her Norwegian-American pioneer mother and Solveig Zempel's collection of immigrant letters are, on one level, two very different books. Zempel's immigrants speak to us themselves while Young's characters are constructed out of her own memory. Both, however, provide scholars of the immigrant experience and of the upper Midwest with important subjective evidence, in both the stories they tell and the historical narratives they construct.

Zempel's letters cover a wide range of experiences from 1870 to 1945. In letters to family and friends, nine immigrants ranging from a teacher to a railroad worker, an unmarried mother to a politician, recounted their experiences of immigration and community-building during a period of mass migration to this country. The letter writers corresponded from various regions, from both cities and farms about their successes in America; about such mundane matters as the weather, neighbors, and food; about their desire for Ibsen's new book or a visit home for Christmas. Such letters provide invaluable documentation of everyday life. They also provide evidence for aspects of immigration noted by other scholars—chain migration and the significance of letters from America urging others to follow, community and family networks, and the importance of maintaining connections to the "old country."

While Zempel's letters provide such primary evidence, Young's collection of essays is her own remembrance of this same period as the daughter of second-generation Norwegian-Americans in a Scandinavian community on the North Dakota prairie. Like the letters, Young's memoir is filled with details of everyday life—harvesting, homemade ice cream on the Fourth of July, ritual meals at Thanksgiving and Christmas. Young tells at least two important stories. First, she

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