

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

recounts the struggles and triumphs of a strong, independent, adventurous woman who did not succumb to the hardships or loneliness of the prairie. Her mother appears throughout the narrative: as a young woman homesteading alone on the prairie, as a mother desperately and successfully trying to educate all of her children, as the moral and physical center of a family surviving the Dust Bowl years. Second, Young tells us much about the daily lives of people living successfully as both Norwegians and Americans. As with Zempel's letters, Young's narrative provides individual evidence of larger patterns, such as efforts to remain bilingual and ethnic uses of civic holidays. Thanksgiving, for example, was less a civil religious holiday for Young's family than a prolonged celebration of Scandinavian food rituals.

Teachers of immigration history or historical methodologies in general will find each of these publications useful for giving students an opportunity to analyze and judge the efficacy of such evidence as letters and autobiography. Both the letters and the memoir tell us much about the everyday life of Norwegian-Americans trying to build and maintain communities in the early part of this century. As documents of cultural meaning, however, they must be closely analyzed and placed in context. As Zempel rightly notes in her introduction, letters are problematic sources. For example, she writes, "one can often detect in the letters a compulsion to defend the decision to emigrate" (xi). Furthermore, many immigrants wished to entice family and friends to follow them; they would, therefore, focus on the more positive aspects of their experience. On another level, Zempel's collection itself is a historical construction, presenting a very particular vision of Norwegian-Americans in this period. These letter writers are highly successful immigrants. She does include one set of letters from an immigrant who does not fit this model. Hans Overland held intermittent, unskilled jobs and was often quite homesick. His father finally helped him to return home, where he "led a successful life" (82). Zempel refers to Hans, albeit somewhat reluctantly, as "economically and socially a failure" (81). Because the historical context she provides is brief, readers do not know about the experiences of laboring classes during this period, nor are we told that 25 to 60 percent of immigrants returned home. Indeed, many came with that intention. A more sustained and in-depth effort to make connections between these letters and their historical context would be helpful. If, for example, Hans Overland was the exception that proved the rule, why were Norwegian-Americans so successful? How did their experience compare with other immigrants in the period? Young's collection likewise constructs a particular history and, therefore, raises interesting

questions about memoir and historical memory. Why does Young select some memories over others? How is that selection influenced by present-day concerns about gender and ethnic identities? By other memoirs in this genre? How do Young's memories compare to other memories of this time and this place? These books point to the significance of various forms of evidence as well as to the fruitful questions that such evidence raises about the construction of history and historical memory.

Promise to the Land: Essays on Rural Women, by Joan M. Jensen. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1991. xii, 319 pp. Illustrations, tables, notes, index. \$27.50 cloth.

REVIEWED BY KATHERINE JELLISON, MEMPHIS STATE UNIVERSITY

In this handsome volume, the foremost historian of America's rural women presents eight new essays on the topic, along with eight previously published articles. There is something here for everyone interested in rural women's history. The essays range from those that are "staunchly academic" (xii) to those that deal with Jensen's own family history and personal memories. Jensen's "soup to nuts" approach is risky but ultimately succeeds.

Jensen's excellent introductory essay outlines the major themes in the history of America's rural women and discusses the principal literature on the subject. Part one of the collection, "Autobiography and Biography," includes her memoirs of life on a communal farm in the 1970s and a profile of her maternal grandmother, a German immigrant and Wisconsin farm woman. Essays in part two of the book, "Oral History, Iconography, and Material Culture," demonstrate the importance of using non-traditional sources to investigate the history of rural women. In particular, material in this section of the book highlights the use of such evidence to retrieve the history of rural women of color. In part three, "Rural Development," Jensen focuses on women's work within various rural economies. She includes essays on the Seneca women of New York, African-American women on a Maryland wheat plantation, and Euro-American dairy producers in the Philadelphia hinterland. In part four, "Rural Social Welfare," Jensen tackles a significant topic, providing essays that examine social welfare issues on the Wisconsin frontier, within the early programs of the New Mexico Agricultural Extension Service, and during the farm crisis of the 1980s. In part five of the book, "Rural History," Jensen reviews the historiography of Mid-Atlantic farm women and suggests

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