

Women of the Northern Plains: Gender and Settlement on the Homestead Frontier, 1870–1930, by Barbara Handy-Marchello. St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2005. vii, 204 pp. Illustrations, tables, graphs, notes, bibliography, index. \$32.95 cloth.

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In *Women of the Northern Plains*, Barbara Handy-Marchello discusses gender and agriculture in North Dakota during the state’s settlement era. Relying heavily on interviews conducted and biographies collected in the 1930s, 1940s, and early 1950s, and augmented with memoirs, she allows the voices of women to tell their stories of farm life and community. The book adds to a growing list of scholarship on rural women’s history in the prairie and plains states, a subfield that has seen important works by Joan Jensen, Glenda Riley, Deborah Fink, Dorothy Schwieder, Mary Neth, and Paula Nelson, among others.

At the heart of *Women on the Northern Plains* is the recognition that women played “reproductive” and “productive” roles, both of which were necessary for agricultural success on the northern plains. Indeed, according to Handy-Marchello, farm women on North Dakota’s settlement frontier viewed themselves as partners in the farming venture. Understanding North Dakota farm life in terms of a partnership, where both the husband and wife “carry half,” is central. The barnyard and the fields did not exist as separate entities; they were both integrated components of the farm itself. According to Handy-Marchello, “Women’s work—producing a small but reliable income from farm resources—complemented men’s work in the fields of beguiling but unreliable wheat” (77). Moreover, the money women earned producing butter and selling eggs represented a significant contribution to the family’s cash flow, which enabled the family to purchase goods such as sugar, coffee, and cloth. Handy-Marchello contends that this revenue became essential for the economic success of many farm families. In the early twentieth century, the Country Life Movement and the Extension Service sought to recast women as reproducers but not producers. In the end, Handy-Marchello asserts that this image created by outside forces engendered a view of farm women in which they lacked a productive role.

Handy-Marchello also notes that Yankee women as well as immigrant women played important economic roles on the family farm. Culturally, both German-Russians and Norwegians held to agricultural traditions that recognized the legitimacy and the importance of female farm labor. Handy-Marchello posits that in North Dakota, at

least during the settlement period, Yankee women also worked in the fields and barns, something that is often overlooked because German-Russian and Norwegian women have been, in many ways, more visible. Handy-Marchello also challenges other stereotypes. For example, her research on mental illness indicates that men, not women, were more likely to be admitted to the state hospital, thus challenging the stereotype that women were most adversely affected by their experiences on the northern plains. In the same vein, Handy-Marchello rejects the overarching narrative of isolation and loneliness for women settling in North Dakota by discussing the communities women helped to create.

Using gender as a category of analysis, Handy-Marchello tells an engaging story of farm women in frontier North Dakota. Although she focuses on German-Russian, Norwegian, and Yankee women and communities, other immigrant groups (including Syrians) and Native American, Jewish, and African American women and men are also featured. By looking at the broad spectrum of people living in North Dakota, Handy-Marchello forces us to see beyond German (Black Sea and Reich) and Scandinavian populations and embrace a more nuanced understanding of North Dakota's history. Although culture and religious beliefs affected women and gender role expectations, Handy-Marchello successfully constructs an argument that women made important contributions to the farm family economy.

She also includes a discussion of her sources and some of the challenges encountered using those sources, but a critique of memory and history would be useful. Interviews and memoirs represent the past as women and men, often advanced in years, recall their experiences on the "homestead frontier." Such memories are the remembered past. For example, when George Tymchuk described how his wife, Julia, "retired" once the couple acquired a tractor, Julia retorted, "Oh no, I didn't retire. I continued to seed" (160).

This highly readable monograph should appeal to scholars and the general public. In many ways, *Women of the Northern Plains* tells a continuing story. Although this book essentially ends in 1930, the work of women on farms did not. In a 1989 article in the *Annals of Iowa*, "Iowa Farm Women in the 1930s," Deborah Fink and Dorothy Schwieder discuss many of the same economic roles women played on depression-era Iowa farms. Handy-Marchello also connects the past and the present: "The legacy of pioneer farm women—family, community, and work—still frames farm women's lives today" (164). Farm women continue to make important economic contributions, and many women will recognize themselves, their mothers, or their grandmothers in *Women of the Northern Plains*.