

At Home in the Hoosier Hills: Agriculture, Politics, and Religion in Southern Indiana, 1810–1870, by Richard F. Nation. *Midwestern History and Culture* series. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005. xi, 274 pp. Maps, charts, notes, index. \$35.00 cloth.

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Richard Nation’s study of rural life during the early frontier years offers a nuanced and complex picture of farming in the southern Indiana hills. Focusing on an area typically seen as backward and poor, Nation weaves together many facets of rural life and reveals a region that is not as simple as stereotypes have suggested. Localism is at the heart of the study: he argues that the farm families who lived in southern Indiana used localism to protect their land and their values during a time of dramatic change.

One strength of this work is its cohesive narrative that integrates all aspects of life in rural southern Indiana, taking readers beyond the singular focus that often characterizes local or regional histories. Nation links ethnicity, economics, politics, and religious life and explains how they were part of larger economic, religious, and political events. His treatment of religion is especially strong. Churches provided moral judgment, and church oversight was a source of both cohesion and division. In the early days of the community, religion molded people and nurtured an essential bond in a place where people depended on one another to survive. Worried that too much individualism would destroy the community, churches ensured conformity and cooperation. Nation makes sense of the myriad religious factions and groups by drawing connections between seemingly unrelated religious groups; he explains why, for example, Catholics had much in common with Primitive Baptists.

Democratic impulses fostered local governance in religion as well as politics. This tendency spilled over into religious polity and was a boon to denominations such as Methodists and Baptists that thrived in the decentralized society of southern Indiana. Additional help came from the revivalist tendencies of the time, which fostered perfectionism, egalitarianism, and other qualities that meshed well with the political and economic culture of democracy.

Nation argues that farm families engaged in an economic and social system of “surplus produce” or “safety-first.” Hoosier farmers participated in the emerging markets, but they did so on their own terms. They produced for their own needs first, and they did not jeop-

ardize their financial security by assuming debt in search of profits. Farmers produced for the market, but they employed a risk management strategy of producing for their own needs to ensure a steady supply of food, fuel, and clothing. The threats from disease, weather, and low prices guaranteed ongoing risk, but the strategy of surplus production limited exposure to such risks. Hoosier farm families suspected that national markets were manipulated and subject to monetary fluctuation beyond the control of local influences. Within the home community and its system of bartering, religious and community pressures ensured that traders would "act morally," but those forces had no effect on markets in New Orleans or New York (112).

Nation does not focus his analysis only on the market and banks. In his argument, the market was ambiguous, and to portray markets as the villain that destroyed rural communities is to ignore the ability of individuals to negotiate their level of interaction and improve their lot by selling surplus production. Because markets and the financial system were not always kind, most Hoosier hill farmers limited their exposure to notes and currency held by local banks. Those who overreached and borrowed money or owned local currencies lost heavily when unstable banks could not meet their obligations.

Like many white northerners, Hoosier hill families disliked slavery but also disliked African Americans. Religious beliefs, ethnic loyalties, and fears that freed slaves would undermine their society fueled disdain for blacks. Nation takes on the well-entrenched idea that southern Indiana farm families were pro-southern; he argues that they were loyal Unionists. They were not firmly committed to the destruction of slavery, but their localism drove them to preserve their markets and way of life, and they believed that a strong Union would help them do that. This does not mean that the hill families endorsed the Republican Party. In fact, they strongly resisted any efforts that they felt infringed on their rights, voted heavily for Democrats during the war, and were accused of being disloyal. But when Confederate armies raided in southern Indiana, those same people fought fiercely to protect their homes and their independence. Although the Civil War eroded some of the tendencies toward localism, Nation argues that this part of Indiana remained stable and true to its past.

Nation effectively counters the stereotype of southern Indiana farmers as ignorant, backward, and lazy. They lived as they did because of rational choices that allowed them to preserve their communities and their society. The strength of this book is the complexity Nation brings to his subject and his effective argument that Hoosier hill farm families controlled their own destiny as much as circumstances allowed.