

Law and Order in Buffalo Bill's Country: Legal Culture and Community on the Great Plains, 1867–1910, by Mark L. Ellis. Law in the American West Series. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007. xix, 262 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$45.00 cloth.

Reviewer Richard Maxwell Brown is professor emeritus of history at the University of Oregon. He is the author of *American Violence* (1970), *Strain of Violence: Historical Studies of American Violence* (1975), and *No Duty to Retreat: Violence and Values in American History and Society* (1991).

For many Americans, the urban icon of the Great Plains in the late nineteenth century was tumultuous Dodge City, Kansas. Common sense suggests that this is a gross exaggeration. In his deft and well-documented study of what he aptly terms “legal culture and community” on the Great Plains, Mark Ellis refutes popular wisdom with reality. An even-handed scholar, Ellis has no bias in favor of lawyers, but in his perceptive treatment of them he finds that, far from being shifty and self-absorbed, they were prime community builders.

The author focuses on Lincoln County in western Nebraska and its county seat, North Platte, a bustling railroad town on the main line of the Union Pacific. Going back to its formative years, writes Ellis, the county’s early history was “about merchants and lawyers” rather than “gunfighters and bad men.” It was “poverty, hard luck, youthful indiscretion, and stupidity rather than rough and tumble frontier conditions [that] produced criminals in Buffalo Bill’s country.” During the 1870s Lincoln County had at least seven homicides, but county and city soon settled down, with 10 to 12 lawyers forming “a vibrant legal community” — a presence that did much to stabilize and enhance the quality of life for those who migrated to the county. Treatments of the leading judges and lawyers who sustained the legal culture of this Great Plains community enliven the text and provide breadth and depth to our understanding of Lincoln County and its county seat.

Ellis emphasizes enforcement of the law by the county sheriffs and their deputies and by North Platte’s town police force, but he is careful to note that the Union Pacific itself was a major factor in the support of law and order in this railroad town in an era when the railroad employed “thousands of watchmen, policemen, and detectives to safeguard company property and investigate crimes against the corporation.”

Ellis’s research in archival records and contemporary newspapers is excellent. As for the main title of this interesting book, it truly was “Buffalo Bill’s country,” for as late as 1901 William Cody had a ranch in Lincoln County. Missing in this well-illustrated book, however, is a photograph of Buffalo Bill.