

Book Reviews

Open Country, Iowa: Rural Women, Tradition, and Change, by Deborah Fink. SUNY Series in the Anthropology of Work. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986. viii, 275 pp. Tables, notes, reference list, index. \$39.50 cloth, \$14.95 paper.

To gain a deeper, more accurate perspective on rural life, scholars must study the roles of women and use new sources to gain such information. *Open Country* does just that. It is based on forty-eight interviews, local records, and participant observation by an anthropologist. The author used published census results as well as the manuscript federal census of 1900 and 1910, but not the manuscript Iowa census that lists every person in detail. Unfortunately, the large number of rural sociology studies done in the Midwest in this century were completely overlooked. Fink argues persuasively that "the reality of women in a small, rural community is significant" (3). The result is an important contribution to our understanding of rural society and the process of change in the twentieth century.

The book focuses on a rural county in northwestern Iowa, with fieldwork in two small towns (population about one thousand each) which are today farm service centers. The people are of mixed northern European heritage; most are Protestant, Republican, and conservative, a profile typical of midwestern rural communities. Fink's Quaker background gave her access to these two communities. Although she tried to remain in the background, she sometimes slipped. At one point she spoke out in favor of hospital women forming a union and going on strike if necessary (194). The women she interviewed were not randomly selected but rather were women who represented key aspects of women's lives in these communities. They included a prominent activist, a "fine old lady," and a woman who "participated fully in the farm operations" (12). Fink believes that she learned much about the details of their intimate lives. However, she warns her readers that "the people of *Open Country* have unstated, shared secrets that they keep for themselves" (17).

The book is divided into three parts—before, during, and after World War II. Fink concludes that World War II was a major turning point in rural society. In a sort of golden age, before World War II, women played crucial and important roles in the community and had a great deal of flexibility as long as their work was done in the context of a family economy. War changed the demographics of these farm communities. No longer were these tightly knit communities with elaborate kinship patterns. Many women married and moved. Strangers arrived. No longer were most men farmers; many worked in nearby factories or in service centers in town. More women also worked outside the farm economy.

After summarizing the war's general effects on rural society, Fink focuses on one industry—the egg industry—and documents the shift from a small-scale operation dominated by women to a large-scale enterprise controlled by men. A new law required that eggs be candled by an elaborate and expensive procedure which large-scale plants could afford but individual farm women could not. The law affected more than just the small-scale egg sellers. Ma and Pa grocery stores had bought eggs from local women who, in turn, bought their groceries in those stores. When the law forced most women sellers to drop their egg business, they also quit shopping at the local stores. Instead, they bought groceries in large volume discount chain stores. It created a vicious cycle.

Fink is well versed in the historical literature on women's, rural, and Iowa history. She builds on the studies of nineteenth-century women by historians Glenda Riley and Dorothy Schwieder. For the War years she cites the debate between historians who see World War II as a watershed and those who see more continuity than change. In arguing that World War II created major changes in rural society, she is working against the most current historical literature. It may be that the war had a more profound impact on rural women than on women in general in American society.

Open Country could have benefited from a detailed discussion of the role of the farmer's wife. More and more she is becoming the farm accountant, running the computers and controlling the farm records. Computers can put her in command of data that will influence major short-term farm decisions and long-term financial strategies. The book would have been stronger if it had discussed in detail the influence of home demonstration (extension) agents and the National Homemakers of America Association on rural women's lives, or used the studies and oral histories edited by Eleanor Arnold.

Rural society is undergoing profound changes. The past role of women in this ongoing process must be studied to help policy makers understand the present and plan for the future. In her final chapter, "Women, Power, and Class in Open Country," Fink concludes that the verdict is still out on what roles women will have in rural communities in the future. But she argues that rural women have formed critical links with each other and are struggling to find meaning in their lives. Her book should be recommended reading for scholars of rural society, twentieth-century women's history, and midwestern studies.

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