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Book Review: Prairie Gothic: The Story of a West Texas Family

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Prairie Gothic: The Story of a West Texas Family.
 By John R. Erickson. Foreword by Elmer Kelton.
 Denton: University of North Texas Press, 2005.
 xv + 208 pp. Maps, photographs, references,
 index. \$40.00 cloth, \$16.95 paper.

The upper West Texas area is a huge region of the southern Great Plains. Including the Rolling Plains, the South Plains, the Texas Panhandle, and more, it is, except for Amarillo and Lubbock, mostly an empty country, characterized by cattle raising and wheat and cotton growing. Big operations with extensive fields and large pastures seem to dominate the agricultural economy. Partly as a result, rural populations, except for the big cities, are in decline, railroads are shutting down, county governments are going broke, and school districts are consolidating.

Despite all that, or maybe because of it, John R. Erickson can, and in this book does, trace his family roots back through five generations in West Texas. He himself grew up in Pampa in the Texas Panhandle; one of his parents grew up in Seminole on the South Plains, where a grandmother lived out her long life. Other rela-

tives lived in Shallowater near Lubbock and in Lubbock. Further back in time, relatives lived at Estacado, a community that no longer exists but was the first settlement on the Southern High Plains. Before Estacado others lived in the Fort Belknap area of Young County.

Moreover, Erickson's ancestors connect to some of the most famous events and personages in West Texas. They are, for example, associated with Cynthia Ann Parker, Peta Nocona (Comanche), and the battle of Pease River. They were with Paris Cox and others who settled an early Quaker colony high up on the Llano Estacado. They were involved with the notorious outlaw Tom Ross; with George Singer, one of the founders of Lubbock; and with Oliver Loving and Charles Goodnight of *Lonesome Dove* fame.

John R. Erickson, author of the *Hank the Cowdog* series, writes his family history with passion. The story is engaging, often surprising, and told with grace and dignity. In some ways, it is a story of everyman, of common folks struggling to make a living and to survive in a harsh land against difficult odds. In some ways, it is a stereotypical western tale with young cowboys, desperate outlaws, and deadly Indian raids. There are blizzards and droughts and rattlesnake bites. In some ways, it represents a grand, but personal, sweep of West Texas history. In every way, it is a fine book.

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