

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Great Plains Quarterly

Great Plains Studies, Center for

2006

Book Review: Childhood on the Farm: Work, Play, and Coming of Age in the Midwest

Elizabeth Hampsten

University of North Dakota

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly>



Part of the [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#)

Hampsten, Elizabeth, "Book Review: Childhood on the Farm: Work, Play, and Coming of Age in the Midwest" (2006). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 98.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/98>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Quarterly by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Childhood on the Farm: Work, Play, and Coming of Age in the Midwest. By Pamela Riney-Kehrberg. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2005. xi + 300 pp. Photographs, illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$34.95.

By “Midwest,” Pamela Riney-Kehrberg means the states of Illinois, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Iowa, and the eastern half of Nebraska and Kansas, and by child, “any dependent son or daughter, generally twenty-one or younger, regardless of physical maturity, who remained subject to his or her parents’ authority on the farm and in the home.” She explains having “chosen 1870 as my starting date” to avoid the Civil War, and “1920 as an ending date because of upheavals occurring in the years that followed” (the automobile, radio, economic depression).

Country life is supposed to be wholesome for children. Actual advantages include an appreciation of the environment (“We are home with the land, secure in the midst of nature’s bounty and in spite of its fury”), knowledge of farm animals, crops, and general farm management, and a sense of purpose in work. Disadvantages come with scant health care, little mention of sexuality either at home or school, and more of a tug between work and schooling than for city children. Farm children commonly skipped school to work, their years of schooling were fewer, and the level of teacher training lower than in towns and cities. As we think of it today, childhood, in short,

came later to the countryside than to urban centers, and in slightly modified patterns.

Childhood on the Farm is a meticulous study; its notes and bibliographies should be a valuable resource for any future consideration of childhood in North America. While children do not figure prominently in usual public histories, here their past emerges in family diaries, individual journals and letters, agricultural publications for and by children, and—for poor children less likely to write—the public records of such institutions as the Wisconsin State Public School, “an institution to which the state committed neglected and dependent children, which then indentured them to farm families throughout the state.”

A major pleasure this book provides are the many quotations from writings of young people. Herman Bretthorst, age fourteen, of Burr, Nebraska, wrote in 1916: “A circus came to Nebraska City a year ago last September and we decided to go. . . . We ate our dinner and then watched the parade. It was fine and consisted of a colored band, a horseback band, elephants, and wagons containing wild animals. We went to the performance, which I thought was good. I saw every wild animal and bird of which I had ever heard, excepting a camel and a giraffe. It surely pays to go to a circus.” And there are photographs of children with their pets, wheelbarrows, tea parties, and corn husking; a boy on top of a hay cart drawn by two goats looks as though he were having a good time and proud of it.

Pamela Riney-Kehrberg’s method is exhaustively informational, her tone unfailingly even-handed. Yet I’d like to know more about what she thinks of the contradictions she so clearly demonstrates: between, for instance, the high value the nation has placed on a farm upbringing, and the fact that the generation she documents fled to towns and cities, until “slightly less than 2% of people in the United States live on farms.” What effect did the generations she describes have on rural institutions in the Great Plains? Many readers of *Childhood on the Farm* will have experienced rural living, which, while taking place after 1920, and outside the geographical limits of the book, nevertheless

gives reading a pleasurable familiarity. Why, now, should we pay attention to this history so carefully described? A reader senses its importance, that it may indeed be crucial to our nation at this moment. I am one who wishes the author had engaged herself more directly with some of the social and political consequences of her insights.

ELIZABETH HAMPSTEN
Department of English
University of North Dakota