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Review of The Checkered Years: A Bonanza Farm Diary, 1884-88.

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BOOK REVIEWS

The Checkered Years: A Bonanza Farm Diary, 1884-88. By Mary Dodge Woodward. Edited by Mary Boynton Cowdrey. With a new introduction by Elizabeth Jameson. St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1989. Reprint (1937). Map, illustrations, notes, afterword. xxxvi + 265 pp. \$8.95.

Mary Dodge Woodward's keen observations, written in her diaries, serve to recreate days of bonanza farming in the Red River Valley of the North in the 1880s. Mary Dodge Woodward came to the Fargo area to live on a bonanza farm managed by her son Walter. A telescope extended Mary Dodge Woodward's view of the land stretching beyond the farmyard. "I stand at the east chamber—which is my observatory—with the spy glass everyday" (82).

This new edition includes an excellent introduction by Elizabeth Jameson that places the personal observations of Mary Dodge Woodward into the broader historical context of the bonanza farm boom era. Beyond this, Jameson presents an interesting analysis of the more personal side of Mary Dodge Woodward, a widow dependent upon her children yet quite independent in many ways.

Mary Dodge Woodward brings forth images of Dakota that are as meaningful today as they were in earlier times. Her descriptions capture the essence of rural Dakota: a land where weather is a constant concern, where nature offers up

the contrasts of breathtaking beauty and life-threatening elements, and where life revolves around the operation of the farm.

Almost every entry includes a comment about the weather: "A bright, pleasant day, with no wind" (26); "The ground was studded with diamonds of frost this morning" (108); "I have been thinking how this lovely day must affect those who lost father, mother, sisters, and brothers in the storm which has swept so many human beings off the face of the earth" (214). The grand scale of work for both men and women is also apparent. "The country is alive with seeders, drags, horses and men. It is so late that everybody is rushing. There are four plows running here, and two seeders which take every horse on the place, eighteen" (225). "Harvest has started. Now there will be no rest for man, woman, or beast until frost comes. . . . I baked seventeen loaves of bread today, making seventy-four loaves since last Sunday, not to mention twenty-one pies, and puddings, cakes, and doughnuts" (90). "I wear out a calico here in four weeks" (88). Her pride in their accomplishments is apparent, "How beautiful the wheat fields look, long avenues between the shocks, just as straight, one mile in length" (91).

The most intriguing part of the book is Mary Dodge Woodward herself. She did not seek out association with others. "I have not been to Fargo for three years, nor off the farm. . . . I

know the children are provoked because I am not like other people" (195).

This self-imposed isolation seems to characterize a creative, self-sustaining woman. Mary Dodge Woodward drew strength from her surroundings as well as her family. She recognized her position of dependence: "for the rest of my days I do not expect to be considered nor consulted as to where I should rather live" (213). Nevertheless, she remained undaunted, sustained by her insight and the wonders of the prairies.

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