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Review by Plains Folk, North Dakota's Ethnic History

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Plains Folk, North Dakota's Ethnic History. Edited by William C. Sherman and Playford V. Thorson. Fargo: North Dakota Institute of Regional Studies, 1988. Maps, illustrations, appendices, index. Preface + 355 pp. \$30.00.

Plains Folk essentially completes its 1983 predecessor, *Prairie Mosaic*, authored by sociologist William Sherman. The earlier work outlined the landscape of ethnic groups that composed North Dakota, the state with the highest proportion of foreign-born residents prior to the Second World War. For the sequel, Sherman teamed up with a handful of ethnic historians to give extended treatment to the same folks: "Yankees," Germans from Germany and eastern Europe, Scandinavians, Slavs, and those with a more limited presence.

The result makes for great drama. Migrants fleeing constraints of politics, economics, religion, etc., trade their circumstances for the coldest climate in the forty-eight contiguous states, the isolation of the 160-plus acre farms, and an unfamiliar status quo. Unlike the English speakers from America and Canada, survival for European immigrants required delicate balance between reliance upon old world customs and adoption of American social structures. *Plains Folk* documents the many folkways that survived time and transatlantic travel.

With these findings synthesized, a portrait of North Dakota social character emerges. Those earliest settlers, the Yankees, found little reward in the struggle to obtain a marginal existence in farming. They either moved to opportunities elsewhere or peopled emerging farm towns as merchants and civic leaders. Foreign immigrants settled in colonies surrounding those trade centers and operated in the relative freedom of America's most rural state. Immigrant farmers moved from farm to city for retirement or business opportunity, and brought many customs, communal celebrations, and religious observances. The Yankee's vague ethnic identity and willingness to move on provided fewer barriers to European practices than more established eastern American towns tolerated.

In completing maps of the settlement areas, the authors have relied on Sherman's earlier research that began in 1965. The maps of *Prairie Mosaic* are superior to those in the follow-up effort: six composite maps offer more precise depictions of each group's areal extent and allow comparisons by plotting those areas side by side. *Plains Folk* offers some refinements and corrections to the earlier work, for instance better maps for the German-Hungarian settlement areas, but these still suffer from their small size and insular depictions of the settlement area.

Because economics led the publisher to eliminate notes and a bibliography, the work successfully walks the fine line between academic and popular treatment. In-text references provide necessary reliability. The book is personalized through lavish illustrations from many state archives and personal collections.

The work makes an important contribution to scholarship on the American West by refuting models of this country as an ethnic melting pot. Ironically, settlement of North Dakota hinterlands marked closure of the American frontier, that line where historian Frederick Jackson Turner hypothesized that the most "American" of settlers would be found. *Plains Folk* gives ample evidence that the frontier could preserve ethnicity as much as extinguish it.

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