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Review of Land in Her Own Name: Women as Homesteaders in North Dakota and Agrarian Women: Wives and Mothers in Rural Nebraska, 1880-1940

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Land in Her Own Name: Women as Homesteaders in North Dakota. By H. Elaine Lindgren. Fargo: North Dakota Institute for Regional Studies, 1991. Photographs, appendix, notes, index. viii + 300 pp. \$25.00.

Agrarian Women: Wives and Mothers in Rural Nebraska, 1880-1940. By Deborah Fink. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992. Appendix, notes, references, index. xxiii + 242 pp. \$34.95 cloth, \$12.95 paper.

Much of the work studying women's role in the American West has served to establish the significance and celebrate the contributions of women to Western American history. Lindgren's book is such a work. Strikingly handsome, it portrays the lives of homesteading women in North Dakota from 1870 to about 1915 by providing excerpts from diaries, memoirs, and from personal interviews with homesteading women and their families, as well as a wealth of photographs and comparative statistics from land records. Lindgren's goals are to dispute the stereotypes of women pioneers and to argue that "women must be recognized as main characters in the settlement drama" (233), a view too often overlooked, she says, because women have been thought of only in secondary roles (iii).

Lindgren reports that in her sampling of nine counties, she found 4400 women had applied for federal land, an average of about 12% of all claimants through the three land grant programs, homestead, preemption, and timber culture. This significant number of women, she argues, cannot merely be considered exceptions to a rule of male land claimants.

Lindgren primarily focuses on the process these women went through to "prove up" their claims. Most were young single women (59% under age 25); most (89%) settled near family or friends (countering the notion that women suffered in intense isolation); most did prove up their claims (the percentage of women failing to prove up is comparable, even lower in some counties, to that of men); and the interviews and diaries suggest that the women, like the

men, developed a deep reverence for their own cultivated soil—all proving that these women, as she asserts, were capable, independent, and “initiators of action” (231).

Deborah Fink’s book *Agrarian Women*, a strong, thesis-driven study of rural women in Boone County, Nebraska, moves beyond a celebration of accomplishments. Fink, who focuses on the social and cultural influences surrounding the rural woman, challenges the popular assumption that an agrarian life gave women equality theretofore unknown.

She believes that Jefferson’s agrarian vision was “hinged on the subordination of women” (10), which the culture worked to preserve despite women’s growing resistance. Women on farms may indeed have worked “shoulder to shoulder” with the men in the fields as well as in their own yards, gardens, and homes, but they were still excluded from the farm’s primary decision making. Although the depression of the thirties made the farm’s economy even more dependent on the woman’s production (eggs, chickens, butter, for example), her work was still considered “assistance,” and she was “an adjunct to the farmer rather than being a farmer herself” (65).

Fink often cites the “Household” column of the *Nebraska Farmer*, which urged women to uphold traditional values by gladly accepting the challenge of rural life and working for the common good of the family rather than the self. Fink also illustrates how government agencies such as the Farm Security Administration made measured efforts to shore up the traditional women’s role. For example, one stipulation for farm loans was that the family pass a case worker’s examination, and Fink’s analysis of case worker notes shows that the wife who was deemed worthy was not only “supposed to be

satisfied with country life, enjoy working, care for her family,” but also “be subordinate to her husband” (112). Nevertheless, Fink’s stories of women’s lives from the 1930s show patterns of resistance: “As young women they left the farms and refused to marry farmers; as wives they had fewer children; as mothers they attempted to divert resources to their children rather than to the farm” (190).

Fink’s work also investigates a wide range of subjects: women’s attitudes toward marriage and childrearing, women and children as farm labor, violence toward women, alcoholism, divorce, birth control, sexuality and the silence that surrounded it, etc.

Both works give strong historical background—Lindgren on the various homesteading legislation, Fink on the agrarian ideal. They are fine additions to this field of study. Fink’s book, supported by an impressive variety of sources including interviews, memoirs and diaries, contemporary fiction, court records, census data, government reports, and numerous secondary sources analyzing women in the west, creates a convincing dialogue concerning women’s roles in rural America. Although Lindgren also provides ample statistics and personal glimpses of women’s lives, her study becomes a “slice of life” portrait of admirable women more than a compelling analysis, the kind of preliminary study that can be the basis for a provocative argument in the future. One strength of Lindgren’s book, however, is a stronger emphasis on ethnic diversity while Fink’s work does not include information from anyone who did not speak English as a first language.

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