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Review of *Life at Four Corners: Region, Gender, and Education in a German-Lutheran Community, 1868-1945* By Carol K. Coburn

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Life at Four Corners: Region, Gender, and Education in a German-Lutheran Community, 1868-1945. By Carol K. Coburn. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1992. Maps, illustrations, photographs, introduction, conclusion, notes on sources, notes, bibliography, index. xii + 227 pp. \$29.95.

In recent years, the number of German-American community and ethnic studies has grown considerably, yet surprisingly few have focused on small rural villages, a significant absence when considering the extensive German immigrant settlement of farmlands in the United States during the nineteenth century. Carol Coburn's *Life at Four Corners*, an examination of a rural German-Lutheran settlement at Block Corners, Kansas, helps to fill that void, contributing to a fuller understanding of the variety of German-American experiences.

Block Corners provides an ideal setting in which to study the factors that assisted in the formation and maintenance of a close-knit German-Lutheran community. As a small farming community with a homogeneous northern German population, Block Corners's ethnic character was largely reinforced by its relative isolation and its affiliation with the conservative Missouri Synod, which advocated maintenance of the German language and adherence to specific cultural and religious values, including prescriptions regarding acceptable male and female behaviors. It is within this context that Coburn examines the education of four generations of residents. She uses the term *education* "in its broadest sense to include the acquisition of cultural knowledge, socialization, and the transmission of beliefs and values" (p. 3). Concentrating on the roles played by the church, school, family, and the outside world, Coburn shows how these influences reinforced the essential German-Lutheran character of the community. Only as the values of the outside world intruded, including the outmigration and return of younger persons and the impact of World

War I, did Block Corners's identity and character begin to change.

The strength of this work is Coburn's focus on the way in which boys and girls were socialized into the community and on the roles men and women played in sustaining their households, their community, and their ethno-religious identity and culture. Furthermore, she has highlighted and offered insight into the German-Lutheran family, a neglected element in many German-American studies. The story of Block Corners's residents is particularly engaging when Coburn draws on individuals, recollections, and anecdotes that illustrate her points, such as first-generation midwife Gesche Mahnken Block and her ties to the informal networks established among the women.

Although the book spans a long interval of time, 1868 to 1945, Coburn is more successful in analyzing and documenting the later period, in part because of more accessible or adequate census data. An area she might have explored further was the availability of land and the strategies families and households used to hold on to it. This issue is mentioned briefly, but as colonial community studies have shown, land inheritance patterns and family approaches for holding onto or acquiring lands became increasingly important as land shortages appeared, a situation later Block Corners generations faced. Despite these limitations, Coburn has contributed to the field of German-American ethnic history, offering a point of comparison with other rural and urban studies, particularly regarding the family.

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