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Review of *Prairie University: A History of the University of Nebraska* By Robert E. Knoll

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BOOK REVIEWS

Prairie University: A History of the University of Nebraska. By Robert E. Knoll. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995. Preface, black and white photographs, notes, sources, index. xviii + 223 pp. \$40.00.

Institutional histories are often dull and lifeless—but not this one. From its preface to its final chapter celebrating the university's 125th year, this impressive history of the University of Nebraska entertains with colorful vignettes of its faculty, staff, and administrative leaders. With candor, curmudgeons are called curmudgeons, the less than able are identified, and the irascible remain irascible in the story's able telling.

Students of higher education will find this a rich study. Nebraska alumni will respond to its anecdotes with vivid memories, and many readers will enjoy the lively, sometimes opinionated analyses. All will find it a detailed but spirited review of the events, policies, politics, and people that transformed a fledgling prairie university into the major research university it is today.

Professor Knoll alerts us in his preface that his account reflects the opinions, judgments, and commitment of an alumnus, scholar, and long-time faculty member. All the richer for that, his book comes to life as his varied cast of players act out their roles and leave their imprints on the university.

Clearly, the university in each period of its history shares regional and national experiences. The "Cult of Aspiration," so much a part of the university in its early years, was shared by other developing universities; the German witch hunts of 1917-18 scarred many campuses; the obsession with football is no Cornhusker monopoly. On the other hand, few state universities had to contend with a

William Jennings Bryan, whose populist influence could prevent the Carnegie pension plan from being adopted or a Student Center from being built because it "smells too much of Rockefeller's money."

Major themes such as student life (from *in loco parentis* in the 1890s to the freedoms of the 1990s), curricular changes (from the traditional classic curriculum of the nineteenth century to today's smorgasbord of offerings), and the transformation from a teaching institution to a comprehensive land grant institution emphasizing both teaching and research are traced through the years. The multiplication of programs and colleges and new organizations featuring the televised course offerings and outreach programs of the 1990s are all explained. The history of these developments is the story of a state university from its early days when only the few took advantage of this "channel of opportunity" to the days, as Mencken presciently observed, when going to college has become "a sort of social necessity."

Academic heroes and heroines are honored, other participants dismissed with appropriate comment. Each generation of acrimonious scholarly conflicts, bitter personal feuds, debate over philosophies of education, turf battles, and financial grievances are carefully chronicled. And any reader eager to learn what it was like and what it took to create and live in a university far from major population or power centers yet participate in the historic and cultural events of the times will find the answers in this stimulating book.

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