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Contented among Strangers: Rural German-Speaking Women and Their Families in the Nineteenth-Century Midwest. By Linda Schelbitzki Pickle. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996. Bibliography, index. xii + 311 pp. \$49.95 cloth, \$15.95 paper.

Here is an important study that joins the growing number of histories of rural American women. Its strengths are many. First, it uncovers the complex and multilayered worlds of German-speaking immigrants; Linda Schelbitzki Pickle, a professor of German and Foreign Languages, uses her linguistic dexterity to unveil a rich cache of German-language diaries, letters, and memoirs, delivering it to North American readers in finely-crafted English narrative. The work is also remarkably sensitive to German immigrant diversity; although the immigrant groups hail from five Midwest states—Illinois, Missouri, Iowa, Kansas, and Nebraska—they represent both Dreisziger Germans and “Germans from Russia,” religious and communist groups, liturgical and sectarian church members, individualistic and communitarian settlers, and chain and group migrants. An even more important aspect of the book is its detailed and empathetic biographical reconstruction of dozens of believable flesh and blood German-language women. Pickle’s locating them in the hidden worlds of family and household, the informal social networks of the ethnic community, and the limited public roles as medical *Braeucher* and marriage *Fuersprecher* brings fresh detail to the study of immigrant women.

The book, however, is more than simple narrative; it pursues the controversial argument that these women were “contented

among strangers.” This contentedness was a mental state not rooted in equality. Indeed, the author is insistent that overarching the culturally diverse “Germans” was a conservative, self-denying patriarchal household that provided women with little opportunity in the public sphere and, as dozens of proverbial sayings indicate, dubious cultural status. However discriminatory this might be, the author argues, women found the arrangement to their advantage. They were like the author’s own grandparents who are introduced early in the book as exhibiting both “the separation of [gendered] spheres” and an “essentially harmonious life together.” Women worked in “private worlds” where they performed important direct and indirect economic roles and made crucial “contributions” to frontier life. Then, too, because the domestic sphere was “shielded” from assimilative pressures and became the “core” of German self-identification, these women assumed central roles as the custodians of German ethnicity; they preserved the language, maintained German foodways, and told the stories of *Pelznickel* and, no doubt, the gentle terror of the *Polterabend*. In the end, the conservative nature of both household and community prevented “cultural alienation,” the bane of frontier experience.

This approach is sure to raise debate. Most problematic will be the appearance of the author’s having privileged ethnic persistence over gender equality. Some readers will wonder whether Pickle’s clear intention of demonstrating a German presence in the Midwest and drawing “common patterns” of German experience has overshadowed the book’s approach to gender. Some will be disappointed that quantitative data are used to mark ethnic and linguistic patterns rather than document fertility, marriage, and life-cycle events that could have served to bolster the author’s thesis. Then, too, the very theme of “contentedness” will be controversial: where most recent scholars have dwelt on themes of gender construction and symbols of resistance, Pickle has set out on the difficult path of documenting “how a woman felt about her life in America”:

women in this text are happy, resilient, contented, uncomplaining, and cheerful, or striving to be. The idea that "contentedness" was worth the "cultural conservatism in gender relations" may not sit well with feminist historians.

This should not detract from the book's importance. The complex and diverse life-worlds of German-speaking women as presented here will add to the growing knowledge of immigrant women's experience. The documentation of the domestic side of frontier life will be a welcome addition to the growing works within the category of the "New Western History."

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