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Review of *Home on the Range: A Century on the High Plains* By James R. Dickenson

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Home on the Range: A Century on the High Plains. By James R. Dickenson. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1996. Photographs, index. 304 pp. \$14.95.

After reading the introduction to this book, I expected a quaint family history joined with some attempt at relating the specifics of the author's family and personal experience to the larger context of Kansas and US history. I found that and much more. The first chapters set up a good model for family history—much better than most local histories or genealogies prepared by enthusiastic amateurs. But then

James Dickenson is an accomplished journalist with over thirty years of journalistic experience including staffing the *Washington Post*; what should I have expected? By the half-way point, I realized that this is a very well written narrative, cultural history. By the end, I was inserting the bibliographic information into the "required texts" section of next semester's undergraduate American West syllabus. This book not only lived up to Jim Lehrer's and Gary Wills' glowing back cover praises, but exceeded them. As Dickenson aptly recounts, "This book is about life in a rural, wheat farming community in Western Kansas, a way of life that is gradually disappearing as the country becomes industrialized and urbanized." In fact, it seemed an apt depiction of High Plains culture generally during the period between 1888 and the present.

I grew up on a Texas Southern Plains cotton farm a generation or two after the author. Yet, in McDonald, Kansas, I heard Dickenson's maternal grandmother recounting stories very similar to those of my own grandmother. My little town possessed counterparts to the farmers, townsmen, agricultural practices, and youthful shenanigans of Dickenson's, and I suspect so do the farm towns that dot the Great Plains from Texas to Saskatchewan and, judging from my father-in-law's regaling, as far east as the corn fields of southeastern Iowa. Dickenson does a wonderful job capturing those elements of rural culture in its High Plains setting, which, as he warns throughout the book, may be disappearing as increased agricultural industrialization leads to declining demand for farm labor. This in turn decreases the need for community service sectors, both exacerbating the Plains population hemorrhage into either the urban islands of the West or the humid cities east of the 98th meridian.

Home on the Range has some faults. It relies too heavily on Walter Prescott Webb's barbed wire, six shooter, windmill matrix to explain Anglo-American settlement. It discusses in an unsophisticated manner the role that evangelicalism played in shaping the rural

Plains world view. The last several chapters adopt a tone reminiscent of *Washington Post* feature stories—good journalism, but lacking the luster of the earlier material. Finally, despite the apparent craftsmanship of the whole narrative, the conclusion is abrupt and disappointingly anti-climactic. Still, this is a book well worth reading.

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