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**Review of *"They Treated Us Just Like Indians": The Worlds of Bennett County, South Dakota* By Paula L. Wagoner**

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*Minnesota Historical Society*

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The land is at the core and “in charge” of the overlapping cultures of the Lakota and whites of Bennett County, South Dakota. The challenging Plains environment is a major element of personal and group identity, a force that “measures one’s worth.” In her ethnology derived from fieldwork in the county between 1993-1996 and in 2001, Paula Wagoner had expected to find sharp social contrasts between groups. As she discovered, residents had more in common than they might wish to admit.

Fear of loss of the land and the identity rooted to it are behind most tensions and disputes between whites and Indians and deeply connected to county history. Racial categories—fullblood Lakota, white, and mixed-blood—are the products of many social forces. In Bennett County mixedbloods are powerful due to their ability to maintain culturally flexible positions. Wagoner proposes that their power derives from collusions and interactions of people at the social margins who have an ability to access, identify with, and reinterpret symbols of the other groups.

She demonstrates this by using snapshots of daily life, especially moments of crisis where social categories come into play and groups must articulate their social identities. Homecoming events began with a protest march against use of Indian sports mascots, threatening to disrupt the homecoming coronation and bonfire. A weekend homecoming parade resolved tensions. The legal aftermath when a non-Indian rancher killed a Lakota man brought deep concern over issues of sovereignty and fairness peaked when outsiders threatened a boycott of local business. Tensions abated after a change of venue and the selection of a fair jury resulted in a conviction and long sentence. Wagoner’s final snapshot is the Wild Horse Butte, followed by the combined Powwow Parade, Bennett County Fair, and Rodeo in which there could be distinct but unproblematic categories and a celebration of diversity in a small regional context.

Wagoner’s volume is exquisite ethnology, providing insight into issues of racial interaction in a contemporary social setting that

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usually is contextualized only in socioeconomic terms by those with social and political agendas. There is real understanding here. Living in South Dakota for more than two decades and sometimes working in the same area, I found reading her volume bringing back many memories, fond and otherwise, and a feeling that she truly knows Bennett County's people. In the end, she asks and answers the most pertinent question: "Will the prairie remain at the core of the community? Of course—she is its heart."

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