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Review of *Children of the Western Plains: The Nineteenth Century Experience* By Marilyn Irvin Holt

Rosemary G. Palmer
Boise State University

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Children of the Western Plains: The Nineteenth Century Experience. By Marilyn Irvin Holt. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, Publisher, 2003. x + 224 pp. Photographs, notes, bibliography, index. \$26.00.

The small but growing collection of literature on children in the nineteenth-century American West has been expanded with Marilyn Holt's book about youngsters who migrated to the Great Plains during the 1800s. *Children of the Western Plains* examines the attention adults paid to young settlers as well as these youngsters' own sense of involvement in the Plains experience. Recognizing the diversity of residents, Holt considers the lives of native-born white, European immigrant, and African American children who contributed to the settlement process. Included in these numbers are military, missionary, and government employee dependents. The author examines young settlers' experiences within the categories of perceptions and expectations, travel and settlement, community and family life, education, work and play, and mortality.

Whether they lived on the Great Plains during pre-territorial, territorial, or early statehood periods, youngsters received attention from adults who often tried to replicate life back home. Immigrants and African Americans attempted to preserve their own traditions and customs even if they lived in a dominantly white American town. Sometimes whole communities relocated together, and bigotry and racism varied among the settlements. Children's lives revolved around home—whether they lived in dugouts, soddies, or adobe dwellings—and church and community families. Adults built schools, organized Sunday schools, and provided church and social opportunities. Education emphasized basic skills and literacy and varied from home schooling to classroom instruction, depending upon population. Early settlement children learned to work, and they found time to play. They also knew droughts and blizzards, “quitters and stickers,” family crises and separations, illness and death.

Young people wrote diaries, letters, and journals, and reminiscences later as adults. Through these primary documents and a number of contemporary photographs, Holt paints a picture of childhood on the Plains. She does not mention, however, how many primary sources she analyzed. How many of these records were actually written by children? How many were reminiscences with a “child-turned-adult” perspective? From the notes section it appears the author used at least sixteen diaries and letters and sixty-nine reminiscences. She also includes several secondary references that deal with overland migration and frontier families in the Plains and Western states, though she overlooked *Children's Voices from the Trail* (2002), which examines the child's perspective of the westward movement and might have been useful to her study. Even so, *Children of the Western Plains* is a worthwhile addition to the growing collection of literature about youngsters in the nineteenth-century American West.

ROSEMARY G. PALMER
Department of Literacy
Boise State University