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## Review of *The Middle West: Its Meaning in American Culture*, by James R. Shortridge

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when their off farm hours are low. In contrast, 75 percent of the women surveyed said they would keep their off-farm jobs regardless of economic necessity" (p. 8). But the woman with the computer business and the part-time job at the post office reported: "Farm women go through the same stress as farm men because the farm means co-working. There's no way that a farm is run by one person. The man from the debt review board wanted our records. And he said to me, 'You realize that usually when I get through these records it's mainly the wife's fault because she hasn't understood—when times are tough she hasn't tightened her belt'" (p. 90).

We are left wondering whether women are pursuing models of economic diversification, harvesting opportunities for themselves during a period of dramatic change, or whether, once more, women are just doing whatever they can to "help out" when the day, or the season, or the era puts extraordinary demands on the lives of farmers, in North America and everywhere. **Katherine Jensen**, *Department of Sociology, University of Wyoming*.

**The Middle West: Its Meaning in American Culture.** James R. Shortridge. Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1989. Maps, charts, illustrations, notes, and bibliography. xiv + 201 pp. \$25.00 cloth (ISBN 0-7006-0475-8).

Fuzzy words facilitate colloquial discourse. They are useful because we all think we know what they mean, even though we would not be able to agree on a standard definition. For example, we all are sure we understand such words as "rural" or "place" or "landscape," but we come a cropper when we try to define them sharply and precisely enough to enable us to use them as analytical tools. Regions are equally fuzzy, and perhaps they are best left that way. Everyone has a sense of New England, or the South, or the West, but when we try to define these areas precisely we realize that they have different connotations for different people.

James R. Shortridge has cheerfully pursued the will-o'-the-wisp of trying to describe the "idea" of the Middle West in a book that was given the prestigious John Brinckerhoff Jackson Prize of the Association of American Geographers in 1990. He argues that a careful reading of the kinds of popular publications that are indexed in the *Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature* can reveal the personality and image of the region, what it originally meant to Americans, and how this meaning has changed over time. Attempts to find meaning in places and things currently seem to be fashionable. Such efforts can be entertaining mental exercises, but all too often they tell us more about the author and his or her mindset than they tell us about the place or thing.

Shortridge believes that the Midwest has been idealized as an area of pastoral virtue between the technological East, with all its attendant urban-industrial evils, and the raw unstable ebullience of the frontier in the sparsely peopled West; the East is old and stodgy, and the West is young and brash, but the Midwest, like the Mother Bear's chair in the story of Goldilocks, is just right. Shortridge complains that this popular perception of the region has conveniently ignored the very existence of Chicago, Detroit, and its other major urban-industrial centers. The status of the region, he says, rose rapidly after 1900, plummeted between the two world wars, but has risen again on a wave of nostalgia in the last decade or so.

Shortridge has relied heavily, perhaps too heavily, on an article by one Charles M. Harger, "a respected journalist from Abilene, Kansas" (p. 18) for his insistence that the name "Middle West" originally was applied only to the middle Plains states of Nebraska and Kansas, but later (p. 105) he slips and admits that the name was also applied to Ohio before 1900. He supports his belief that "the core of what is considered the Middle West now . . . has returned to its birthplace on the Kansas-Nebraska plains" (p. 10) by citing the results of a survey of 1,941 (p. 75) or 1,933 (p. 84) college students in thirty-two states; an alternative interpretation might suggest these results are merely another manifestation of the widely publicized geographical ignorance of American undergraduates.

The author uses maps mainly as illustrations rather than as analytical tools. He makes little attempt to explore and explain some of the intriguing discrepancies between the maps on pages 85, 86, 93, and 98, and he is astonishingly uncurious about a map (p. 93) that shows the heart of the Midwest stretching southeastward from Minot, North Dakota, and pinching out near Sioux Falls, South Dakota. **John Fraser Hart**, *Department of Geography, University of Minnesota*.

**The Political Economy of Manitoba.** Jim Silver and Jeremy Hull eds. Regina: Canadian Plains Research Centre, 1990. Graphs, tables, and notes. xxiii + 340 pp. \$28.00 paper (ISBN 0-88977-059-X).

*The Political Economy of Manitoba* analyses the evolution of social, economic, and political marginalization concomitant with a wide range of struggle and conflict experienced by the people of the province. Its chapters provide significant empirical evidence of the nature and scope of this evolution. Underlying objectives of the contributions to this book are the support of activists in their popular struggles and the stimulation of progressive innovations in political policy. Two main perspectives are used in presentation. Historical analysis is used to show the origins and