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**Review of *Life at Four Corners: Religion, Gender, and Education in a German-Lutheran Community, 1868-1945* by Carol K. Coburn**

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## BOOK REVIEWS

**Life at Four Corners: Religion, Gender, and Education in a German-Lutheran Community, 1868-1945.** Carol K. Coburn. Rural America Series. Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1992. xii + 227 pp. Maps, photographs, and references. \$29.95.

As historians of immigration have turned their sights from the cities to the countryside, they have discovered "ethnic islands" which retained Old World cultures to a greater degree than urban immigrant clusters. In this thoughtful study, Carol Coburn shows that the village of Block, Kansas was an extreme case in its isolation, homogeneity, and the durability of its ethnic culture. Therefore, while Block may not be representative, its past provides an opportunity to study the mechanisms by which an ethnic island maintained a distinctive way of life within mainstream American culture.

Coburn argues that the German Lutheran culture of Block's settlers was transmitted to succeeding generations through "educational networks": church, school, family, and the outside world. She argues that in Block, first settled in the 1860s, primarily by Germans from Hanover, German culture was used to preserve the Lutheran religion, which was conservative, isolationist, and patriarchal. This symbiosis of religion and culture was reinforced in the parochial school, which existed primarily to give moral training. A hub of social activity, schools reinforced family and community values in ways that were "pervasive, authoritarian, traditional, and total" (p. 80). Habits of private life were central to the shape of public community. Family members filled prescriptive roles that echoed extended families of the peasant past. The practice of endogamy and family rituals of birth, baptism, marriage, and even Sunday dinner spun networks of belonging. At church, school, and home, the residents of Block created an insular community with an uncanny resemblance to their European peasant past.

The book's insightful analysis of gender shows how larger structures of authority penetrated to the core of private life. The religious experience was deeply gender rooted; males governed the church under the direction of the pastor, and men and women sat on different sides of the church. It was not until the third generation came of age in the 1930s that women were active in church affairs. In the school, lower-paid female assistants aided the male teacher who was the role model for the children. At home, women created informal networks that served as a bulwark against male control.

Block did not emerge from its ethnic cocoon until World War I. The market work of men, women's work as domestic servants in nearby towns and cities, and the expansion of transportation and communication networks began to break down the barriers the community had built against the world. In the book's final chapter, Coburn shows how Germany's role in World War I forced community members to sever ties with the old country and affirm their American identity by promoting patriotic activities. But it would be several more decades before English replaced German as the community's primary language, and even then it was seen by many as the abandonment of German culture itself.

The central argument of arrested assimilation could have been strengthened by more attention to the behavior of the immigrants in the larger market economy. For example, the study lacks detailed information about farming practices and land transmission, which are central issues to rural history. Were Block's farmers yeomen, keeping the family on the land, or entrepreneurs, like the archetypal mobile Yankee? As historians of immigrants in the midwest such as Jon Gjerde and Kathleen Conzen have shown us, it is in the interaction of the local culture with the larger economy and society that the true mettle of such a culture can be measured. By exposing the processes by which an ethnic culture can be sustained, this book makes a solid contribution to our knowledge of rural community. **Susan Rugh**, *Department of History, St. Cloud University*.