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May 1997

Review of *The Minds of the West: Ethnocultural Evolution in the Rural Middle West, 1830-1917* by Jon Gjerde

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Buenker, John D., "Review of *The Minds of the West: Ethnocultural Evolution in the Rural Middle West, 1830-1917* by Jon Gjerde" (1997). *Great Plains Research: A Journal of Natural and Social Sciences*. 328.
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The Minds of the West: Ethnocultural Evolution in the Rural Middle West, 1830-1917. Jon Gjerde. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997. xii+426 pp. Tables, figures, notes, and index. \$39.95 cloth {ISBN 0-8078-2312-0}.

In his paradigm-shifting essay, Frederick Jackson Turner conceptualized a frontier West in which freedom and opportunity inexorably invested millions of European immigrants with a universal American identity. Revisiting the same phenomenon a century later, Jon Gjerde demonstrates convincingly that “the juxtaposition of cultural patterns—the minds—and

environmental possibilities in a region diverse in cultural traditions and rich in resources—the West—. . . was replete with tension, conflict, even paradox.” Moreover, he challenges the simplistic notion of undifferentiated “Americanization” with the brilliantly nuanced concepts of “ethnicization,” “complementary identity,” and “layered allegiances.” Although briefly acknowledging that these complex interactions between cultural patterns and economic opportunities and constraints are fundamental to U.S. history, Gjerde carefully confines his paradigm-building to the interplay between Yankee and European “minds” in the upper Midwest during the nineteenth century, both because such activities were “magnified and isolated there” and because that region has served as a “metaphor for opportunity in the white American mind,” a place, he argues “where cultural differences were muted and where the concept of the American people was forged.” It is that intensive focus that is simultaneously the book’s greatest strength and the source of its one significant shortcoming.

For both Yankees and immigrants, the West as metaphor was a reversible dilemma. To the former, the same qualities of freedom and opportunity that virtually guaranteed the amalgamation of diverse ethnicities into an undifferentiated American identity also provided immigrants with the conditions necessary to perpetuate their own sub-societies and sub-cultures. For Europeans, the very environment that facilitated the transplanting of Old World institutions in fertile soil also empowered individuals to dissent and defect. In short, the West was not a fixed template transforming immigrants into Americans, rather a changing landscape that offered a variety of opportunities.

In this open-ended environment, Gjerde painstakingly explains, Yankee and European minds, infused with diametrically opposed world views, clashed, compromised and changed over time. The former saw societal bonds as contractual; the latter as corporatist. The former regarded family and community as launching pads for individual life courses; the latter as seamless webs that enmeshed individuals in complex strands of unequal status and reciprocal obligations and privileges. The former favored an activist government and public education to promote “progress”; the latter was suspicious of both, looking to family, church, parochial schools, fraternal associations, and ethnocultural politics to diffuse state power. Gjerde’s carefully crafted typology significantly enhances understanding of the bitter ethnocultural clashes between ritualists and pietists that rent Midwestern society and politics in the 1880s and 1890s, as well as of the pressures that produced ethnicization, layered identities, and complementary nationalities.

To this reviewer's regret, Gjerde ends his detailed analysis in the mid-1890s, jumping to a brief epilogue on coercive Americanization during World War I. In so doing, he forsakes a chance to explore what occurred in the minds of Midwesterners during the Progressive Era, when state governments embarked upon business regulation, tax equalization, labor and welfare legislation, and initiatives that seemed to have greater political support among Euro-Americans than among Yankees. This reviewer sincerely hopes that Gjerde will carry his analysis into the twentieth century in the very near future. **John D. Buenker**, *University of Wisconsin-Parkside*