
by Lawrence H. Larsen

ix + 212 pages, tables, essay on sources, index.

Like Rodney Dangerfield, state histories do not get much respect. Often written as textbooks for elementary-level students, they sometimes make little original contribution. Citing one in a scholarly work seems to be considered just one step above footnoting an encyclopedia article. But there are notable exceptions, and this book, last of an ambitious multi-volume project by outstanding scholars, is one of them.

Larsen is especially an urban historian, an appropriate choice to interpret a state with the majority of its population in two border cities, Kansas City and St. Louis, which themselves spil people over into two other states. Kansas City and St. Louis, Larsen notes, “disdained each other and tended to be dismissive of everything between them.” But they were home to big industry and changes, and this book is outstanding in documenting those. Examples are the treatments of the disastrous Pruett-Igoe public housing project in St. Louis, the ambitious restoration of the two urban union railroad stations, and the changes in demographics and image. Always there is a wry insight, and many condensed, well-crafted summary statements. Kansas City, Larsen notes, lost its old sex and frontier flavor in the late twentieth century for better, but also for worse. “In trying to become simply another modern big city, Kansas City lost confidence and promotional zeal. Without the sinful aspects, the postwar culture was bland, promoted in a self-conscious and artificial way” (p. 69). Such conclusions are well and clearly documented using primary sources.

Larsen has a special challenge in that his time period has been yet little written about by scholars. It is also so near that it is difficult to get perspective on what events will be regarded as especially significant. However, Larsen does well at pioneering. For a brief book, this one is broad in its scope, treating everything from the impact of air conditioning and Corps of Engineers dams, to the Times Beach pollution case, the rise of the Ozark country music centers, the emergence of historic preservation, urban riots, and changes in air service. It is strong in statistics, and they are presented both usefully and attractively. Perhaps social history receives a bit less play in relation to the political and economic than it might. One could think of alternatives to organizing the last part of the book, which looks at very recent Missouri history through the perspective of gubernatorial administrations. But this work is always vivid and compelling and should be a revelation to those who might think regional history becomes homogenized and predictable in the modern era.

Larsen is a “participant observer,” and resident of the state for most of the period about which he writes. He notes, “While residing in Missouri …, hardly makes me all-seeing, it has helped immeasurably in acquiring a general knowledge and placing a sharper focus on many events and developments.” It shows Missouri has been fortunate in its histories, which have been many and extensive since Louis Houk’s 1908 work set a standard of thoroughness. The “essay on sources” in this book and the others in this series are an outstanding guide to further study of a state whose history is made a rich and present resource by the seriousness with which it is taken.

Reviewed by Craig Miner, professor of history, Wichita State University.
Cities on the Plains: The Evolution of Urban Kansas
by James R. Shortridge
xvi + 380 pages, illustrations, notes, bibliography, index.
Lawrence, Kans.: University Press of Kansas, cloth $45.95.

A four-hundred-page book about cities in Kansas? I have to confess some initial skepticism when I first learned about James R. Shortridge's latest work. Kansas is better known for wheat and beef than it is for cities. The state's largest urbanized area—three-fourths of it, at least—is located east of the Missouri border. Denver and Oklahoma City, both influential metropolises, also lie beyond the state's boundaries in other directions.

What do states have to do with cities? Shortridge had to face this question to explain his approach. He engages in some weak theorizing about urban systems in the first chapter, but soon abandons it. His strategy, which I believe succeeds, is to retell the unique history of Kansas in a way that makes urbanization a natural part of the process. Kansas may not be a state best known for its cities, but it has dozens of them—118 by Shortridge's count that have ever fulfilled the U.S. Census Bureau's official definition of a city as any place with more than twenty-five hundred inhabitants. Not all of those places have published histories, but many do, and Shortridge has ambitiously mined the literature to extract what is salient about each one.

Kansans will find this book a rich source of information about individual places and an interesting overview of what made some cities grow while others languished. The nearly one-hundred pages of endnotes and references should dispel any notion that Shortridge is the first to study the subject. One is impressed with the general fascination that generations of Kansas scholars have had with their cities. The author's reliance on journal articles, local histories, and various state and industry reports is a good strategy for examining individual cities, although the role of larger institutional contexts tends to get slighted. For example, I was disappointed that no use was made of the Arkansas Valley Town Company records that are archived at the Kansas State Historical Society. That company was responsible for platting nearly two dozen townsites along the Santa Fe railroad west of Emporia in the 1870s.

Why did urbanization play such a large role in the growth of Kansas? In addition to the base of agriculture and trade so important to cities on the Plains, Kansas was uncommonly well endowed with mineral resources. The exploitation of coal, oil, lead, zinc, salt, and natural gas deposits attracted labor and capital to the state. Investment in cities was stimulated as a result. Shortridge chronicles the booms and busts in these industries, contrasting the excesses of optimism following every "gusher" with the inevitably longer periods of decline that eventually would follow.

This is a fascinating book that should engage the attention of Kansas scholars as well as the general public. It is an impressive companion volume to several of Shortridge's early works, including Peopling the Plains (University Press of Kansas, 1995).

Reviewed by John C. Hudson, professor of geography, Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois.
If We Could Only Come to America ...  
A Story of Swedish Immigrants in the Midwest

by Robert J. Nelson


With a box of old family papers as his starting point, Robert Nelson gives this history of his Swedish immigrant family both charm and substance. His maternal grandparents were the first generation of his family to emigrate. Grandfather Gustaf Adolf Carlson, was a Swedish farmer who left Sweden in 1867 following the trail of an older brother who had emigrated in 1856. Gustaf settled in Illinois, where he met Frederika Charlotta Johnson. Frederika, one of seven children of a Swedish tenant farmer, was the first of her family to emigrate. Her emigration documents identify her as a maid or farmhand. In 1869 thirty-two-year-old Gustaf married Frederika, then twenty years of age, and the newlyweds set off for Kansas. Gustaf homesteaded eighty acres in Saline County, and built a soddy for their first home. Ten years later, after Gustaf had proved his claim, this was replaced by the frame house in which they raised their six children.

In 1897 the last immigrant in Nelson’s family arrived in America: Oskar Fridolf Nilsson, the author’s father. Oskar was only sixteen when he left Sweden, also following an older brother. Oskar too traveled to Illinois and attended school there to learn English. He was naturalized in 1902 at age twenty-one and Americanized his name to Oscar Nelson. In 1917 he rented the Kansas farm of the widow Frederika Johnson. A year later he married the Johnson’s daughter, Cora Ida Josephine, and settled into the frame house to farm and raise his son, Robert, the author of this book. A genealogy chart (p. viii) illustrates the family connections.

Nelson divides the narrative of his family’s history into seven chapters, carefully sketching the conditions in Sweden that made emigration a positive solution to social and economic problems of the “Old Country.” Chapters on “The New Land” and “The Homestead” explain the attractiveness of open farmlands to the immigrants, and, at the same time, describe the difficulties farmers faced in sustaining themselves through droughts and economic pressures in America. As he describes “The New Americans” and his own youth in Kansas, Nelson provides a portrait of middle America in the depression years: the simple life, the family values, the role of work and church, and disappointment of the new life not living up to the full expectations of the immigrants. Each chapter is well illustrated using, for example, copies of emigration documents, a plat of the farm and its lease to Oscar Nelson, and photographs of the Nelsons. He effectively melds research into general and local history, genealogy, church and school records, and contemporary migration scholarship to round out the context for his family’s story.

Nelson subscribes to the “melting pot” theory of assimilation. He states in the preface that the family papers helped him “understand fully why I came to be born a Midwesterner, why after centuries in the Old Country my family and thousands of families like mine had ceased to be Swedish and became Americans” (p. ix). In his conclusion he decides that this “immigrant forest, that woodland of family trees” (p. 127) brought a flexibility and creativity that “helped create a different kind of society” (p. 128) in America. Interestingly enough, he indicates that his family had only limited connection with the Swedish “mecca” of Lindsborg (p. 50), which has retained its Swedish customs, food, and orientation to this day. Would a closer association with Lindsborg have affected his attitude?

Nevertheless, one need not be Swedish to enjoy this thoughtful, often poignant picture of family life in Kansas. It is, above all, a story of likeable individuals coping, and we respect them for that. Nelson provides a good bibliography and a workable index. He omits notes, but they would have been helpful to readers who would like to conduct their own family investigations. This reads well, by itself, and would be an excellent supplement to any class on Kansas history.

Reviewed by Eleanor L. Turk, professor emerita, Indiana University East.
Not Just Any Land: A Personal and Literary Journey into the American Grasslands

by John Price

xi + 225 pages, notes, bibliography, index.
Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004, cloth $20.00.

Even as the world around us grows increasingly complex and small towns are abandoned by younger generations seeking the sophisticated trappings of big-city life, still a small place in our beings calls to us to return to a home, to find that place in the world that draws us in and makes us feel stable and safe, "a part of something greater.

In 1994, moved by the previous year's flood destruction, and later regeneration, of the natural areas along midwestern rivers, Iowa native John Price felt driven to embark on "a personal and literary journey to better understand [his] relationship to home" (p. x). The resulting Not Just Any Land was Price's effort "to bear witness to the beginning of one writer's conscious commitment to place" (p. x)—in this case, the grasslands of the Midwest.

"Altogether," Price writes of the grasslands at the beginning of his journey in South Dakota, "no other American biome has suffered such an enormous loss of life with so little protest. In fact, the presence of Wall Drug just down the street with its severed buffalo heads, cigar-store Indians, and quick-draw video games confirmed that the demise of the grassland ecosystems... was and still is the occasion for some grand celebrating" (p. 9).

In the opening chapter Price sets the stage for his coming ecological and literary education. What follows are four chapters, each committed to his interviews with a different midwestern writer "born and raised in grass country, urban or rural, [who] remains by choice" (p. 23). Unlike past writers of the prairie (Hamlin Garland, James Fenimore Cooper) who chose to chronicle their subject from the safety of the East Coast, these modern-day writers have stayed put and written from the land they call home. By interviewing them, Price says, "I wanted to observe the overlap and tensions, if any, between these authors' published convictions and their daily existence" (p. 24).

Although at first I questioned the selection of authors Price chose to interview, on further reflection I realized how appropriate they were, for while each had developed a close tie to the grassland environment, each also had sought it out and nurtured it for a different reason. South Dakotan Dan O'Brien, a falconer, has devoted his life to his birds and to living in the wild for periods of time, reveling in the seeming cruelty of nature and its processes, becoming one with nature by entering the natural cycle of hunting and consuming. Linda Hasselstrom, a rancher, has been tied to her land since childhood. She has come to know intimately every inch of her South Dakota ranch and holds dear each of her memories from that place.

William Trogdon (aka William Least Heat-Moon, apparently whenever the spirit overtakes him), is a Missourian who came to know and love the land of Chase County, Kansas, by studying all its layers, its people, its history, and its presence today. And Mary Swander, an Iowan, is a poet/teacher/writer who was forced into a relationship with the land because of environmental illus but is now devoted to it by the need for pure, organic sustenance and by the simple joy of being alive.

Throughout the first and final chapters of the book, and particularly in the pages devoted to Heat-Moon, Price shows an eagerness to claim his heritage to both the land and his ancestors, and yet he is tentative in his attempt. Several pages are devoted to a brief but well-written history of the Plains and their rapid destruction under the insatiable plow, which left little in its wake for us to appreciate. "The responsibility of the nature writer," says Price, is "to call attention to what is unique and worth saving in our environment, to write places into our collective consciousness" (p. 15), but at the same time he admits "there isn't much native prairie left to write about" (p. 15).

Fortunately, amid the uncertainty of the future of the grasslands, Price is able to present hope, offered through a deep commitment to the land by those individuals who have found their homes within the fields of big bluestem, among the recovering bison herds, alongside coneflowers, thimbleweed, and black-eyed Susans. The Walnut Creek National Wildlife Refuge, to which he devotes his final chapter, is a positive stepping-off place for this thought-provoking volume.

In a time when restlessness and the drive to succeed has overtaken so much of our thinking, it is encouraging to realize that the search for our roots and a desire to recover the natural land is experiencing a resurgence. Although the reader can never be certain that the author, or the writers he interviews, have found complete peace in their environment, perhaps that is the real point of this book. Price's healing may not lie in a final destination but rather in the process—the search for what he, and many of the rest of us, have spent most of our lives never knowing we had actually lost.

Reviewed by Susan S. Novak, associate editor, Kansas History.
The Eden Peace Witness: 
A Collection of Personal Accounts

edited by Jeffery W. Koller

vi + 302 pages, photographs, appendixes, index. 

The timeline of history is most often measured in terms of violent armed conflict. As students of American history, we are drilled on dates for the French and Indian War, American Revolution, War of 1812, Civil War, Spanish Insurrection, right on up to the current war in Iraq. What we are as a people, a country, and a planet often is defined by how we responded to violence and aggression.

Stephen Ambrose, Tom Brokaw, and Cornelius Ryan are just some of the twentieth-century authors whose works help describe and define a generation of Americans by how they responded to war. Brokaw’s and Ryan’s books, especially, tell the story of a global conflict (World War II) through the eyes of everyday citizens who were plucked from their farms and desks and placed in incredible and impossible situations and who somehow found the courage to step up to those situations.

Stories of the valor of those who chose to participate in the military are easy to find, and the nation’s current patriotic fervor tends to encourage us to view these stories as the only ones reflecting the attitudes, experiences, and sacrifices of “real Americans.”

Jeffrey Koller is a member of the Eden Mennonite Church in Moundridge, Kansas. A confluence of serendipitous events led him to read Tom Brokaw’s The Greatest Generation almost back-to-back with Noah Leatheman’s A World War I Diary. Leatherman was a member of the Hodelman Mennonite Church and, as such, was forbidden by conscience and the teaching of his faith from participating in war or in offering harm to a fellow human being. (The Mennonite Church was founded in the sixteenth century; one of its premier tenets from the beginning was nonresistance to violent confrontation and nonparticipation in war as being against Christ’s teachings of love for one’s fellows, even those who persecute you.) Because Leatherman would not fight, after he was drafted he was interned at Camp Funston where he endured both physical and psychological abuse from officers and fellow enlistees and finally was imprisoned at the federal penitentiary in Leavenworth.

Koller was struck by the Leatherman account as representing a different kind of courage, the courage involved in standing up for deeply held convictions, not in the face of violence from a perceived “enemy” but in the face of people who are friends and neighbors. As a Mennonite, Koller was concerned that if the story of nonviolent “heroes” was not told alongside the story of military “heroes,” not only would future generations not have their religious beliefs and training reinforced, but accessibility to alternative service for conscientious objectors (a direct outgrowth of the negative experiences by Noah Leatherman and many others during World War I) might be jeopardized.

Thus inspired, Koller set out to collect from members of his Kansas congregation the stories of how they, mostly Kansas farm boys, responded when America sent out a call to arms. The Eden Peace Witness is the result. Eden Mennonite Church is a large and long-established congregation, and members of its congregation were involved in all of the major conflicts of the twentieth century. Oral histories in this collection are included from World War I up through the Vietnam conflict. The book is divided into sections representing each conflict. Each section includes an introduction, setting the men’s stories in historical context, in context of how the Mennonite Church was able to develop alternative methods of service for its young men in each conflict, and also illustrating the changes the Eden community itself experienced through time. This is particularly effective as it illustrates in microcosm the changes and acculturation most Mennonites have experienced, from being a largely rural, reclusive, minimally educated, mostly German-speaking people at the outset of World War I to being well-educated, cosmopolitan, involved individuals virtually indistinguishable from the general population, aside from the peace stance that is still a mainstay of the denomination.

The testimonies given in The Eden Peace Witness are exclusively male. Although this seems logical, as historically only males had to face the draft, one is left to wonder (in light of the kinds of discrimination the men had to confront with the military) what kinds of discrimination those who remained at home had to face. Hopefully, that could be a story for a sequel. In the meantime, The Eden Peace Witness is a very interesting, eye-opening, and inspirational addition to the history of humans and war.

Reviewed by Sara J. Keckeisen, librarian, Kansas State Historical Society.
A Dancing People: Powwow Culture on the Southern Plains
by Clyde Ellis


Indian fairs, dance contests, and family gatherings come together in Clyde Ellis's history of powwow culture in the Southern Plains. In focusing on the several tribes who reside in Oklahoma today, familiar ground for Ellis, A Dancing People takes the reader backward and forward in time, connecting history and memory through the words of his collaborators in addition to archival sources. The end product is a ringside seat at dozens of Indian powwows.

Nicely organized around two photo galleries, A Dancing People takes both a circuitous and linear route from past to present. The introduction and conclusion form a circle from past to present by describing what a powwow's function and purpose has been historically and what it means today to Indian people who participate at all levels throughout Indian country. But Ellis's treatment is also linear, starting with nineteenth-century ritualized dancing and song through its evolution into a form of intertribal competition and cultural exposition for Indians and non-Indians alike. As in nearly every other aspect of Indian history, the United States government early on tried to control and direct Indians' desire for communal expression through song and dance. And just as Indian people have shaped their own responses to outside pressures regarding education, land use, and religion, they responded characteristically to official attempts to deny them yet another basic human right—that of self expression through dance.

Ellis is quite clear about his purpose in writing the book by specifying that this is not a book about dance styles or costumes. It is instead a cultural history of Indian dance, particularly communal dances as performed today within the powwow circuit. He argues that any cultural history of powwow dancing leads inevitably to Oklahoma with its long tradition of larger fairs such as the Indian Exposition started in 1934 near Fort Sill and the mammoth Red Earth powwow held annually in Oklahoma City that draws native dancers from across the country. In this, Ellis shows his bias as a historian of Oklahoma and a non-Indian who understands that much of what passes for Indian culture today in the minds of non-Indians happens in the powwow dance ring.

Ellis does not, however, neglect the Indian perspective on dance either historically or today. In fact, he goes to great lengths to find and quote Indians' own perception of how they dance, why they do it, and what it means to them. This is both the greatest strength and weakness of the book overall. As a historian of Indian peoples, Ellis has understandably become immersed in the lives and viewpoints of his subjects. They are not simply a subject that he writes about; they are his friends and colleagues in everyday life. This gives Ellis's perspective gravity as one who has seen and witnessed firsthand dozens of powwows over the years. Together with his Indian collaborators such as Billy Evans Horse, Ellis has accepted the responsibility of helping to maintain dance culture because "we have to take care of it, to pass it on to our children. It's our way of life" (p. 3).

Along with this insider view of powwow culture, however, Ellis seems to have picked up some of its intertribal competitiveness. He spends a good deal of time in the preface and throughout the text analyzing and dissecting the interpretations of other anthropologists and historians whom he believes have erred in their understanding of what powwow culture signifies. While some level of internal conversation between academics is unavoidable by implication in scholarly monographs, Ellis's direct attack on others' interpretations of early twentieth-century religion and culture is far too personal. Indeed, Ellis (always in tandem with another ethnologist) argues that powwow culture does not ease inter- or intratribal tensions and rivalries (the "traditional" interpretation, according to Ellis), yet the testimony and information he provides in A Dancing People seems to suggest exactly that to a considerable degree.

Ellis's best work comes in his purely historical reconstruction of the roots of powwow culture. In his recounting of the events surrounding the birth, growth, and maintenance of both small and large powwows, Ellis provides a solid link between tribal values and mainstream historical events. It is this interplay of context and culture that provides the reader with an understanding of what it means to Indian families today to present their son in dance clothes at his first powwow and some sense of the pride and gratitude they feel at the giveaway that follows.

Most important for the reader of A Dancing People, however, is an appreciation of the connections between deeply powerful rituals of tribal identity, such as warrior dances, and how the powwow circuit functions as a forum for the maintenance of those values today. Given the stereotyped and circus-like atmosphere of the first white-sponsored Indian fairs, complete with beauty pageants, horse racing, and shoot-outs, it is a credit to Indian peoples in general that they wrested control of the powwows away from non-Indian commercial interests and re-made them in their own individualized tribal images.

Reviewed by Bonnie Lynn-Sherow, associate professor of history, Kansas State University, Manhattan.
Dog Soldier Justice: The Ordeal of Susanna Alderdice in the Kansas Indian War

by Jeff Broome

xxii + 314 pages, photographs, notes, bibliography, index.

During 1868 and 1869 Indian raids occurred in Kansas that claimed dozens of lives and destroyed much property. The perpetrators of these attacks were Dog Soldiers—one of the soldier societies common to Plains tribes. These warriors were militant and resisted the efforts of the peace chiefs to reach accommodation with the whites. The death and destruction visited upon pioneer families in central Kansas by these Indians during this period were part of the final chapters in the cultural conflict that had been unfolding across the continent for generations.

Dog Soldier Justice: The Ordeal of Susanna Alderdice in the Kansas Indian War chronicles these attacks. The book deals with the events leading up to the abduction and eventual killing of Susanna Alderdice by the Dog Soldiers during the Battle of Summit Springs in northeast Colorado. The book is filled with first-hand descriptions of death and destruction visited upon the settlements in north-central Kansas.

In his narrative, Broome draws upon a variety of source material—official reports, personal accounts, and newspaper reports. One of the more interesting source materials are the Indian Depredation Claim files. These records are a catalog of settlers' claims to the government for the loss of property from raiding Indians. They provide a survey of what property these settlers were bringing to the frontier as they began domesticating a wilderness. It also underscores that government red tape and inaction is nothing new.

The book, published by the Lincoln County Historical Society, is an extremely valuable reference for local history. Broome goes to great lengths in describing accounts of the raids and linking the inter-connected family relationships that characterized frontier settlements.

Broome assumes the reader knows much of the historical context in which these events occurred. His defining of the Dog Soldiers is left to newspaper accounts of the period. The reports of attacks and murders upon settlers is summarized and then often repeated in first-person accounts.

Dog Soldier Justice contributes to an understanding and appreciation of the dangers and hardships endured by settlers. The reader is presented a base from which to seek further perspectives on this chapter of our history.

Reviewed by William McKale, director, Museum Division, Fort Riley.