

Dorothy Hubbard Schwieder. Growing Up with the Town: Family and Community on the Great Plains. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2002.

SUMMARY OF THE BOOK

This book has a dual motive: “to preserve at least a part of a small town’s experience in its first fifty years of existence” and “to document the history of a family within that town and, in so doing, to interpret the experiences, values, and attitudes of some of the people who lived there.” (xi) Most memoirs set on the Great Plains, according to the author of this insightful volume, dwell upon life on the farms and ranches that dot the rural countryside, not upon their counterparts—the ubiquitous small towns spread across the landscape. Dorothy Schwieder, who was born in 1933 and came of age during the late 1940s and early 1950s, blends stories and information based upon her own memories and those of her nine siblings (she was the ninth child) with telling observations obtained by the methods of a professional historian to write an interpretation of small-town life that is compelling at a number of different levels.

First, there is her own story and those of the Hubbard and Anderson families, who derived from Northern Ireland and Norway. Family and ethnicity were hugely important in the settling of the Plains. People living in Dorothy Hubbard’s community understood as a matter of course which ethnic groups frequented which churches, where they tended to live, what types of jobs they gravitated toward, and what kinds of cultural practices they preserved. When religion was added to the mixture, it sometimes stoked antagonisms that divided Catholics and Protestants. For many residents, especially among the older generation, the notion that someone of one’s own “kind” might marry into the “opposition” was a thought too horrible to contemplate. Sociologists would call this tendency or practice “endogamy”; many South Dakotans called it common sense or a necessary taboo. Schwieder also makes it clear that significant gender divisions prevailed in South Dakota (and American) culture into the fifties, where she ends her story, while at the same time she shows how some of the more egregious barriers and inequities were beginning to break down.

In the second place, this is the story of a town—a typical railroad “T”-town (so called because the Main Street ran perpendicular to the railroad tracks) along the line of the “Milwaukee Road,” which by the time Dorothy was born had also become the route of Federal Highway 16. Presho’s location upon two major transportation routes and its favored geographic position—40 miles west of Chamberlain and 50 miles north and south of Winner and Pierre—conferred on it a decided advantage over nearby towns that were seeking to expand their own trade territories. Although from reading the book it is not entirely clear why Presho succeeded so well over time in its competition with its rivals, Schwieder provides clues in her descriptions of the business people and professionals who made up the core leadership of the town. Standing prominently among them was her father, Walter Hubbard. Wives and single women, who were largely relegated to secondary roles within the community, also provided crucial support and direction both inside the household and in numerous businesses, occupations, and a variety of clubs and organizations.

The spirit of community that prevailed in Presho is a third major theme in Schwieder’s narrative. She clearly views her hometown in a generally positive—even nostalgic—fashion. Her researches reinforced her memories and experiences of

extensive community participation within many venues: neighboring, people looking out for each other and each other's kids, engaging in school activities, participating in church activities, swimming at the new municipal pool, socializing on Main Street on Saturday nights, attending movies, listening to band concerts, participating in World War II, and in other ways. "Small towns are, by their very nature, communal entities," Schwieder notes (132), and she thinks this is one of their greatest recommendations.

A fourth major theme of the book is labor. Nothing characterizes Plains dwellers so much as their will to work, and to work hard. Walter Hubbard was clearly wedded to his job in ways going far beyond average. Twelve- to fourteen-hour days were the norm for him. That detracted somewhat from his presence at home, but he clearly was the dominant presence within the household during the time of both of his wives, first Alice Jacobson (mother of the first seven children) and then Emma Anderson (mother of the last three, including Dorothy). His willingness and insistence upon having all of his young brood spend a great deal of time at his farm implement office, first to be watched over and cared for by him and then to assist him in his work, ensured that they would get a steady dose of practice at working and would be force-fed a continuous litany of his beliefs, values, and observations about life.

A fifth major theme of the book is the land and the environment in general. All of the author's memories were powerfully enclosed within the broader context of the landscape and the weather that surrounded the small town of Presho, which, at less than a thousand people, seemed precariously perched on the gently rolling, mainly treeless, and semi-arid West River terrain. Perhaps the most consistent feature of the region was the constant wind. Also compelling was the dramatic shift of seasons, from scorching summers, when temperatures frequently elevated over 100 degrees, to the freezing temperatures and snows of winter. The Great Plains can be unforgiving, Schwieder impresses upon us, and they demand accommodation from the intrepid people who venture out upon them.

That point carries over in to a sixth and final theme that will be mentioned here: the cycles of history that are heavily intertwined with variations in the weather that occur from year to year. The author is a professional historian, attuned to identifying patterns and configurations and to looking for causes and consequences, change and continuity. Her book divides into two parts around 1938, when the weather turned for the better, rain returning in sufficient amounts to green up the countryside that year. That was the year she turned five, old enough to remember much about her own doings and those of her family. So she shifts the narrative from an analysis of the town and its development, based largely upon research in historical documents and records and memories of her siblings, to an account of the family, grounded in her own memories, supplemented by her siblings' recollections. Two things stood out in driving events during the 1920s and 30s, where most of the story concentrates: cycles of weather and economic ups and downs. The "dirty thirties" got labeled that way for good reason—terrible drought conditions and terrific dust storms, along with the grasshoppers and other pests that accompanied them. They also, of course, were characterized by hard economic times, which forced two out of every five families in the state onto the relief rolls. This book is largely about how the people on the Plains reacted to those two disasters. Ironically, one thing that helped them cope was that low farm prices, farm foreclosures, and bank

failures during the twenties in South Dakota helped prepare them for the hard times they experienced during the following decade.

This, then, is a book that appeals from many angles. Readers will differ in which parts of it they enjoy the most and learn the most from. All will find something of interest in it, and all South Dakotans will discover much that is familiar in its pages, even as they learn things they hadn't known before.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. The author tells us that her purpose in writing the book is to chronicle the early history of her home town of Presho as well as to tell the story of her own family while she was growing up. How good a job do you think she does of integrating these two parallel lines of development?

2. Schwieder says that most people tend to believe that their family is interesting and just a little unusual. Do you think her family fits those categories?

3. She observes that there were no journals or diaries for her to rely upon in telling her story and that most of her information about the family derived from her own memories and those of her siblings. Do you believe reliable history can be written in this fashion? Would you be able to write a similar book about your family and your hometown? What difficulties would you encounter?

4. The author spends some time tracing her family ancestry on both sides. How much influence did her English/Irish and Norwegian backgrounds have upon her?

5. How important was religion in the family's life? Would Schwieder have been a different person had she been Catholic or Norwegian Lutheran rather than a member of the Methodist Episcopal church?

6. We know that the author went on to become a professor of history and a well-published author at Iowa State University. What indications are there in this book that this might become her eventual role?

7. Although Schwieder's father clearly was the emotional center—as well as the decision-making authority—of the household, her mother (and for her seven oldest siblings, her mother's predecessor) was also a strong presence and influence. Discuss the family dynamics that developed over time and the respective roles played by mother and father within the home.

8. Presho was a typical "T"-town on the Plains. What do we learn about it from the book? How would you compare it to the town or city that you live in?

9. With approximately 600 residents, Presho developed a healthy amount of community activities. From your own experience and knowledge, was it typical in this respect? Would this have been an appealing town to live in? If you had owned a magic wand and could have changed the town in any way, what would you have done, if anything?

10. The movement of people in and out of the town, according to the author, was remarkably high. From a distance, it seems almost like Grand Central Station. What effect do you think this high degree of mobility had upon people's lives?

11. Descriptions such as those of Lorena Hickok of life in South Dakota during the "dirty thirties" sound almost unbelievable to those who did not actually live through the experience. What impact do you imagine these harsh climatic and economic conditions had on people's psyches?

12. Schwieder provides a rather detailed description and analysis of the physical reality of the house her family lived in as well as an emotional map of the activities that occurred there. How would you describe those goings-on?

13. The author titles chapter five “The Wonderful World of Work.” What was wonderful about it? Or do you think it was wonderful?

14. Can you imagine plucking chickens for three cents apiece? Is the work world easier now or harder than it was in Presho during the thirties and forties?

15. Do you think all the child labor that occurred at the time was exploitative?

16. Schwieder describes West River South Dakota as “a culture shaped by place.” (119) What does she mean by this? Is place as all-important now as it was during the time that she was growing up? Explain.

17. How would you describe the social structure of the town? How does it compare with your own experience? Have conditions improved or deteriorated during the past half-century and more?

18. The Hubbard family prospered on the basis of the farm machinery business, which four of the family’s six sons also went into. Small town viability obviously depends upon the health of its businesses, which, in turn, depends upon the prosperity of farmers and ranchers on the surrounding countryside. What do you think is the long-term prospect for towns like Presho in the coming decades?

19. What do you think are the strengths and weaknesses of the book? Would you recommend it to others?

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF THE AUTHOR

Dorothy Hubbard Schwieder was born in 1933 in Presho, South Dakota, a place she still calls home. Her father was an early businessman in town. The ninth child in a family of ten children, she graduated from Presho High School in 1951 and Dakota Wesleyan University in 1955. That year she married classmate Elmer Schwieder. They had two children: Diane, born in 1958, and David, born in 1959.

In 1962, the family moved to Ames, Iowa. After receiving his Ph.D. at Iowa State University, Elmer taught in the departments of Sociology and Family Environment for over thirty years. Dorothy received her Ph.D. at the University of Iowa and was on the history faculty at Iowa State University for thirty-four years. In 1998, she was named a University Professor for exceptional contributions to the University. Among the many courses she taught at ISU, her favorites were Iowa History and the History of American Women. She has written and edited numerous books and articles on Midwestern history, with a primarily focus on Iowa. These include Iowa: The Middle Land and Black Diamonds: Life and Work in Iowa’s Coal Mining Communities. In 2007, she co-edited A Sesquicentennial History of Iowa State University: Tradition and Transformation. For some fifteen years she took part in the Iowa Humanities Speakers Bureau.

Dorothy retired from ISU in 2000 but still does historical research. Elmer died in 2005, and Dorothy continues to live in Ames. Along with her history work, she enjoys bridge, traveling, reading, and spending time with her family and with Seri, her six-year-old Sheltie. Her children live in Illinois, Diane in Normal and David in Champaign-Urbana. She has two granddaughters, Mary and Elizabeth.

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