

The Rural Midwest since World War II

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Nonetheless, *Cold War Kids* is an important work that redirects East Coast biases of child welfare reform studies and demonstrates the national significance of concerns that arose in other regions. Coverage of issues significant to the Midwest, such as educational funding, segregation, and consolidation of rural schools, centers largely on Kansas. That is likely because a significant amount of Holt's research material came from the Eisenhower Presidential Library in Abilene, Kansas. She drew largely on official government documents, such as presidential commission reports, conference proceedings, and congressional statements. Specific examples from literature, film, television, and music enhance the argument. Of particular note is Holt's use of archival collections that have received scant attention until now, such as the records of the 1950 and 1960 White House Conferences on Children and Youth, housed in Abilene, Kansas; and the Orphan Correspondence Files at the National Archives and Record Administration in College Park, Maryland—a collection that Holt requested through the Freedom of Information Act.

Throughout the book, Holt successfully highlights the things that Americans said they wanted for their children—health, education, and hope in a world of insecurities—while specifying how Cold War tensions influenced government programs in form and function. Holt convincingly argues that childhood “achieved a new importance both culturally and politically” on the frontline of democracy in postwar America (150). *Cold War Kids* demonstrates in substantial ways that federal policies and agendas shaped postwar American childhood, leaving a legacy that continues into the twenty-first century.

The Rural Midwest since World War II, edited by J. L. Anderson. DeKalb: Northern Illinois University, 2014. xii, 323 pp. Illustrations, graphs, maps, tables, notes, index. \$28.95 paperback.

Reviewer Coreen Derifield is an instructor at East Central College in Union, Missouri. She is working on a book manuscript titled “Earning Her Daily Bread: Women and Industrial Manufacturing in the Rural Midwest, 1950–1980.”

The Rural Midwest since World War II provides an impressive array of essays on the state of the Midwest since 1945. Each contributor provides a descriptive answer to three questions that tend to arise when discussing the Midwest: What is the Midwest? What does it mean to be rural? And is the Midwest distinct? By tackling these difficult questions, the scholars provide a varied and complicated look at the social and economic diversity of the rural Midwest.

This collection also addresses two fundamental issues surrounding the history of the rural Midwest: the relative lack of scholarly interest in

the Midwest after World War II; and the problems surrounding the idea that the region is in decline. While the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are seen as the heyday of rural midwestern life, recent years have been characterized as a period of decline and decay. This volume counteracts that declension narrative by telling a story of a region reinventing itself through social and economic change. Each essay shows how people, economics, and ecology have adapted to a modern world of advanced technology. By addressing these concerns, the contributors provide an excellent survey of the current literature on the rural Midwest while also suggesting new areas for historical research and investigation.

The book's essays are divided into three major themes: changes in ecology and the landscape, economic and political development of industry and institutions, and social and cultural changes within families and communities. The first two essays by James Pritchard and Kendra Smith Howard address changes to the land itself and how new ecological practices have altered the landscapes of the rural Midwest. The second thematic collection addresses economic and political changes in the Midwest and how they affected rural areas in the region. Wilson Warren, Cornelia Butler Flora, and Jan Flora discuss the role of industrial development in rural areas of the region and how communities have embraced industry as a means of economic survival. J. L. Anderson focuses on how governmental farm policies affected farms and agricultural production. The largest collection of essays focuses on demographic and social change in rural areas in the region. Jenny Barker Devine demonstrates how rural women embraced new roles after advances in technology altered their previous home and domestic chores; and Pamela Riney-Kehrberg argues that because of changes in technology, entertainment, and education, childhood in the rural Midwest no longer retained its distinctive characteristics from the late nineteenth century. Debra Reid and Jim Norris discuss the place of minorities in the Midwest and show how African Americans have clung to their place in the countryside, despite their small numbers, while Latinos/Latinas are a growing demographic presence. Lastly, Steven Reschly demonstrates the surprising mobility of the Amish communities scattered throughout the Midwest and shows how they continually search for new opportunities and new places to practice their unique way of life focused on farming, family, community, and religion.

Each author argues against the myth of the Midwest as a bucolic wonderland of apple-cheeked children, contending that the reality of midwestern life is far more complex and diverse. David Danbom asserts in the final essay that "whatever made the place unique or special at one time . . . has been eroded by modern communications, population

movements, and a market economy; . . . what is most noteworthy about the region is its Americanness—its similarity to every other place” (297). The reality that Danbom presents is a Midwest that no longer represents the Jeffersonian ideal of the yeoman farmer, but includes economic and social diversity. Danbom contends that the reality of the non-distinct nature of the Midwest does not mean there is a lack of distinctive culture and community in rural areas of the region, but that there are many distinctive cultures that embody the midwestern ideal. These regional and community values passed down through generations of midwesterners are rooted in European ethnic identities, religion, and community history. Danbom claims that what makes the Midwest distinct is its essential Americanness, its commitment to hard work, self-sufficiency, family, and community. Whether these values and ideals represent the “real” Midwest is difficult to determine, but what is significant is the long-lasting commitment midwestern communities hold to those values. The people of the Midwest cling tenaciously to their way of life, embracing the ideal of midwestern niceness even though, in reality, the bucolic wholesomeness of the region may no longer exist.

The breadth of these essays provides a comprehensive overview of the region except for one problematic aspect of rural life: there is no sustained discussion of the rural poor. Several scholars across disciplines have attempted to address the issue of rural poverty, a growing concern in the rural Midwest because of the plethora of changes addressed in this book. Many areas across the region have become pockets of poverty as they have lost their livelihoods to the decline of agriculture, industry, or community businesses. While rural poverty is addressed indirectly, an essay dedicated to the difficulties of overcoming rural poverty and the ghettoization of these communities would be enlightening and informative.

Readers interested in Iowa history will find this book an important and engaging read as it places the state’s recent history in context with the rest of the region. The book identifies the causes of much of what has occurred in Iowa in recent history and explains the rapid agricultural, ecological, and demographic changes spreading across the state. Many of the essays specifically discuss communities in Iowa, and the state receives significant attention in all of the essays. Overall, the book provides an excellent overview of the rural Midwest since World War II and addresses the dearth of historical scholarship on the region in the recent past. It is an essential contribution to understanding the history of Iowa and the rural Midwest.