

# Natives of a Dry Place: Stories of Dakota before the Oil Boom

Paula M. Nelson  
*University of Wisconsin–Platteville*

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where readers are reminded go to the book's Amazon page "to leave a review please. Thank you again for your support!" (163). The back matter of the print-on-demand title also includes an excerpt from Rank's work in progress and a page for "Other Books by Michael Rank," which lists such titles as *History's Most Insane Rulers* and *Greek Gods and Goddesses Gone Wild*.

Rank's approach is educational, entrepreneurial, and commercial. He brings a journalist's bent to bear, although he apparently conducted few if any original interviews. The metaphors with which he chooses to illustrate his thesis—comparing Iowa's underdog status to former Iowa State running back Troy Davis as the introduction's overriding metaphor—are curious, and yet they emphasize a whimsicality often eschewed in more hidebound historical scholarship. In the end, Rank appears both eager for, and solicitous of, readers; his ethos is earnest. Readers of the *Annals of Iowa* may wish to give *How Iowa Conquered the World* a try.

*Natives of a Dry Place: Stories of Dakota before the Oil Boom*, by Richard Edwards. Pierre: South Dakota Historical Society Press, 2015. xvi, 198 pp. Illustrations, maps, bibliography, index. \$16.95 paperback.

Reviewer Paula M. Nelson is professor of history emeritus at the University of Wisconsin–Platteville. She is the author of *After the West Was Won: Homesteaders and Town-Builders in Western South Dakota, 1900–1917* (1986) and *The Prairie Windows Out Its Own: The West River Country of South Dakota in the Years of Depression and Dust* (1996).

We do not talk much about virtues these days. The word seems old-fashioned, descriptive of the old sexual morality, maybe, but not one for our modern world, so full of transgressive beliefs and behaviors. Along comes Richard Edwards, director of the Center for Great Plains Studies at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln, to remind us how just how much virtues matter. He is self-conscious about it, informing readers as he concludes his memoir that he does not see the inculcation and practice of virtues as conservative. That label reminds him of all of the evils of the modern-day political right, which he jabs vigorously in a few discordant lines near the end of his fine book. The lesson most readers will learn here is that teaching and practicing virtues is an excellent way to support a functional society. The people whose stories Edwards tells are an object lesson in their value.

Richard Edwards's grandparents homesteaded in Mountrail County, North Dakota, shortly after the turn of the twentieth century. His parents moved into Stanley, the county seat, where he was born and lived until age 12, when the family moved to Massachusetts. Although he left

Stanley in 1956, Edwards returned on occasion to visit and maintained ties with relatives in North Dakota. To research the book, he did a number of oral history interviews, checked the local newspapers and histories, and plumbed his memory and the memories of others for stories of his home town. *Natives of a Dry Place* is the result, a memoir that tells the story of town and county residents in an interesting way.

After explaining how the oil boom of recent years has pulled at the fabric of society and changed the landscape in troubling ways, Edwards lays out the design of his book: he will tell stories of local people who represented the virtues that are so vital to their society. Edwards understands that Stanley's people "cultivated a distinctive way of thinking about the world and how an upstanding person ought to behave, a set of values or character traits or habits of mind," that is, virtues (24). People in other places had them, too, Edwards says, especially on the northern Great Plains. Virtues he highlights include resoluteness, steadfastness, devotion to community, pluck, commitment, optimism, a spirit of adventure, and modesty. Each virtue has its own story, each one highly engaging and readable. Resoluteness tells of the death of Tom Scrivner in 1923 and the men who tried to rescue him without thought of themselves from a deep, dry well left behind on the prairie when the original landowner moved away. Steadfastness is the story of his father, "a necessary man" (45)—rural mail carrier, town fix-it man, pillar of the community. Pluck tells the story of Edwards's much older sisters, who moved to Portland, Oregon, during World War II, to be welders in the shipyards. Each chapter has depth and complexity. Edwards's father was not a good family man at first but he grew into it. Tom Scrivner may have been pushed into that well by angry young Finns, who resented his dalliance with a young Finnish girl, whom he married when she became pregnant. No one in this book is perfect. Many human foibles are on display, but virtue shines through.

*Natives of a Dry Place* is well written, heartfelt, and thought provoking. Those who grew up in small towns in the Midwest or on the Great Plains may find much to relate to. Those who want to understand the values that shaped rural society in the past and that remain present today, even in the face of demographic change, decline, or displacement, will learn much from this book.

*Myths of the Rune Stone: Viking Martyrs and the Birthplace of America*, by David M. Krueger. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015. x, 213 pp. Maps, illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$130.99 hardcover; \$36.99 paperback.