

Fostering on the Farm: Child Placement in the Rural Midwest

Anne Effland

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ployed here to analyze that rhetoric" (12). Such passages, and much of this book overall, would have benefited greatly from a good editor who could have helped the author distill his sometimes illuminating understanding of the spectacle of nineteenth-century printed landscape images into the fascinating read that his subjects deserve. For this the publisher should bear as much responsibility as the author.

Fostering on the Farm: Child Placement in the Rural Midwest, by Megan Birk. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2015. viii, 234 pp. Illustrations, maps, notes, bibliography, index. \$55.00 hardcover.

Reviewer Anne Effland is senior economist for domestic policy at the Office of the Chief Economist, U.S. Department of Agriculture. Much of her broad-ranging research and writing has focused on agricultural labor, including that of migrants, women, and children.

In *Fostering on the Farm*, Megan Birk offers an intertwined history of agrarian ideals and child welfare policy that is both sweeping and steeped in detail. Moving us beyond the oft-told stories of the orphan trains and the naive beliefs in the inherent virtue of farmers and outdoor living, Birk digs deep into the harsh realities of both farming and farm placements of needy children at the turn of the twentieth century. She takes us through a half-century of changing views of American farm life and care of indigent children, explaining the rise and fall of the farm placement system and the eventual adoption of paid foster care and family preservation, with a preference for keeping children in town and urban settings.

Birk centers her study on the rural Midwest, the focus of the late nineteenth-century glorification of rural homes for orphan children. Birk, however, is most interested in the local manifestations of that ideal rather than the more familiar national story. She grounds her analytical narrative at the county level, tracing the growing and changing administrative structures and the actual care experiences of children and families involved in farm placements. Birk presents the philosophies, practical politics, and daily administration of county programs as the movement in favor of farm placements grew, then follows their transformation as state institutions took progressively greater control and often moved children farther from their original homes. Interspersed throughout are the stories of individual children's and families' experiences, deftly lifted from the same local institutional sources that support the rest of the study. Birk has meticulously combed county and state government records, records of private institutions, annual reports of state and county governing boards, other government reports,

newspaper accounts, convention proceedings, and contemporaneous social science studies to bring a wealth of detail to her narrative.

Birk neatly places the local experiences she documents within the broader national context of changing public and professional enthusiasm for farm placements. She bookends the study with chapters on the construction of an American rural mythology based on Jeffersonian agrarian ideals in the mid- to late nineteenth century and on the decline of that mythology in the early years of the twentieth century. In between, Birk describes how these changes played out in the Midwest.

She begins by examining the development and operation of the county farm placement system that took the place of county-run poor farms and other institutions for orphan children in the Midwest. As the examples of abuse and overwork of placed-out children increased and attracted the attention of the press and the public, state governments intervened and slowly removed control of child placements from county governments. In the end, increasingly professionalized state-level child welfare systems found rural placements difficult to supervise and began to place children in homes and family care in towns, closer to social services and schools and away from the dangers and isolation of farms.

Among the book's greatest strengths is its depth of detailed research in local sources. Readers with an interest in child welfare systems or education in the Midwest during this period will be delighted with the wealth of sources in her notes and bibliography. The depth of detail can make the narrative somewhat dense, on occasion weighing on its momentum and flow. Yet by carefully situating her work in the broader literature on agrarianism, childhood on farms, and social welfare institutions, Birk steadily advances her thesis through these details, bringing readers to understand, almost without realizing it, how the broader changing views of farm life were manifested in the daily execution and supervision of child placements at the local level. References to the broader literature, which ranges across multiple fields and periods, will be valuable for readers with particular interests who want to delve deeper into those subjects.

Iowa readers may be disappointed to discover that Birk's Midwest encompasses primarily the Old Northwest—Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Wisconsin—with only very occasional references to Minnesota and Iowa and virtually none to other states many consider part of the Midwest. An explanation early in the book as to why the work is focused on those five states would have been helpful. Still, local historians of the Midwest, or any region, must be inspired by Birk's skilled use of local sources—especially the ubiquitous county government and

private institutional records that can seem so dry and one-dimensional. In Birk's hands, county administrators, welfare professionals and administrators, foster families, and children rise up from the pages of these records as real and interesting characters. Such research is time consuming and often tedious, but Birk makes clear its potential for building detailed depictions of local life. On that basis alone, this book should not be missed.

Planning Democracy: Agrarian Intellectuals and the Intended New Deal, by Jess Gilbert. Yale Agrarian Studies. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015. xv, 341 pp. Map, table, illustrations, appendix, notes, index. \$45.00 hardcover, \$30.00 paperback.

Reviewer Jon K. Lauck is past president of the Midwestern History Association, associate editor and book review editor of the *Middle West Review*, and adjunct professor of history at the University of South Dakota. He is the author of *The Lost Region: Toward a Revival of Midwestern History* (2013).

In recent decades, University of Wisconsin–Madison rural sociologist Jess Gilbert has frequented academic conferences and presented impressive papers on rural history, politics, policy planning, intellectual history, and midwestern history. His focus has been the hothouse environment of New Deal agricultural policy making and the myriad ways 1930s farm policy was constructed and implemented. Now comes his grand summary statement of all of this work in the form of a book in Yale University Press's Agrarian Studies series.

Gilbert's essential point is that historians have spent too much time examining the early stages of the agricultural New Deal, especially the Agricultural Adjustment Act, and have been seduced by the lingering power of the images captured by the Farm Security Administration. More important, Gilbert argues, were the large-scale planning efforts of the late New Deal, which have been largely forgotten. Gilbert hopes that a better understanding of these planning efforts will make grand national policy planning efforts easier in the future.

Gilbert's most impressive work focuses on his collective portrait of the key contingent of midwestern-born planners in the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) who largely led the agricultural planning effort. With a nod to cultural Marxism in general and the work of Antonio Gramsci in particular, Gilbert sees these men as "organic intellectuals," policymakers who had emerged directly from the midwestern soil to construct farm policy for rural America. This argument is meant to rebut the work of Catherine Stock, who, in her book *Main Street in Crisis* (1992), pointed to the friction between local cultures in the Dakotas