The Perfect Fence: Untangling the Meanings of Barbed Wire

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MacFadyen’s “Flax on the Northern Great Plains and Prairies, 1889–1930,” Tisa M. Anders and Rosa Elia Cobos’s “The Beatableras of Western Nebraska: Gender Labor, and the Beet Sugar Industry,” Jason McCollom’s, ‘‘We Are Tied Together . . . in a Hundred Different Ways’: Farmers and Farm Organizations across the Forty-Ninth Parallel, 1905–1915,” Thomas D. Isern and Suzzanne Kelley’s ‘‘Done for Another Year’: The Resilience of Canadian Custom Harvesters on the North American Plains,” along with a passing nod to the region in Sterling Evans’s “Dependent Harvests: Grain Production on the American and Canadian Plains and the Double Dependency with Mexico, 1880–1950.” The authors of the previously published essays apparently did not have the opportunity to update their secondary sources.

Overall, Evans has provided a useful collection of essays that deal with the agricultural history of the North American West in a transnational context. Scholars will find it a ready reference and a good introduction to specific topics. Most of the essays are synthesized based on secondary sources. Evans’s call for primary research is justified for this expansive, new approach to the agricultural history of the North American West. Anyone interested in this field of historical inquiry will find Evans’s essay collection a useful read and an important guide for future research.


At the start of the 1962 film Lonely Are the Brave, modern cowboy Jack Burns encounters a barbed wire fence while riding his horse, Whiskey, across the New Mexico landscape. Dismounting, Burns (played by Kirk Douglas) snips the wire, opening the closed range and allowing him to proceed. The film, directed by David Miller from a script written by the once blacklisted Dalton Trumbo, was based on the second novel (The Lonely Cowboy, 1957) by a rising star of western literature, Edward Abbey. Here is how Abbey himself set up the fence-cutting episode: “[Burns] came eventually to a barbed-wire fence, gleaming new wire stretched with vibrant tautness between steel stakes driven into the
sand and rock, reinforced between stakes with wire staves. The man
looked for a gate but could see only the fence itself extended north and
south to a pair of vanishing points, an unbroken thin stiff line of
geometric exactitude scored with a bizarre, mechanical precision over
the face of the rolling earth.” This fence is no ordinary obstacle. In a
story that will end with the displaced cowboy run down on a rainy
highway by a truck laden with toilet fixtures, the fence represents both
the insistent demarcations of a modern, bounded world and the near
ubiquity of industrial products that promise convenience but are
capable of delivering confinement and at last death.

The Perfect Fence is a smart study of the tangles of meaning caught
in the barbed wire fence. Fences had long been a staple of rural
landscapes in North America when the first weaponized wire fences
came onto the market following the Civil War. Fences kept animals out
of crops during open range periods in American history, then kept them
in once most of the range was closed. The first fences tended to be
improvised from uprooted stumps and lopped-off tree branches. Then
they were built in various forms from posts and boards. In areas of
abundant stone outcroppings, as along much of the East Coast, rocks
brought to the surface by continuing tillage eventually provided a more
durable substitute, resulting in the distinctive stone walls of New
England, New York, and even the Kentucky Bluegrass. Once European
settlement passed from the area of heavy forest and geological riches
and onto the prairie, where neither extensive woodlands nor much
surface rock appeared, erecting enclosures became a challenge.

Into the gap came, eventually, an array of alternatives. Some use
was made of hedging plants, most notably the Osage Orange, of which
remnant examples survive to this day in several midwestern areas.
Woven wire fence was tried, first of iron and later steel, but proved
ineffective with regard to larger animals, which could simply push
through it. In the 1870s various inventors affixed to wire fencing an
array of sharp pronged attachments intended to repel any stock that
came in contact. Although these innovations had considerable effect,
they also generated various kinds of concern. It is in regard to this
particular subject that the work of Lyn Ellen Bennett and Scott Abbott
is particularly valuable. Earlier scholars, including Earl W. Hayter and
Henry and Frances McCallum chronicled various technical aspects of
the story of barbed wire. Bennett and Abbott, after briefly treating that
subject, pass on to a consideration of the rich and diverse cultural
meanings of barbed wire fencing. Following the lead of other re-
searchers, they reflect on the inherent violence of the invention, which,
after all, uses bodily pain as a means, as one 1885 comment had it, of
keeping “the ‘ins’ from being ‘outs’” and “the ‘outs’ from being ‘ins.’” Because as early as the Spanish American War and the Second Boer War barbed wire was applied to the battlefield, the technology of pain as a deterrent to movement across boundaries soon became a subject of much reflection in a variety of practical and moral contexts. Worse applications of the agricultural invention to human or, rather, inhuman purposes followed in the twentieth century, from the trenches of World War I to the concentration camps of World War II.

The authors do a great job of illustrating the many strands of this story with appropriately chosen graphic materials and, in an especially fresh fifth chapter, modern American literary texts, including Abbey’s novel and the writings of Wyoming poet and prose writer and rancher James Galvin. This is, all in all, a nice example of how much we can learn from material culture studies undertaken in a spirit of genuine interdisciplinary inquiry.


Reviewer Bruce Curtis, a native of Wapello County, Iowa, is Professor Emeritus of Michigan State University. He is the author of *Like Ordinary People: An Illustrated Iowa Social Biography of Josephine Mae Teeter Curtis and Her Times, 1903–2007* (2008) and articles in the *Iowa History Journal* and *Our Iowa*.

There is gold here, for those who choose to dig, nuggets to be found. In the front matter of this self-published work, Steven C. Hull remarks, “I did not write an academic history. This book is a compilation of biography, history and memoir.” In explicating the book’s subtitle, Hull focuses on his English and Polish ancestors’ origins and how they made their way to America, ultimately to southeastern Iowa, some to Jefferson County, but particularly to Wapello County, more particularly to Ottumwa and vicinity.

As the subtitle suggests, Hull views his ancestors as having engaged for generations, whether in Europe or America, in a struggle to rise and cling to “middle class” status. Although the term is not defined, their struggle is presented as involving enduring and generally unsuccessful attempts to become landowners in an era of booming population growth, rising prices for increasingly limited land, and agricultural markets over which they had no control. In specific instances, as strapped tenant farmers, they turned to low-paying and insecure employment in the area’s new industries.