

In Essentials, Unity: An Economic History of the Grange Movement

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In Essentials, Unity: An Economic History of the Grange Movement, by Jenny Bourne. *New Approaches to Midwestern Studies*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2017. xv, 138 pp. Illustrations, maps, tables, graphs, charts, notes, bibliography, index. \$26.95 paperback.

Reviewer Thomas Summerhill is associate professor of history at Michigan State University. He is the author of *Harvest of Dissent: Agrarianism in Nineteenth-Century New York* (2005).

In *In Essentials, Unity*, Jenny Bourne sets out to establish the foundational role of the Grange—or Patrons of Husbandry—in the history of U.S. reform organizations stretching from the post-Civil War years to the Occupy movement. She argues that the connection between the Grange and contemporary economic protests is a shared conviction that American capitalism should distribute benefits widely. Focusing her attention on Minnesota and to a lesser extent Iowa and surrounding states, Bourne locates this fight for economic justice squarely in the Midwest.

Bourne begins her study by demonstrating that the Grange, founded by Oliver H. Kelley in Washington, D.C., in 1867, grew in direct response to the declining fortunes of American farmers in the wake of the Civil War. A nonpartisan, secret organization, the Grange preached self-improvement, education, and government regulation of corporations that served the public good (railroads, utilities, grain elevators) as the way to preserve farming in America. Bourne explains that the Grange aimed primarily at preserving the competitive advantage of farmers in the evolving marketplace of the late nineteenth century. It advocated government regulation of railroad freight rates, the income tax, cooperative purchasing and marketing, and other economic reforms. She demonstrates that its perception that agriculture was falling behind other economic sectors in terms of return on investment was, in fact, accurate. Interestingly, the Grange thrived in counties served by railroads and therefore the most enmeshed in the market economy. Midwestern states like Iowa became centers of Grange activity.

Bourne notes that after a spike in Grange membership in the aftermath of the depression of 1873, the organization waned nationally. The reason for this, she contends, is that many of the Grange's economic critiques were naïve. For example, Grange members believed fervently that railroads, grain elevator operators, bankers, and merchants overcharged for services or set discriminatory rates that hurt small operators. Yet after experimenting with government regulation of common carriers, or cooperatives, or even the manufacturing of farm implements, farmers learned that such middlemen provided essential services that were difficult to replicate on their own. The Grange shifted its

emphasis toward education and mutual support, helping midwestern farmers accommodate rather than fundamentally alter the market economy. She sees in the misnamed Granger Laws of the Midwest in the 1870s not a radical agrarian agenda finding voice in statutes, but rather the beginnings of what would later become specialized commodity groups aiming to secure market share in the twentieth century. After the 1880s—and very much tracking with the nation's economics—the Grange waned, revived in the 1920s, and then eclipsed in the 1950s as farm populations fell.

In Essentials, Unity has several nice touches that make it appealing to a general audience. Bourne balances her scholarly analysis with a case study of the Minnehaha Grange in Minnesota. Her narrative of its history over many decades enables her to show the critical role the Grange played in rural community building in the Midwest. Her clear and concise treatment of how local Granges interacted with state and national bodies demonstrates the critical role they played in defining rural life in America well into the twentieth century.

Bourne's disciplined focus on the Grange, which enables her to write a modest-length book, prevents her from engaging with wider scholarly debates about agrarian activism or rural family life in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. She does not elaborate on the relationship between the Grange and the Farmer's Alliance, the People's Party, the Farm-Labor Party, or the National Farmers' Union. Each of those had reformist or radical agendas, and the Midwest was a hotbed of agrarian political revolt. Bourne leaves open the question of whether those groups drew on different constituencies, yet for specialists this is a vital question when assessing the significance of the Grange. Bourne also does not invoke the work of social historians who examine the unique features of northern farm households in this period. Strong evidence exists that farm families embraced a set of gender relations that reflected a more equitable sharing of authority between men and women that translated into the public sphere. As midwestern farm women took such a prominent role in the agrarian politics of the late nineteenth century, it would be nice to see Bourne explore the extent to which the Grange helped advance that activism.

In Essentials, Unity is a well-written, compact history of the Grange that provides an excellent starting point for understanding the organization's importance in midwestern rural life for over a century.

All in One Room: A History of Country Schools in Johnson County, Iowa, by Franklin L. Yoder. Coralville, IA: Johnson County Historical Society,