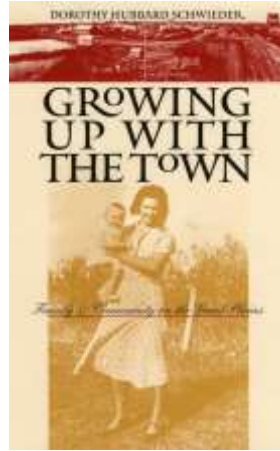


About the Book



Dorothy Hubbard Schwieder. *Growing Up with the Town: Family and Community on the Great Plains*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2002.

Synopsis

The town is Presho and the families were the Hubbards and the Andersons. The family the author grew up in consisted of ten children, of whom she was the ninth. Born in 1933, she relies on local histories, newspaper accounts, interviews, and other evidence to describe the early history of the town. For the period during which she was growing up, the 1940's and 1950's, she is more reliant upon her own memories and those of her nine siblings. Her father ran a farm machinery store on Main Street, and all of the kids worked there for a time, so Dorothy got to see the working of the town from the inside. This is a compelling account of a single family and life in a small town, as it moved into the modern era.

Summary of the Book

This book has a dual motive [as expressed by the author on page xi]: "to preserve at least a part of a small town's experience in its first fifty years of existence" and "to document the history of a family within that town and, in so doing, to interpret the experiences, values, and attitudes of some of the people who lived there." Most memoirs set on the Great Plains, according to the author of this insightful volume, dwell upon life on the farms and ranches that dot the rural countryside, not upon their counterparts—the ubiquitous small towns spread across the landscape. Dorothy Schwieder, who was born in 1933 and came of age during the late 1940's and early 1950's, blends stories and information based upon her own memories and those of her nine siblings (she was the ninth child) with telling observations obtained by the methods of a professional historian to write and interpretation of small-town life that is compelling at a number of different levels.

First, there is her own story and those of the Hubbard and Anderson families, who derived from Northern Ireland and Norway. Family and ethnicity were hugely important in the settling of the Plains. People living in Dorothy Hubbard's community understood as a matter of course which ethnic groups frequented which churches, where they tended to

live, what types of jobs they gravitated toward, and what kinds of cultural practices they preserved. When religion was added to the mixture, it sometimes stoked antagonisms that divided Catholics and Protestants. For many residents, especially among the older generation, the notion that someone of one's own "kind" might marry into the "opposition" was thought too horrible to contemplate. Sociologists would call this tendency or practice "endogamy"; many South Dakotans called it common sense or a necessary taboo. Schwieder also makes it clear that significant gender divisions prevailed in South Dakota (and American) culture into the fifties, where she ends her story, while at the same time she shows how some of the egregious barriers and inequities were beginning to break down.

In the second place, this is the story of a town—a typical railroad "T"-town (so called because the Main Street ran perpendicular to the railroad tracks) along the line of the "Milwaukee Road," which by the time Dorothy was born had also become the route of Federal Highway 16. Presho's location upon two major transportation routes and its favored geographic position—40 miles west of Chamberlain and 50 miles north and south of Winner and Pierre—conferred on it a decided advantage over nearby towns that were seeking to expand their own trade territories. Although from reading the book it is not entirely clear why Presho succeeded so well over time in its competition with its rivals, Schwieder provides clues in her descriptions of the business people and professionals who made up the core leadership of the town. Standing prominently among them was her father, Walter Hubbard. Wives and single women, who were largely relegated to secondary roles within the community, also provided crucial support and direction both inside the household and in numerous businesses, occupations, and a variety of clubs and organizations.

The spirit of community that prevailed in Presho is a third major theme in Schwieder's narrative. She clearly views her hometown in a generally positive—even nostalgic—fashion. Her researches reinforced her memories and experiences of extensive community participation within many venues: neighboring, people looking out for each other and each other's kids, engaging in school activities, participating in church activities, swimming at the new municipal pool, socializing on Main Street on Saturday nights, attending movies, listening to band concerts, participating in World War II, and in other ways. "Small towns are, by their very nature, communal entities," Schwieder notes on page 132, and she thinks this is one of their greatest recommendations.

A fourth major theme of the book is labor. Nothing characterized Plains dwellers so much as their will to work, and to work hard. Walter Hubbard was clearly wedded to his job in ways going far beyond average. Twelve- to fourteen-hour days were the norm for him. That detracted somewhat from his presence at home, but he clearly was the dominant presence within the household during the time of both of his wives, first Alice Jacobson (mother of the first seven children) and then Emma Anderson (mother of the last three, including Dorothy). His willingness and insistence upon having all of his young brood spend a great deal of time at his farm implement office, first to be watched over and cared for by him and then to assist him in his work, ensured that they would get a steady dose of

practice at working and would be force-fed a continuous litany of his beliefs, values, and observations about life.

A fifth major theme of the book is the land and the environment in general. All of the author's memories were powerfully enclosed within the broader context of the landscape and the weather that surrounded the small town of Presho, which, at less than a thousand people, seemed precariously perched on the gently rolling, mainly treeless, and semi-arid West River terrain. Perhaps the most consistent feature of the region was the constant wind. Also compelling was the dramatic shift of seasons, from scorching summers, when temperatures frequently elevated over 100 degrees, to the freezing temperatures and snows of winter. The Great Plains can be unforgiving, Schwieder impresses upon us, and they demand accommodation from the intrepid people who venture out upon them.

That point carries over in to a sixth and final theme that will be mentioned here: the cycles of history that are heavily intertwined with variations in the weather that occur from year to year. The author is a professional historian, attuned to identifying patterns and configurations and to looking for causes and consequences, change and continuity. Her book divides into two parts around 1938, when the weather turned for the better, rain returning in sufficient amounts to green up the countryside that year. That was the year she turned five, old enough to remember much about her own doings and those of her family. So she shifts the narrative from an analysis of the town and its development, based largely upon research in historical documents and records and memories of her siblings, to an account of the family, grounded in her own memories, supplemented by her siblings' recollections. Two things stood out in driving events during the 1920's and 1930's, where most of the story concentrates: cycles of weather and economic ups and downs. The "dirty thirties" got labeled that way for good reasons—terrible drought conditions and terrific dust storms, along with the grasshoppers and other pests that accompanied them. They also, of course, were characterized by hard economic times, which forced two out of every five families in the state onto the relief rolls. This book is largely about how the people on the Plains reacted to those two disasters. Ironically, one thing that helped them cope was that low farm prices, farm foreclosures, and bank failures during the twenties in South Dakota helped prepare them for the hard times they experienced during the following decade.

This, then, is a book that appeals from many angles. Readers will differ in which parts of it they enjoy the most and learn the most from. All will find something of interest in it, and all South Dakotans will discover much that is familiar in its pages, even as they learn things they hadn't known before.

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