

Discussion Questions

1. The author tells us that her purpose in writing the book is to chronicle the early history of her home town of Presho as well as to tell the story of her own family while she was growing up. How good a job do you think she does of integrating these two parallel lines of development?
2. Schwieder says that most people tend to believe that their family is interesting and just a little unusual. Do you think her family fits those categories?
3. She observes that there were no journals or diaries for her to rely upon in telling her story and that most of her information about the family derived from her own memories and those of her siblings. Do you believe reliable history can be written in this fashion? Would you be able to write a similar book about your family and your hometown? What difficulties would you encounter?
4. The author spends some time tracing her family ancestry on both sides. How much influence did her English/Irish and Norwegian backgrounds have upon her?
5. How important was religion in the family's life? Would Schwieder have been a different person had she been Catholic or Norwegian Lutheran rather than a member of the Methodist Episcopal church?
6. We know that the author went on to become a professor of history and a well-published author at Iowa State University. What indications are there in this book that this might become her eventual role?
7. Although Schwieder's father clearly was the emotional center—as well as the decision-making authority—of the household, her mother (and for her seven oldest siblings, her mother's predecessor) was also a strong presence and influence. Discuss the family dynamics that developed over time and the respective roles played by mother and father within the home.
8. Presho was a typical "T"-town on the Plains. What do we learn about it from the book? How would you compare it to the town or city that you live in?
9. With approximately 600 residents, Presho developed a healthy amount of community activities. From your own experience and knowledge, was it typical in this respect? Would this have been an appealing town to live in? If you had owned a magic wand and could have changed the town in any way, what would you have done, if anything?

10. The movement of people in and out of town, according to the author, was remarkably high. From a distance, it seems almost like Grand Central Station. What effect do you think this high degree of mobility had upon people's lives?
11. Descriptions such as those of Lorena Hickok of life in South Dakota during the "dirty thirties" sound almost unbelievable to those who did not actually live through the experience. What impact do you imagine these harsh climatic and economic conditions had on people's psyches?
12. Schwieder provides a rather detailed description and analysis of the physical reality of the house her family lived in as well as an emotional map of the activities that occurred there. How would you describe those goings-on?
13. The author titles chapter five "The Wonderful World of Work." What was wonderful about it? Or do you think it was wonderful?
14. Can you imagine plucking chickens for three cents apiece? Is the work world easier now or harder than it was in Presho during the thirties and forties?
15. Do you think all the child labor that occurred at the time was exploitative?
16. On page 119, Schieder describes West River South Dakota as "a culture shaped by place." What does she mean by this? Is place as all-important now as it was during the time that she was growing up? Explain.
17. How would you describe the social structure of the town? How does it compare with your own experience? Have conditions improved or deteriorated during the past half-century and more?
18. The Hubbard family prospered on the basis of the farm machinery business, which four of the family's six sons also went into. Small town viability obviously depends upon the health of its businesses, which, in turn, depends upon the prosperity of farmers and ranchers on the surrounding countryside. What do you think is the long-term prospect for towns like Presho in the coming decades?
19. What do you think are the strengths and weaknesses of the book? Would you recommend it to others?

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