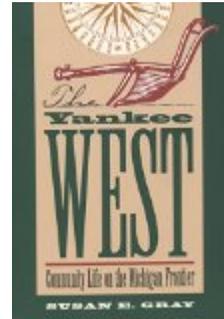


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Susan E. Gray. *The Yankee West: Community Life on the Michigan Frontier*. Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1996. xii + 227 pp. \$23.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-4610-0; \$55.00 (library), ISBN 978-0-8078-2301-9.

Reviewed by Robert Irwin (University of Alberta)
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The Yankee West is both a traditional local history of Richland, Climax, and Alamo townships in Kalamazoo County, Michigan and a cultural history of Yankee settlers in antebellum America. The book examines issues of national concern and consequence through the lens of local events and personality. Readers will learn how the Yankee settlers responded to the emergence of market-based agriculture, the Second Great Awakening, and the continued development of party politics. They will discover that a local bourgeoisie and the dialectic between market and community within Yankee culture explains the local response to the challenges presented. The book, however, remains focused on Turnerian perspectives of the frontier experience. What emerges is an anti-Turnerian study of frontier life that is Turnerian in its approach to the topic.

Canadian historian Paul Voisey notes that local histories can descend into a problematic illustration of the nation as developed in the community.[1] Professor Gray avoids some, but not all of the inherent problems in the local history approach. Although Gray addresses the major historical issues of late antebellum America, she maintains a sympathetic concern for the peculiarities of local issues. Her emphasis upon local personalities and the use of family stories as descriptive tools of analysis is especially effective. *The Yankee West*, nevertheless, is not a study in local identity.

Rather than the local identity, Gray is concerned with the identity of the Yankees. The Yankee settlers, she argues, were an ethnic group. They shared two cultural markers: “market involvement and community institutions” (p. 3). Yankee culture emerged in the dialectic between the market and morality. The Yankees sought “to

create traditional rural communities of unlimited potential for economic growth” (p. 15). In the process, they changed the dialectic to one which emphasised individual wealth and prosperity. It was not the frontier which inspired the changes, however, but Yankee culture itself. Life in Kalamazoo County is virtually irrelevant to the process.

The book begins with a discussion about the designs of settlement. Gray emphasises the continuities between Michigan settlement and earlier town settling schemes of New Englanders. She proves effectively that settlement changed the dialectic between market and community in favour of the market. The first character in the book, Isaac Barnes, a would be proprietor and founder of the Kalamazoo Emigration Society, is one of those destroyed by this changing dialectic. He lasted only a decade in Richland township before moving on to other economic ventures in neighbouring townships. Barnes, and those like him, represent the traditional New England proprietary settler (which Turner admired) who linked the hope for a pious, spiritual community with economic wealth and prosperity. Instead of the old Yankee values, however, the Yankee West emerged as a class-based society in which status would be defined by wealth and capital. Gray also develops national themes regarding the disbursement of federal lands, land speculation, and absentee landlords in this chapter. This linkage between national issues as seen through the locality and the transformation of Yankee culture continues throughout the work.

The strongest elements of this book are the sections on agricultural development and the role of external markets and local transactions. Economic historians like to debate the intricacies of the transition of the farm econ-

omy from market participation to market dependency. Gray demonstrates quite clearly that such discussions are less than valuable with regard to Yankee settlement in antebellum America. By the beginnings of settlement in Kalamazoo County in the 1830s, the external market was relevant, necessary, and desired. Yankees sought market opportunities. Although they may not have depended on the market for survival, they depended upon it to achieve their goals. From the beginning, the production of wheat for market dominated Kalamazoo County agriculture, but Yankee farmers also diversified their holdings into blooded cattle, hogs, and sheep production to obtain better access to markets. This pattern reflects changes in New England as well as Michigan.

The local economy, transactions between neighbours, functioned as an element of the external market. Given the vagaries of the currency markets in antebellum America, local transactions and personal notes functioned as another source of currency in the district. Most of the local credit transactions eventually arrived at a district merchant, who eventually had to turn the personal note into a currency of exchange with the external market. Transactions often considered to fall within the domain of “neighbourliness” were in reality intended to provide a financial reward and profit.

Yankee family structures and obligations did not exist outside this structure either. Farm land generated “capital to provide sons with starts in life and parents with retirement portions” (p. 102). Yankee settlers in Michigan thus sought farms as a source of capital and decisions such as family farm contiguity, cooperation between fathers and sons or brothers, and distribution of patrimony were made in order to maximise the market opportunities for capital accretion. Mothers and daughters, Gray notes, were outside of this system. Once a son had obtained his start, or the brothers were secure in their economic status, they ceased to cooperate or function as an economic unit. This change reflected the changing nature of Yankee families and communities as a whole, and Gray draws examples from the court records of New England and New York to demonstrate the widespread nature of the change.

The last two chapters in the book examine conflicts between Congregationalists and Presbyterians, and the rise of party politics in the townships as an aspect of Yankee culture. Here the limitation of the sources hindered Gray’s ability to fully examine the events. Church records exist for Richland township but are erratic and the records do not exist for Climax or Alamo. Voting

records and poll results do not exist for any of the townships, and Alamo township disappears from the study.

Religion reflected the moral aspect of Yankee culture. In “Religion and Community,” Gray shows how the Second Great Awakening and the Plan of Union between Presbyterians and Congregationalists affected the development of community churches within a local context. While unified churches developed in both Richland and Climax townships, competing elites within the townships battled for leadership within the church community. Both elites saw church leadership as essential to imposing their vision of moral order on the community. “In this,” Gray writes, “the experience of both townships points to the profound impact of evangelical Protestantism in the antebellum period as both a centrifugal and centripetal force—splintering community churches yet blurring doctrinal differences among them” (p. 136).

Politics reflected the economic orientation of Yankee culture. In “Politics and Community,” Gray shows that politics was similarly used by local elites as a method of establishing community leadership in the economic sphere. Democratic versus anti-Democratic political combinations were better understood as competitions for local patronage than ideological divisions.

I have some problems with the book. As a Canadian historian who studies settlement in the twentieth-century Canadian west, I am always amazed at the omnipresence of Frederick Jackson Turner in American history. Professor Gray, like so many historians, finds a suitable, if unnecessary, strawman in Turner. While Turner emphasised the frontier as the process of change, Gray finds the lives of her township settlers demonstrate significant continuities with the New England past. Changes which occurred in the community, she argues, have little to do with frontier life and much more to do with the on-going discourse between Yankee concepts of commerce and spirituality. All of Gray’s work stands on its own without the presence of Turner, and indeed, by using Turner as her frame of reference, she limited her examination to Turnerian concepts of the frontier. She does not draw effectively on the work of environmental historians, nor on the identity scholarship emerging in European history.[2] As a result, *The Yankee West* tends to be a Turnerian book.

In the chapter on the necessary market, for example, Gray provides a valuable discussion of the farmers’ struggle to make their farms financially profitable. Turner’s emphasis upon change, and Gray’s desire to show continuity, limit the discussion, however. Grey

notes that farmers made adjustments to local environmental conditions—in other words change—but does not discuss the peculiarities which may distinguish agriculture in Richland, Climax, or Alamo township. Instead she focuses on the Yankee discourse between commerce and community and makes comparisons to Yankee farmers in Vermont, New Hampshire, and New York—in other words continuity. She never asks how the Michigan Yankees learned to farm the new environment or whether the decision to increase oats acreage or the reduced importance of sheep and wool production could be traced to local environmental limitations.

Similarly, Gray's discussion of the political dynamic in Richland and Climax townships is tinged by Turnerian philosophy. Gray notes that the Richland township was divided politically on the basis of religion and geography—Methodists on poor lands on the western edge of the township tended to be Democratic while Yankee Congregationalists and Presbyterians in the east tended to be Whig/Republican (p. 155). Identity scholars have concluded that people have multiple identities that constantly interact and may influence political decisions, yet Gray does little to investigate this dynamic. Instead she focuses on the role of the townships' emergent bourgeoisie in the political debate. She demonstrates that political divisions emerged less from philosophical differences than from contests for political patronage and community status. Kalamazoo county was not egalitarian.

Turner's concept of the democratic, egalitarian frontier is thus destroyed (this concept of course has been destroyed so many times it is hard to understand why it still exists), but the peculiar nature of Kalamazoo politics is left undiscovered. To be fair, the paucity of political records hindered Gray's work and a detailed analysis of political patterns is difficult. But surely regional political issues such as land speculation, railroad development, tax rates, or wheat marketing affected local political discourse.

Thirdly, the new western historians and western Canadian historians have been influenced by the concept of Metropolitanism. Where is Detroit, New York, or Washington in the political and economic discourse of this Yankee community? Surely regional resentment over eastern control of markets or railroad financing or currency manipulations led to some protests in the district. Did it show up in the political discourse?

What about the transition to market-based agriculture? I would suggest that a lack of resentment to-

wards Metropolitan financial and political control—if the absence of this material in the book is a symbol of its absence in the community—means the external market was less important than Gray argues. Furthermore, in her chapter on religious life, Gray argues disputes between settlers over the structure of the community church resonated in the external debates between Presbyterians and Congregationalists over the Plan of Union and were resolved in the case of Richland township by changes in the external relationship. This type of relationship is at the core of Metropolitan history, yet Metropolitanism is not mentioned. It is interesting that an anti-Turnerian book does not draw more effectively upon Metropolitanism.

As a last critique of the book, I would note the publisher's decision to print the statistical data in appendices at the back of the book and in table rather than chart form. I found it cumbersome and difficult to follow Gray's useful explanations of farm production decisions, capital accretion, land expansion, property tax obligations, and personal information which she obtained from the census and other statistical sources. Figures incorporated into the text illustrating the trends she highlights would have been far more useful. Similarly, a few more maps highlighting the geographic and political features of the townships would have helped.

I make these criticisms to inspire discussion. This book is solid work which makes effective use of a variety of sources and makes sense of local development despite the erratic nature of the archival evidence. As Gray notes, sources are difficult to find and more often than not are incomplete. Her work is thus valuable and worthwhile. She makes a compelling case for the emergence of market-based agriculture in antebellum America and for the dialectic between market and community as a tool for understanding the evolving Yankee culture. Furthermore, too often regional historians think of their region as unique and emphasise the uniqueness. It is refreshing to read a book which emphasises continuity rather than change in the settlement process.

Notes

[1]. Paul Voisey, "Rural Local History and the Prairie West," *Prairie Forum* 10 (Autumn 1985).

[2]. Charles Tilly, "Introduction," *Citizenship, Identity, and Social History*, (Cambridge: International Review of Social History, Supplement 3, 1996) reviews this literature.

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