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*A Store Almost in Sight: The Economic Transformation of
Missouri from the Louisiana Purchase to the Civil War* by
Jeff Bremer (review)

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Book Reviews

Jeff Bremer, *A Store Almost in Sight: The Economic Transformation of Missouri from the Louisiana Purchase to the Civil War*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2014. 252 pp. \$39.95, paper.

Jeff Bremer tells an engaging story of economic transformation in the core region of the Missouri River Valley from the Louisiana Purchase to the Civil War. He creatively employs a vast array of primary sources to document the lived experiences of countless white settlers—"the people, the economic choices they made, and their struggles to build their lives" deep in the interior of the early republic.

A Store Almost in Sight opens against the pre-Louisiana Purchase backdrop: the French and Indian fur trade; subsequent Spanish control; the travails of the Osage Indians ending in their forcible removal; and the rapid in-migration of white settlers. In his 1819 report, Stephen H. Long, the explorer and topographical engineer, said of the town of Chariton: it exists "on a spot where two years previous, no permanent habitation had been established. Such is the rapidity, with which the forests of Missouri are being filled with an industrious and enterprising population" (13).

Fueled by Gottfried Duden's *Report on a Journey to the Western States of North America and a Stay of Several Years Along the Missouri* (1829), white migrants poured into the Missouri River Valley mainly from the Upper South (Kentucky, Tennessee, Virginia, and North Carolina). The "push" came from bad conditions at home and the "pull" from the lure of cheap, fertile land, and the opportunity to start a new life. Three waves of migrants generated distinct eras of boom and bust before 1861. Many agreed with Frederick Steines who wrote back to relatives in 1834: "We have all been resurrected to a new and better life" (41).

Immigrants considered Missouri a land of opportunity, but establish-

ing a home there was not for the faint of heart. Some of the newly arrived were too poor to buy land. Those who did typically faced high start up costs in acquiring livestock, clearing land, and struggling with disease—cholera, malaria, dysentery, typhoid, and whooping cough. Death was an ever-present threat for all ages. Nicholas Hesse, a German settler, summed up the situation: “only a few Germans are able to stand the multitudinous, vexatious and hard labor” (60).

The hardships of daily life led white settlers to forge communal work arrangements. In his reminiscences, Philander Draper explains how the neighborhood exchanges worked: “Distinctions of wealth or other such accidental circumstances had little influence. The common dependence of man up on his fellow man rendered all such pure accidents worthless. Physical helpfulness in time of need was superior to everything else” (89–90). Work sharing occasions—barn raisings, land clearing, corn husking, hunting, quilting, and sewing—were typically also social occasions buoyed by free flowing alcohol.

Within farm households, a different culture of cooperation prevailed. Men and teenage boys performed the heavier, backbreaking tasks in the fields during daylight. By contrast, women’s work and the work of their older daughters seemed endless—preparing meals, knitting and sewing, caring for and training younger children, and assisting with lighter male tasks. Henriette Burn expresses the toll such a life could exact: “What else should I complain about? That I am often truly vexed? That it is no fun to represent cook, nursemaid, and housewife in one person?” (105).

Itinerant peddlers and roving merchants helped widen the market for both consumer goods and farm produce in the early age of flatboats, barges, and keelboats. By the 1830s and 1840s innovations in transportation—canals, steamboats, and eventually railroads—were widening the market for farm goods produced by male and female labor and consumption goods desired by farm families. In an 1840 letter back home, R. Rowland writes, “There are 150 or more steamboats up the river in the course of a year and a great business is done and increasing” (127).

By the outbreak of the Civil War, market participation was routine in the Missouri River Valley, as it was much earlier in the Ohio River Valley. The growth of multiproduct general stores soon anchored both small villages and trade center towns. Stores offered farm families an expanded range of consumer goods—coffee, candy, shoes, and clothing—backed by a credit system. W. L. Irwin proudly wrote in a letter to family members: “we have a store almost in sight” (141).

As a former quantitative economic historian, I greatly admire Bremer's unabashedly literary approach to the economic and social history of antebellum Missouri. He draws on an enormous number of eyewitness accounts, memoirs, diaries, and letters that provide windows into the hearts and minds of white settlers. Readers get a deeper and more intimate understanding than is possible when historical actors are reduced to mere data points in statistical studies.

Yet the social scientist in me can't help but ask: How representative of the wider population are these wonderfully rich literary sources? Their sheer number suggests they might be, and if not, it may not matter. I wonder more about Bremer's decision not to include slaveowning settler families in his study. Referring readers to the valuable works of Diana Burke and R. Douglas Hurt on slavery in "Little Dixie," he concludes that before the Civil War the "peculiar institution did not impede involvement in the growing market economy, since Southerners had long demonstrated an interest in commerce" (160). Yet incorporating literary sources from slaveholders might make his story even richer by showing the different dynamics in family farms with and without slaves.

Another rationale for including slaveholding families is the book's closing sentence: "The opportunities for improving life that the market presented [commercial farmers] before the Civil War decreased in Missouri in the decades after the war" (163). If true, then postbellum Missouri lagged well behind other Midwest states as data on city size show. In 1870 St. Louis was the Midwest's largest city, just ahead of Chicago. Twenty years later Chicago was more than twice the size of St. Louis and by 1920 Chicago had dwarfed all other Midwest cities in size, including Detroit and Cleveland, both of which were larger than St. Louis. Lots of things may explain the relative decline of Missouri but having to adjust to the double legacy of slavery and St. Louis's key role in America's internal slave was a tall order.

Missouri's legacy of slavery raises another big issue. As a former slave state, is Missouri a midwestern state? Many people think so, and Jeff Bremer's fine book certainly supports this view. Then what about Kentucky? Both Missouri and Kentucky share a legacy of slavery, and their southern borders are at much the same latitude yet most people think of Kentucky as part of the Upper South, not the Midwest. Why the difference?

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