INTRODUCTION

In south-central Miami County, Kansas, where county road 343 and Block Road intersect, a large metal sign marks the location of this rural crossroad for the passing motorist; it is a blue sign with bold white letters that says simply, “Block Corners.” To an uninformed traveler the name means nothing, but one hundred years ago these four corners clamored with horses, wagons, and people. Block Corners served as a gathering place and commercial hub for the German-Lutheran community that had grown around the spot. Today, asphalt roads, houses, and trailers have replaced the dirt roads, small businesses, and post office, and the traveler no longer needs to speak German to buy, sell, or converse with the residents.

One-half mile south of Block Corners, a two-story parsonage comes into view, and soon one sees the church grounds spreading along the west side of the road. A modern-looking church faces east, and its glassed-in sign reads

Trinity Lutheran Church
Faith, Grace, Scripture
Rt. 2
Paola, Kansas

The cemetery south of the church reveals the history of the congregation, and over four hundred tombstones attest to those who died in “faith.” A few hundred yards away school children play outside their rural schoolhouse amid an array of buildings, playgrounds, and open pasture. The two-room Lutheran schoolhouse and the wood-framed house for the teacher complete the church grounds.

This type of rural scene is not uncommon in Kansas or elsewhere in the Midwest. Many rural churches still have Sunday services and some rural schools have survived even in the face of extensive bus service and school consolidation. The religious and ethnic character of the Block Corners’ community is representative of the many nineteenth-century rural-ethnic communities scattered throughout the Midwest.
These communities, many no longer visible on the rural landscape, provide lasting legacies for the generations of women and men who came from their midst—a legacy that began, and sometimes ended, at “four corners” on the midwestern landscape.

Religion, ethnicity, and gender mark and shape our past, providing richness and texture to individual and group experience. It is this combination of factors that creates identities and communities, which, in turn, educate the young and ensure the transmission of values, beliefs, and culture across generations. In 1868 the community of Block, Kansas, was the starting place for such an endeavor. Most of the original settlers were farmers from northern Germany who came to Kansas after brief stopovers in other midwestern states. The German Lutherans at Block used their ethnic heritage in combination with their religious doctrines to create an ethnic enclave, continue their agrarian lifestyle, and perpetuate family and farm life on American soil. Trinity Lutheran Church (Missouri Synod) and its school served as focal points in the development of Block’s people and community.

It is important to note that although the community was incorporated and had a post office for twenty-one years, Block was a village community in every sense. Its location and size make the discussion of demographics and population somewhat problematic. The commercial hub at Block Corners developed in conjunction with the ethnic and religious aspects of the church and school; these buildings and Block Corners were located in the southeast corner of East Valley Township, but many church members and store patrons lived in three other adjoining townships. German-Lutheran homesteads fanned out in all directions around Block Corners and the church grounds.

Since state and federal census data were organized around township demographics, there was no official census for the Block community; church membership data provided the best opportunity to assess population numbers. In 1884 Trinity Lutheran Church boasted 278 members; membership in the congregation peaked in 1920 with 485 members, and the church population never dipped below the 400 mark through 1945. Plat and land-ownership maps matched with church membership data provided the best information on the size and range of the Block community, but the cohesiveness and identity of the community were defined and maintained more by religious and ethnic identity than by geographic boundaries.

Moreover, problems arise when demographics alone are used to por-
tray a community since most public documents reflect and record white male activity. Although such records tell part of the story, the viewpoints and perspectives of ethnic groups, women, children, and people who were not landowners receive little elaboration except as seen through the eyes of the male officials or the clergy who created the documents.

Nineteenth-century rural communities prevalent throughout the Midwest and the western United States provide another challenge: Much research has centered on medium-sized towns and the "urban frontier," but only a few studies have attempted to re-create life and community in nineteenth-century rural America. Studying the Block community reinforces the importance of using a variety of sources, but more important, it adds a new dimension to the existing historiography of village communities. Like the historians of colonial communities, I have focused on one community and have attempted to study it in depth; however, since demographics alone do not tell the complete story, I have also incorporated qualitative research methods, including newspaper accounts, church records, reminiscences, and oral histories of persons who grew up in the community.

Within this village community setting, I chose to focus on the transmission of education and culture across four generations. I use the term "education" in its broadest sense to include the acquisition of cultural knowledge, socialization, and the transmission of beliefs and values. This broad view of education enables me to see the Block community as a whole and not in isolated fragments. The interdependence of men, women, and children, as well as the institutions they created to perpetuate ideals, values, and beliefs, comes to the fore. By using and integrating research methodology and ideas from an interdisciplinary perspective, women, families, communities, networks of kinship and association, and all aspects of culture as potential educators become a part of history.

By asking questions about rural ethnicity, religion, and gender, I intend for this study of a community to serve as a nexus for disciplinary research. Specifically, how did the Block community transmit its culture? How did the content and process of education for females differ from the experience of males? How did the religious institutions of church and parochial school serve as transmitters of education and culture? How did the ethnic family function as educator? What were the effects of the rural topography and of American culture on education in Block?
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METHODOLOGY

The German-Lutheran community of Block, Kansas, provides a provocative setting for asking questions about education and culture. Yet to comprehend the lives that the people of Block created for themselves it is necessary to develop a new theoretical framework, which, unlike those used by many historians, does not assume a dichotomy between public (male) and private (female) spheres. This public/private construct is not always helpful in describing rural or ethnic peoples’ experiences, because for many women and men a clear separation of worlds does not exist and never has. For historians to operate solely within such a polarized construct may render many individual contributions and experiences invisible or insignificant.

With most dichotomies, one side tends to be viewed as more “valuable,” depending upon cultural beliefs and the interpretation of their sources by historians. Separating female and male behavior into competing and opposing spheres does little to enhance understanding of the reciprocity needed to maintain any community. To reject the notion of a dichotomy is not to ignore gender differences or to assume that reciprocal interactions ensure equality of opportunity or experience. Certainly, in theological terms, the Block community was a patriarchal environment.\(^4\) Still, under this patriarchal umbrella, individual women and men developed their own consciousness and behaved in specific ways that the historian may understand better if preconceived notions about dichotomies and polarities are set aside before interpretations are made.

To avoid entering the Block community from the front door of male domination/female victimization or from the back door of female superiority/male indifference, I have attempted to construct a side door into the intricacies of the community. I used a theoretical framework designed to examine “networks of association” and to explore the ways these networks transmitted education and culture across four generations in Block.\(^5\) In other words, networks of association are the arenas in which to discover how gender, ethnicity, class, region, and religion educate and affect both group and individual behavior.\(^6\) This approach permits me to analyze the interactions between the people and their institutions within the context of a specific setting; moreover, the reciprocity and independence of women, men, and children can be noted and explored.

I have chosen to examine four educational networks for the Block com-
community: church, school, family, and the outside world. Analyzing these networks gave me the opportunity to discuss the formal as well as the informal ways that individuals functioned within this rural-ethnic community. Within each of these networks, life-course differences, gender differences, and continuity/change across generations were assessed. Such an analysis also facilitated examining the influence of American technology and culture within the community.

A close look at gender, ethnicity, and religion within each network provided insights into four generations of struggle, change, and assimilation in the community. For example, although all the networks of association played a role in the transmission of beliefs, values, and culture, the church and the school functioned as the hub around which the entire community lived and worked. This powerful combination of ethnic-religious institutions effectively resisted linguistic change (German to English), succumbing only after much internal controversy and two world wars with Germany. The third generation in Block, who came of age just before World War I, provided the pivotal point for change. The availability of birth control, increased economic options, military service, advances in transportation, and outside secular contacts served to change this generation’s perceptions of themselves and their community.

Even in this highly patriarchal, authoritarian community, men, women, and children adapted and transformed their own educational networks and activities. By the 1930s the youth group and the Ladies Aid Society had expanded self-governance, increased autonomy, and learned to parlay organizational activities into money-making endeavors that increased their prestige and assured their existence. Clearly, the role of these informal educational (nonschool) settings cannot be ignored or understated as part of the impetus for change. Finally, the educational networks of association demonstrated the important role that rural topography and advanced technology played in this four-generational portrait. The availability of cars, trains, modern conveniences, and radio changed forever the dynamics of religious and geographic isolation that had solidified nineteenth- and early twentieth-century life in Block.
CRITICAL COMPONENTS FOR LONGEVITY

Through examining and analyzing formal and informal educational experiences, I explore the transmission of education across four generations in the Block community. Focusing specifically on education, I examine continuity and change over time, comparing and contrasting Block’s development to that of other German and immigrant communities, urban and rural, that developed during the nineteenth century. Further, I argue that the education of four generations in Block was more total, ongoing, and pervasive than that in most nineteenth-century immigrant communities. Three critical factors combined to create a community that actively resisted assimilation and encouraged community cohesiveness, achieving longevity well into the twentieth century. First, the German Lutherans in Block belonged to a religious group of Lutherans (Missouri Synod) that tightly bonded ethnicity to religious beliefs. Missouri Synod Lutheranism emphasized the interdependence between German language and culture and reine Lehre ("pure doctrine"), requiring members to shun Americanism and promoting isolation and a defensive posture toward any religious group, including other Germans or Lutherans, who differed on theological or social issues. Exposure to "outsiders" was strongly discouraged, and the authority and doctrine of Missouri Synod Lutheranism insulated members by stressing their Germanness and their religious purity. In fact, the clergy often told members of the community that associating with "outsiders" was a sin and a threat to their salvation. In the synod's view, religion and ethnicity were inseparable—they were explicitly bound together, so both must be protected.

With its theological-linguistic stance, its rural immigrant character and its thorough educational system, the Missouri Synod was considered "the most compact German culture group in the United States . . . perhaps the only separate culture-group which has a perfect organism for self-perpetuation on such a high and well-rationalized plane."7

The church and parochial schools instilled the necessary education in four generations in Block, reinforcing this ethnic and religious identity through the use of a national publishing house and all levels of educational institutions to educate children, teachers, and clergy.
Second, the Block community had a high level of homogeneity in its population throughout the seventy-seven years covered in this generational study. The largest group of people who settled the community at Block came from northern Germany (Hannover Province). They had similar rural backgrounds, spoke a Hannoverian dialect, and had come to the United States to own land and to continue their farm and family patterns. Generational land inheritance patterns and endogamy helped perpetuate the patterns of homogeneity; also, until 1924 slow but continuous migration from Germany encouraged the continued use of the German language and maintained constant interaction with the mother culture. Throughout its seventy-seven-year history, Block maintained the educational institutions of church and school, and this triad of church, school, and family successfully indoctrinated four generations. Only the economic and political exigencies of World War I and its aftermath began to wear away some of the deepest layers of homogeneity.

Third, Block’s midwestern location and rural isolation created an environment that severely limited contacts during the first fifty years of the community’s existence. Kansas, and most of the states west of the Mississippi River, offered land and opportunity to build communities and ways of life to land-hungry immigrants in the nineteenth century. Unlike the densely populated eastern states, western expansion provided white European immigrants with an opportunity to recreate communities patterned on Old World customs. Compounding regional isolation, early roads in and around Block were often impassable and rivers uncrossable until the county began improving roads and building bridges in the late nineteenth century. Until the advent of the automobile and World War I, the people traveled by foot or by horse and buggy. Although many passenger trains ran through the county, seven miles stood between most residents of Block and the train depot in nearby Paola. The rural community maintained its own commercial center, post office, telephone service, school, and church until well into the twentieth century. The first and second generation purchased most of the supplies they needed at Block Corners and thus avoided trips to larger nearby towns. Students in Block went to the parochial school, attending high school in large numbers only when rural bus service began in the late 1930s.

How representative was the Block community in comparison to other ethnic settlements or other rural-ethnic enclaves? Nineteenth-
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century Kansas was replete with small, rural-ethnic settlements, and in many ways Block was no different from other midwestern rural-ethnic communities, many of which developed around an ethnic church and espoused traditional, conservative values. Yet rarely do these immigrant settlements contain the three critical components of longevity: a religious-ethnic bond (that discouraged outside contacts), homogeneity of population, and regional isolation. For example, Scandinavian-Lutheran settlements in the Midwest often included a homogeneous group living in rural isolation, but their ethnic identity was not as closely tied with their religious identity, nor were their religious practices as restrictive. German Catholics created rural villages, had homogeneous populations, and had a parish church and school, but their ethnic identity was not directly reinforced by their religious allegiance to the Vatican. The ethnic diversity of the Roman Catholic church forces it to accommodate a more pluralistic ethnic identity. For Roman Catholics, remaining true to their religious prerogatives did not depend on their ethnic culture, or vice versa. Urban immigrants, although they created strong ethnic enclaves within large cities, lost any initial homogeneity sooner because the outside world surrounded their subcommunity and could hardly be ignored for many generations. Certainly the Block community serves as a model for religious-ethnic communities in rural areas; furthermore, it also represents an example of a community that effectively encapsulated itself in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In many ways, it falls on the accommodation-assimilation continuum between religiously conservative, rural communities and the religious exclusivity typical of Amish, Mennonite, and Mormon rural communities.