Life at Four Corners

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Published by University Press of Kansas

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Life at Four Corners: Religion, Gender, and Education in a GermanLutheran Community, 1868 -1945.


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CONCLUSION

The Block community and its people created networks of association that educated, shaped, and molded four generations of German Lutherans in Miami County, Kansas. Church, school, family, and outside networks each played a role in the transmission of beliefs, values, and culture; age, kinship, and gender defined the networks and taught pervasive and invaluable lessons. The educational networks of association influenced individual and group behavior in a community that closely bonded ethnicity to religion, included a homogeneous population, and had the benefit of rural and regional isolation. These three factors effectively meshed to provide an educational setting that was total, pervasive, and ongoing for four generations.

Of the four networks of association, the church and school functioned as the hub around which the entire community lived and worked, and their interconnection increased their power and influence. Church networks were gender-defined, and age determined the entry and exit patterns of women and men. The hierarchy of authority remained solidly male in a church that firmly believed in the subordination of women and children. The male voters' assembly functioned as the governing body of the church, and in this educational arena men worked out individual and group conflicts similar to those of Jon Gjerde's Norwegian Lutherans in Minnesota; theological discussions often masked personal dislikes and individual and group power struggles within the immigrant community. Unlike Catholics and some Protestant groups, Missouri Synod men called their own pastor, who served at the whim of the voters' assembly. As in other rural and urban immigrant churches, men learned democratic processes, particularly through group meetings, voting, and the financing of church activities.

The church not only functioned as a conservator of German language and culture but as a powerful social control over individual
behavior. Like eighteenth-century Puritan institutions, the voters' assembly and pastor in Block served as judge and jury when a member's behavior did not conform to community standards. Early pastors constantly reminded the men to inform others when they observed "sinful behavior." A serious offense often required a public apology in the form of a letter or a personal appearance. This strict control diminished in the 1920s after the conservative, German-born pastors died and when it became apparent that third-generation men would no longer tolerate such clerical control. Expanded mobility and economic options provided the third generation with the opportunity to leave the community or to attend the town church if they disagreed with the pastor or the voters' assembly.

Women and eventually adolescents defined a place for themselves by creating church-related activities that justified separate associations. The organized groups of Ladies Aid and the Walther League operated at the discretion of the men, but in time each group expanded its self-governance and independent actions. The women successfully blended social gatherings with domestic activities, and the youth group combined early Bible study and educational activities with social events and trips. Like their husbands and fathers, women and children developed skills in financing, leadership, group interactions, and independence in general. With true American entrepreneurial spirit, members of each organization learned to parlay domestic and social activities into money-making endeavors that increased each group's prestige and ensured its continuation.

Immigrant churches played a major educational role in rural and urban communities, and of the four networks, the church was affected least by Americanization and the passage of time. For over seventy years its formal organizations, structure of authority, and character of activities changed only by degree. Immigrant churches played a major educational role in rural and urban communities, and of the four networks, the church was affected least by Americanization and the passage of time. For over seventy years its formal organizations, structure of authority, and character of activities changed only by degree.3

Trinity Lutheran Church provided a continuous, unchanging, and pervasive mechanism for training young and old in how to think and how to live. It is not difficult to understand the lack of internal change if one remembers that it took the most threatening outside pressures of World War I to precipitate institutional change. In a hierarchical world where men were often reluctant to challenge the authority of the pastor, it is no wonder that change came slowly for marginal groups such as women and children.

Gaining strength through its close association with the church,
the school network taught children strong, consistent messages about beliefs and behavior. The education of the young was considered important, not just because the community valued literacy but because it was the best way to inculcate Christian values and beliefs. Young children learned social and gender roles in conjunction with religious doctrine, firmly linking appropriate gender behavior to religious imperatives. Like the church, male authority was unquestioned. Unlike the public schools, the school at Block permitted children to see few female teachers. Girls learned to acquiesce, and boys learned that age and status gave the male teacher unyielding control in the classroom. The melting pot of the public school remained remote and had little effect until children in Block started attending public high school in the late 1930s.

Formal education remained relatively unchanged in curriculum, discipline, and teachers' role models until the fourth generation began attending school in the late 1920s and early 1930s. The aftereffects of World War I and the more assimilated third-generation parents forced the school to Americanize, particularly in curriculum. Female teachers were more commonplace, and all teachers appeared to rely less on corporal punishment as the main method for controlling the classroom. Aided by rural isolation, Block's protective and insular institutions functioned with unparalleled authority, staving off outside religious and cultural threats to its unity. Even if individuals were tempted by the outside world, Block's institutions remained unwavering in their constancy and "truth." Institutional education was authoritarian, traditional, and total. For some people, the protection was unwanted and resented; but for most, it offered strength, assurance, and unfailing support from birth to death. Unlike some urban ethnic environments that created dissociation and conflict among families and between generations, the rural environment buffered the cultural shock that many first- and second-generation Germans faced in large American cities. As Frederick Luebke, writing about Nebraska Germans, suggests, "it seems that immigrant institutions operative in the rural and small town environment were fairly successful in easing the process whereby the newcomer was assimilated, mostly, perhaps, by slowing it down."5

Family networks functioned as productive work units, providing the arena for interpersonal interactions; these work units were typically single-sex and stretched across generations. As scholars have noted, when men and women worked together in other rural settings, women
and children were often perceived as “helping out” with male jobs. The patriarchal family educates in specific ways, not only by defining economic and social roles but by teaching its members how to view their roles and status in the family. As Gerda Lerner notes in *The Creation of Patriarchy*, “The family not merely mirrors the order in the state and educates its children to follow it, it also creates and constantly reinforces that order.”

Because of the complexity, variability, and privacy of family life, the structures of authority are difficult to assess. Bolstered by religious doctrines, patriarchy was unmistakable; however, the German reverence for and tradition of motherhood placed women firmly in the core of family interactions. Women’s public deference to their husbands did not determine the private interactions of husband and wife or parent and child. In assessing women’s experience, Claire Farrer decries the importance historians give to public behavior. “Because the public arenas are more readily accessible [for investigation] than private ones, it is too often assumed they are the dominant, if not the only areas where expressive activity occurs.”

A strong sense of family pride and privacy required that problems be kept from nonfamily members, and public displays of affection or anger were highly unusual. In German-American families each family member understood the importance of duty and control. Yet as if to balance this self-discipline, family celebrations and religious rituals occurred throughout the life cycle, bonding family members to each other, to the church, and to the community.

As family members ventured into the outside world, particularly those of the third generation, outside networks changed family dynamics, individual behavior, and the expectations of both women and men. Although men journeyed into town sooner and more often than women, outside networks played a large role in expanding the role and activities of the women in Block. The continued need for salable and consumable domestic goods kept women in the mainstream of family productivity. Improvements in transportation allowed young women to work in Kansas City as hired girls, a live-in domestic experience that exposed them to Americanization in a dramatic way, particularly in contrast to brothers who “worked out” but lived at home or in another German-Lutheran community. The automobile gave adult women the opportunity to transport their goods to town to exchange for groceries or cash. Twentieth-century women in Block, like many rural women,
functioned as both producers and consumers much longer than their urban counterparts.  

The men interacted in work-related networks associated with farm sales and small businesses. Through political and eventually social activities such as baseball and the Farmer's Union, men in Block entered the secular world. The necessity of nonfarm labor and military service also required entry into the American mainstream, encouraging if not forcing Americanization for some individuals. Certainly both wars with Germany, especially World War I, demonstrated the influence of outside intervention and its effects upon the Block community.

The exclusiveness of the church initially insulated and protected the people; however, in the twentieth century this protectionist attitude forced many residents of Block into painful conflicts as change became synonymous with survival. As individuals and families responded to outside pressures, they began to force internal change in their institutions. Although many people wanted the traditional stability and theological certainty, others began to embrace Americanization and demand more freedom, particularly in their personal lives.

Questions remain to be answered concerning religion, ethnicity, and gender. Block serves as an excellent point of comparison for other rural-ethnic communities in the Midwest with its many similarities to other village communities that have been studied. For example, Conzen's German Catholics in Stearns County, Minnesota, Gjerde's Norwegians in Wisconsin, and Osterge's Swedes in Minnesota exhibit similar family patterns and are examples of communities that grew around an immigrant church and school in isolated regions in the nineteenth-century Midwest. Conzen's description of Stearns County Germans closely correlates with Block Germans.

Stearns County's Germans were able to develop and preserve a distinctive ethnic culture firmly based on the triad of farm, family, and community, which has to a significant degree endured to the present. Neither the content of that culture nor its survival can be understood without taking into account the extent to which pioneers were able to transplant traditional values supporting family continuity on the land.

As much as this sounds like the Block community, I believe that Block's German Lutheranism, as interpreted by the Missouri Synod,
provided a distinctive component to its rural immigrant character. More than just the well-documented German "clannishness" and traditional family patterns defined Block's character; the ethnic-religious bond forged by the synod required Block to retain both its ethnicity and its religious exclusivity longer than other rural immigrant communities. The community resisted assimilation not only for ethnic reasons but for religious reasons; assimilation was a threat to ethnic purity and to spiritual salvation. Because the church thrived in a defensive, immovable posture, only the extreme circumstances of World War I could crack the barriers of Block's isolationism. Certainly the third generation began to enter the outside community for economic and social reasons before the war, but assimilation could have remained extremely slow had not other external pressures been exerted during 1917 and 1918. Even with these pressures to Americanize, it took the community two more decades and another world war before it finally relinquished the German language in its institutions.

In contrast to Germans in St. Louis, Milwaukee, and New York, Germans in Block had the benefit of regional isolation, more homogeneity, and an opportunity to prolong assimilation that the large urban settings rarely had. Even if urban-ethnic communities retained their foreign language or used parochial schools, most of them did not experience the longevity or the religious exclusivity of Missouri Synod churches and schools. In many ways, Missouri Synod communities, like Block, served as a nexus between ethnic groups that sent children to heterogeneous public schools and ethnic communities that created parochial schools but typically had a less homogeneous population. 11

Although the study of gender remains a difficult task in traditionally male-defined communities, it continues to promise and to deliver rich rewards. Additional methods must be devised to uncover the attitudes and activities of women in a strongly patriarchal community, however. Historian Gerda Lerner asserts that "the true history of women is the history of their ongoing functioning in a male-defined world on their own terms." 12 As a further guideline to gender analysis, Lerner argues that women and women's experiences should be viewed in comparison with men in similar social groups and time; viewing gender in isolation ignores the time, place, and context of a given setting. 13

Joan Scott's seminal article on gender as a category of analysis provides some additional guidelines for interpreting gender behavior within a given social context. She contends that in order to use gender
as a category of analysis the historian must understand that although how women behave in a specific patriarchal context is important, it is probably more important to understand the “meaning” associated with the behavior. Scott also points out that social relationships are indeed reciprocal and that “the direction of change is not necessarily one way.” In Block, gender behavior changed over time so that by the third generation, the men and women functioned by choice in more obviously interdependent ways: working on farm produce, taking produce to town, interacting more at social gatherings, and sharing recreational interests (e.g., card parties). The third-generation interviewees emphasize these differences when comparing their marriages to their parents’ or grandparents’.

Within the social context of this rural-ethnic community, one must understand that religion played an important role in women’s behavior. Women in Block had limited personal and work options, and unlike other Protestant women, they could not resort to evangelical causes or behavior to assert their independence and worth. For women in Block, religion did not offer as fertile an environment for independence as it did for women in most other Protestant denominations. Still, I would argue that women in Block clearly benefited from the Ladies Aid organization because it provided an educational arena for growth in leadership and in fiscal and group-interaction skills. Compared to other Protestant groups, however, the women in Block had fewer opportunities for growth through formal church networks. Power in church and school belonged to the men, and for busy rural women, reform or social welfare societies served little purpose when domestic work had to be produced and families fed and clothed.

Women’s networks, whether based on church, school, family, or outside associations, did play a crucial role, however. Based on age and kinship, these networks in sum provided the most important lessons learned by a girl or a woman in Block. Far more than the male-dominated institutions of church and school, family and outside networks functioned in supportive and educational ways. Three generations of women often shared domestic responsibilities in a family. Rooted in this sex-based division of labor, women’s support networks extended far beyond the family to interactions in the outside world. Hired girls from Block, particularly those who worked in Kansas City, mothered the newest or youngest girls who came to the city as domestic laborers. As Joan Jensen argues,
The oldest and most persistent form of community activity has been the development of and participation in women’s support networks, networks that women created for giving assistance and understanding to other women. . . . It has been the basis for a type of feminism on the farm whose role in allowing women to survive, and at times flourish, under severe pressure has not been given adequate attention by scholars. 17

In addition to examining the importance of women’s support networks, the imperatives of economics and gender-defined work roles need analysis. In the economic sphere of the outside world, numbers alone provide limited information, particularly when much quantitative analysis has been based on male work or on urban female work patterns. Moreover, the often-used public/private construct fails to provide a meaningful format in a discussion of rural or ethnic women’s experiences.

Two significant work experiences effected change in the options and behavior of women in Block. First, women’s domestic production was vital to the farm economy in Block. Third-generation women, who as adults lived through the farm crises of the 1930s and the Great Depression, continued to function as producers as well as consumers. Rural women’s work activities in their gardens or with small animals often kept the family afloat during hard times. Even during healthier economic times, the women consistently contributed to the farm income. Although Jensen and other scholars assert that such participation did not necessarily redistribute the power structure within the household, the women’s economic contributions supplied a vital element for family survival, clear evidence of the interdependency of men and women in the economic realm. 18

A second important female work experience took place outside the Block community. Before settling down to marriage and children, many women in Block, the majority of the third generation, left their homes to become live-in domestics; their new environment taught invaluable lessons and changed the lives of these young women. In this work realm, religion and ethnicity clashed with economic needs and Americanization. Although initially supported by the Missouri Synod, hired girls’ interaction with outsiders became a bane for clergy, who saw too late the effects of assimilation on these young women. Twentieth-century clergy blamed hired girls for increases in immoral behav-
ior, the dissatisfaction of young people in the church, decreasing birth rates, and female insubordination. This once appropriate work setting became a contaminating experience in the eyes of the synod clergy. Micaela di Leonardo argues that for immigrant women ethnicity takes second place to economic needs. "'Ethnic culture' is not an unchanging construct passed down by ethnic mothers, but the living result of the intersection of all members of a particular group with the economy and population of a particular region in a particular time." By working at a gender-defined job (domestic service), young women from Block effectively challenged and in some ways undermined the religious dictates that required "subordination" and "silence" from their sex. The hired girl experience clearly changed their behavior, and more important, their attitudes and expectations about themselves.

How ethnicity, religion, and gender affected women's economic options needs far more investigation and analysis. Although great strides have been made in analyzing women's work experiences, more research must be focused on finding objective and subjective ways to assess rural women's work experiences and attitudes; women must define their own work options and choices. Recently, oral histories and personal narratives have been used effectively to describe women's life and work experiences.

Finally, the significance of education, with its implications for future research, must be explored. In the past, many historians of education have chosen to focus on schools, ignoring the historical richness of culture. Because most educational historians have examined urban environments, I would argue that the variables of ethnicity and class have been integrated into educational historians' research, more than gender, rural, and religious variables. Mary Leach argues that historians of education, whether working from a Marxist, liberal, or revisionist position, share a "serious neglect of the recognition of gender as a central organizing principle in nineteenth- and twentieth-century education." Historians of education have not taken advantage of the vast amount of research "exploring the multiplicity of women's roles and identities and the intersection and contradictions between the roles and identities imposed by race, sex, and class" that can be applied to a wealth of educational issues.

With few exceptions, rural education continues to be ignored even though this setting offers the educational historian the opportunity to explore the educational experience of the majority of Americans in the
nineteenth century. Historians of education continue to be fascinated with urban settings, school bureaucracies, and urban power struggles, ignoring the setting that provides the most pervasive and long-lasting examples of local democracy and community control—the rural school.23

Like rural schools, parochial schools (urban or rural) need more research; their wealth of resources remain untapped. Recent research on Roman Catholic schools, for example, demonstrates the vast potential for educational historians.24 Our country began with church-sponsored schools, and although the form has varied over time, parochial schools of all levels have continued to play an important role in educating a large minority of American children. Little comparative work has been done on parochial institutions, and almost no research has examined the interaction and roles of parochial versus public schools in any historical period.

Historians of education need to continue to ask questions about the formal and the informal ways that individuals and communities educate people.25 For Block, formal education played a powerful role in inculcating values and beliefs, but only by analyzing informal experiences, particularly experiences of family and of the outside world, can we view the Block community as a whole. Formal institutions describe the dominant group (males) and their worldview; informal educational experiences tell about the dominant group but also provide much-needed information about the marginal groups (women and children). The community must be examined in a holistic manner so that these less powerful groups can be understood. More important, examining all types of educational experiences is necessary in order to assess the reciprocity of the community's subgroups. Other conceptual frameworks similar to "networks of association" must be found to avoid projecting oppressor-victim constructs or other dichotomies that ignore interaction and reciprocity among individuals and groups.

The community at Block functioned as an important educational setting, creating individual and community identity in the lives of four generations of German Lutherans. It is tempting for an outsider to view this small parochial world by its limitations, reducing the community to a rural ghetto of sorts. Historian Martin Marty places a community like Block into a larger context, assessing the historical and contemporary significance of such a place. Although he was describing what he calls a "Catholic ghetto," Marty's words fit the "sheltered world" of the Block community.
These days we have to visit any number of these sheltered worlds in order to learn about the America we inherited. In fact, despite intermarriage, rage against old orders, social mobility, suburbanization, mass higher education, mass media, or whatever, most Americans still live in parochial and provincial subsectors of the social economy. They do, at least, if they are fortunate. They may later have identity crises, but they belong to something strong enough to have given them an identity in the first place.\(^\text{26}\)

The formal institutions created in the Block community have endured. The church, school, and cemetery stand as monuments to religious faith and perseverance; some fifth and sixth generations still reside on original homesteads. People live and die there and some move away, but the sense of community remains—a link to the past and a symbol of survival for the future.