

When a Dream Dies: Agriculture, Iowa, and the Farm Crisis of the 1980s

by Pamela Riney-Kehrberg

xi + 288 pages, illustrations, notes, index.
Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2022, cloth \$39.95.

In an address delivered in March 1978, Kansas Senator Bob Dole spoke of the “Farm Crisis in America,” pointing to the “vicious cost-price squeeze” that plagued farmers in Kansas and across the nation. The Republican senator claimed that “the family farmer is in the worst financial condition since the great depression” and insisted that the crisis was, at least in part, the fault of the Democratic administration of President Jimmy Carter. Although Dole was part of a bipartisan effort to bring some relief in the form of “an emergency farm bill,” the crisis only worsened and soon led to the rise of the American Agricultural Movement and direct action, including “tractorcades.” Hundreds of farmers from all over the country,

including Kansas, drove their trucks and tractors to Washington, DC. This protest, according to participants, probably had little impact on federal legislation, but it did manage to draw considerable public attention to the plight of these American farmers.

The 1970s version of the chronic farm crises and the direct action undertaken by these farmers was a precursor of sorts to the focus of Pamela Riney-Kehrberg’s fine story of “the farm crisis of the 1980s” as it played out across Iowa. “Between 1979 and 1983, the situation on farms . . . went from difficult to critical and the number of foreclosures mounted,” writes Riney-Kehrberg. “It would soon be evident that the borrowing and spending of the 1970s had been a mistake” (p. 17). *When a Dream Dies* “tells Iowa’s story, from the heady days of the 1970s through the floods of 1993, which formed an ending of sorts to the long decade of the 1980s” (p. 11). By focusing on individual farm families, as well as local, state, and national efforts to bring relief of various kinds, Riney-Kehrberg skillfully tells a very personal story of the impact of the crisis across the state, a story highlighted at the time by Willie Nelson’s Farm Aid concerts and in movies such as *The River*, *Places in the Heart*, and especially *Country*, “Iowa’s film” (p. 88).

A common theme in those films was the stress experienced by farm folk as they battled forces beyond their control. Throughout farm country during the 1980s, as never before, much attention focused on mental health and stress management as well as meeting the physical needs of farm families. Support groups encouraged and helped these people access food banks, food stamps, financial counseling, hotlines, and self-help materials that specifically addressed mental health.

This long, often painful story spans more than a decade. Blame for the farm crisis was no respecter of political party. In the late 1970s, Senator Dole pointed the finger at the Democratic president,

but Republican administrations presided over the 1980s. In 1985, David Stockman, President Ronald Reagan's controversial budget director, blamed farmers themselves for the crisis and was pilloried for suggesting "that the United States had too many farmers and needed a 'shakeout'" (p. 115). By the time the crisis ended in Iowa, according to Riney-Kehrberg, many had come to accept the new reality of the need for fewer farmers and had to accept a new rural landscape where most farm families who chose to stay put were forced to "diversify" their "family's income stream" with off-farm employment (p. 205).

When a Dream Dies is a good read and a fine contribution to the literature, worthy of replication for Kansas and other midwestern farm states.

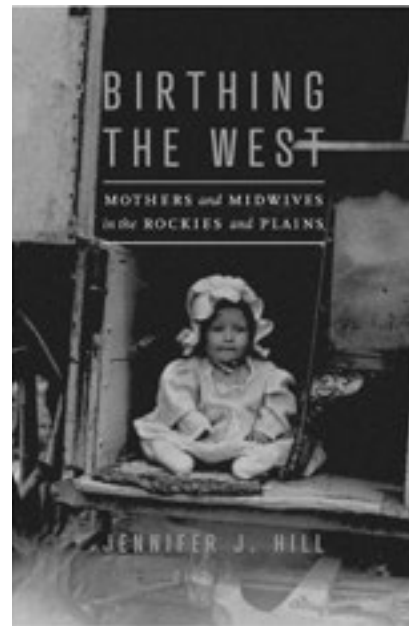
Reviewed by Virgil W. Dean, historian and retired editor, *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains*.

Birthing the West: Mothers and Midwives in the Rockies and Plains

by Jennifer J. Hill

xii + 274 pages, illustrations, notes, index.
Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2022, paper \$24.95.

Montana is sometimes called "Big Sky Country." While reading *Birthing the West*, one might easily picture human points on the ground being reflected as constellations in that big night sky. Women who might have seemed isolated connected to each other through care, concern, knowledge, and physical routes in these stories of birth practices in Montana and other northern plains states. The paths of neighbors crossed miles from homestead to homestead. The roads to towns were traveled when extra nurture was needed. Rail lines carried mothers to safekeeping when the homestead and town were not enough. Author Jennifer J. Hill makes a strong case that childbirth is a social experience and that reproductive labor



is a key, but underrecognized, component in the colonial settlement of the West from the late 1800s through the early 1900s. Expectant mothers, babies, deceased infants, siblings, sisters, neighbors, midwives, and other people in the medical field are each nodes in the community built around birth. Hill emphasizes bonds centered around parturition practices, which she pushes as an antidote to the concept of the West as a place of individuals.

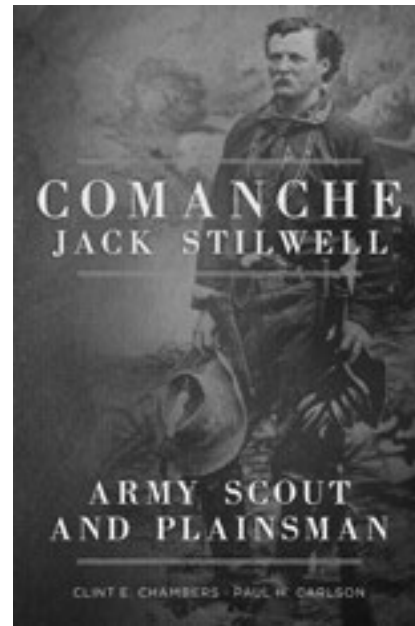
Hill tells the reader that childbirth is "a social act, a cultural act, and an ethical act" (p. 199). Across seven chapters, she proves the truth of this statement. The book is helpfully written for an audience who may not be experts in giving birth or assisting with it. The author starts at a macrolevel by discussing typical reproductive cycles for western women in the late 1800s. She touches on contraception and details the actual events over the course of the several weeks surrounding a birth. With direct language and descriptions, Hill spotlights the depth and breadth of knowledge about birth that women used, maintained, and passed along in rural regions. The text addresses the practices of Native women, but the material is largely focused on white women. As the work progresses, she narrows the focus on midwifery and explores some of the factors contributing to

death at the time of new life. Here, she skillfully demonstrates how the death of an infant or mother could impact the communities that formed around a birth. The endpoint of the study is the beginning of a new birth regime by public health entities and professional organizations, which created rules and records that are useful for study but, as Hill demonstrates, do not tell the whole story.

One of the most interesting parts of the book is the author's short discussions of sources that punctuate several of the chapters. Hill set out to find material that would not necessarily be neatly filed or even detailed in an archival catalog; she listened for what she needed in oral histories. When surveying the birth records and the names of birth attendants in Chouteau County, Montana, she noted that a prominent area midwife never appeared in the official records. Yet "off-record midwives" (p. 86) existed in family histories and photographs. She did not take state health department records and U.S. Census records at face value but learned how the tallies were taken to help shape her interpretation. Hill's efforts to find sources provide a good reminder of the creativity and perseverance needed to practice history.

The most compelling material covers the transition from midwives being the dominant figures in home births to doctors and regulated medical facilities being the locus of birth. This story of change over time is one of control over birth being shifted from mothers, midwives, and their communities to doctors and public health officials. Hill is sometimes direct in her criticism of this shift when she notes that women's expertise was increasingly sidelined. Ultimately, *Birthing the West* conveys how power in intimate spaces was negotiated by women and, later, men as the northern plains region of the West became increasingly incorporated into centralized power structures.

Reviewed by Meg Frisbee, professor of history, Metropolitan State University of Denver, Denver, Colorado.



Comanche Jack Stilwell: Army Scout and Plainsman

by Clint E. Chambers and Paul H. Carlson

xiv + 280 pages, illustrations, notes, bibliography, index.

Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2019, paper \$24.95.

Clint E. Chambers and Paul H. Carlson's *Comanche Jack Stilwell* is a riveting biography of famous army scout Stimson E. "Jack" Stilwell. Having run away at thirteen, Jack Stilwell found employment on the Santa Fe Trail as a wagon teamster and slowly acquired scouting skills. After the railroad ended the trail's life, he moved into scouting for the U.S. military. There he served with distinction in the last phases of the Indian Wars on the southern plains and became famous for his actions during the Battle of Beecher Island. Once the wars wrapped up and the army's need for scouts diminished, he transitioned to work in law enforcement. He served as a U.S. marshal and U.S. commissioner in Reno and Indian Territory. This career was broken by stints as a ranch hand and miner in an attempt to relocate to Arizona. With his

lifestyle destroying his body, he became a lawyer and served as a judge. Throughout his time in Indian Territory, he learned Comanche, Spanish, and the Plains Indian sign language. These language skills helped him avoid many confrontations and find employment during this era of rapid change. Like many of those in the Old West club, he relied on his connections, which led to his final life chapter being enacted in Cody, Wyoming with Buffalo Bill. There he split his time between farming strawberries and acting as a judge specializing in land claims.

Chambers started this project by tracing the truth behind his grandfather's boyhood stories of his uncle Jack and then allied himself with historian Carlson. With few personal writings left by Stilwell, the authors rely heavily on newspapers, government documents, court cases, and writings of his contemporaries. Naturally, conflicting accounts occurred. They do not shy away from them and skillfully navigate the different versions. By zooming in and out from Stilwell, his family, and national background information, they turn one man's life into a story of the West itself. Weaving this biography through national and regional events allows them to contextualize the transition from the Old West to the "civilized" West.

Through Stilwell's adventures, the reader gains insight into the relations among the government, tribes, military, and settlers. As a white friend of the Comanche, Stilwell frequently found himself in the middle of race relations. He spent time fighting the Comanche in wars, dealing with cattle rustlers on their reservation, and protecting them in court. The authors' inclusion of environmental history adds another layer to understanding these relations. The situations that Stilwell faced reveal the various factors in these events. While some problems were created by relations between settlers and tribes, others were uncontrollable. Throughout this monograph, the reader finds perspectives on the establishment of the reservations, the legal system, and transportation infrastructure. All these changes affected Stilwell's life, at times helping him to obtain employment and at other times

causing him to lose it. He participated directly in some changes through his military service, while he caused other changes himself as a judge, such as allowing the use of the Comanche language in the courtroom in Anadarko, Oklahoma Territory.

This book will be interesting to anyone fascinated by the American West, Native American history, or U.S. military history.

Reviewed by September Gering, *PhD student, Kansas State University, Manhattan, Kansas.*

Keep It Old-Time: Fiddle Music in Missouri from the 1960s Folk Music Revival to the Present

by Howard Wight Marshall

xiii + 504 pages, illustrations, notes, index, appendices, companion CD.

Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2022, cloth \$39.95.

Keep It Old-Time: Fiddle Music in Missouri from the 1960s Folk Music Revival to the Present is the last of Howard Wight Marshall's three works on traditional fiddle music in Missouri. An avid fiddler himself, Marshall spent decades immersed in the history and culture of the genre, particularly as practiced in and around Columbia, Missouri. Marshall is professor emeritus, former chair of art history and archaeology, and past director of the Missouri Cultural Heritage Center at the University of Missouri–Columbia.

One of the primary strengths of Marshall's scholarship is its accessibility: his conversational narrative is appropriate for the general reader interested in regional culture. Since he is not a musicologist, the discussion is seldom bogged down by musical jargon. He effectively combines oral history in the form of dozens of interviews and personal anecdotes with transcriptions of popular tunes, photographs, and a CD representing major figures in Missouri fiddling dating to the late 1950s. Some tracks are newly recorded for this collection, some are field recordings, and some are drawn



from studio albums.

Keep It Old-Time opens with the folk music movement of the 1960s. Marshall emphasizes the divide between the movement's academic and festival audiences and the devoted amateurs of old-time fiddling. The former tended to be purists preoccupied with authenticity: they expected musicians to carry the tradition across generations. However, many old-time fiddlers first heard the style on television or radio, at festivals, or at coffeehouses, and they took up playing by ear, largely by listening to live performances and recordings. In chapters 2 and 3, Marshall highlights Columbia's Chez Coffeehouse as a representative of the jam session culture of the 1960s and '70s. He provides biographical sketches of prominent fiddlers who performed at the venue, such as Tom Verdot, Spencer Galloway, and Bill Rogers, and many of their mentors, including Taylor McBaine and Pete McMahan.

One point emphasized throughout Marshall's narrative is the tension between "old-time" and "Contest Style" fiddling, which emerged at competitions in Texas and on the West Coast. Marshall laments the impact of contest style on Missouri contests and suggests that its growth led to the decline of old-time fiddling. Most of

the remaining chapters focus on the evolution of contests: contest fiddling as a crowd- and judge-pleasing style; contest politics and the administration, foundation, and growth of the associations that administered contests; important contest fiddlers from the 1960s to the present; and how fiddlers negotiated the divide between old-time and contest style. Chapter 12 explores bluegrass festivals and their intersection with traditional fiddling, and in chapter 13, the author highlights several contemporary fiddlers. Although more fiddlers enter the genre with classical training, most still rely on the traditional oral/aural methods of teaching and learning.

Marshall's narrative is engaging, albeit somewhat meandering. It is occasionally difficult to parse fact from personal interjection and generalization, but on the whole, the volume is well researched and fills a significant gap in the scholarship of traditional music. Marshall draws together a wealth of oral history in a satisfying chronicle that should serve as a model for future studies on traditional music. While his work does not directly address issues related to Kansas history, Marshall mentions some groups and festivals that are worth exploring, including the Walnut Valley Festival in Winfield. In his conclusion, Marshall highlights a topic overdue for study: fiddling in Hispanic traditions, including the rich history in Kansas City and mariachi culture in Topeka. Another area warranting future research is women in fiddling. Few women are covered in this text, though Marshall does address the male-dominated history of the field and includes a handful of interviews with women who discuss their experiences with sexism as well as the growing acceptance of women in fiddling.

Reviewed by Kelly Huff, lecturer in music history and theory, Washburn University, Topeka, Kansas.