
BOOK NOTES

Gathering Strays: Stories from Kansas and the Southwestern Plains. By Jim Hoy. (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2023, xiii + 386 pages, paper \$34.95.)

Jim Hoy grew up on a ranch in the Flint Hills of Kansas, and in addition to a prolific career as an essayist, folklorist, literary scholar, and professor, he knows his way around horses and cattle. The title of his latest book is a nod to his ranching life; the “strays” here are not cattle, though, but a diverse array of short tales that never made their way into his earlier books. Some originated in the long-running Plains Folk series that Hoy began with Tom Isern in 1983, while others appear for the first time in this volume. *Gathering Strays* recounts the stories of nineteenth-century Kansas cattle towns and introduces an eclectic cast of historical characters. Despite the geographically constrained subtitle, the book journeys far and wide, with fascinating details about cowboys in Mexico, Australia, Scotland, and Argentina. Part history, part memoir, part pulp folklore, *Gathering Strays* takes readers on an adventure through esoteric and mostly forgotten moments of the region’s past.

The Plea: The True Story of Young Wesley Elkins and His Struggle for Redemption. By Patricia L. Bryan and Thomas Wolf. (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2022, viii + 218 pages, paper \$19.95.)

The Plea follows the life of eleven-year-old Wesley Elkins, an Iowa boy who was convicted of murdering his parents after potentially being coerced into pleading guilty. It traces his life in prison and his success in society after being granted parole. Interspersed in this narrative is contextual information about Progressive Era prison reform and changes in child psychology theory. At the time of the crime, there was no separate criminal system for children, and Wesley was treated as an adult. Society also considered crime an inherent trait, and this divisive case became a focal point of reform debates. While supporters portrayed him as proof that reform could work, opponents argued that his evil nature required life behind bars. With the help of reform-minded wardens, he earned his second chance and became an exemplar of the reform movement’s ideas.

Sand Creek and the Tragic End of a Lifeway. By Louis Kraft. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2020, 440 pages, cloth \$34.95.)

This narrative history of the Sand Creek Massacre in 1864 examines the *longue durée* of the Southern Cheyenne (Tsistsistas) and Arapaho (Hinono’eino’) experience on the plains before, during, and after this act of horrific violence. Kraft’s greatest scholarly contribution comes from his deep research, allowing him to situate the massacre within this broader context. He weaves a complicated tale of the escalating tensions between these nations and the U.S. government, the role of mixed-race go-betweens such as Charles Bent, John Chivington’s motivations for the attack, and the massacre’s extensive repercussions. (The Cheyenne and Arapaho persisted and still exist today, however, perhaps calling into question Kraft’s choice of title.) Kansas connections are prominent, ranging from Denver’s founding by Kansas land speculators to peace councils at Fort Larned to Kansas soldiers such as Silas Soule, who protested the murder of innocents.

Mud, Blood, and Ghosts: Populism, Eugenics, and Spiritualism in the American West. By Julie Carr. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2023, xv + 335 pages, paper \$30.00.)

Omer Madison Kem (1855–1942) spent the first decades of his life as an impoverished homesteader, first in Indiana and later in Nebraska. In Nebraska, he took active part in the Farmer’s Alliance, entered politics, and eventually was elected to Congress as a Populist in the 1890s. Carr, Kem’s great-granddaughter, tells his story, together with that of other members of the family. In highly charged pages, she narrates key passages in the history and character of the United States in the period. Carr does not turn away from Kem’s contradictions. He delivered speeches of remarkable moral clarity about white violence against Native peoples, but this did not stop him from personally profiting from the removal of the Ute from their land. Kem eventually became an avid white supremacist, which had not been essential to the politics of midwestern Populism. Throughout the narrative, Carr also describes her own research process, so reading this book feels a bit like listening to a gripping story told at night over a kitchen table spread with photographs, letters, and artifacts, all lit by a glimmering candle.