

EUROPEAN IMMIGRANTS IN THE
AMERICAN WEST

Community Histories



Edited by

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CHAPTER TEN

ETHNICITY, RELIGION, AND GENDER:
THE WOMEN OF BLOCK, KANSAS,
1868-1940



CAROL K. COBURN

All too often the role of women in the development and maintenance of ethnic communities has been overlooked or ignored in the literature of immigration history. Carol Coburn, a professor of education at Avila College in Kansas City, Missouri, provides a corrective lens through which one may view women and families in restrictive ethno-religious societies.

Coburn offers an explicit theoretical framework for her analysis. Dismissive of constructs that separate male and female behavior, she clearly identifies the patriarchal character of her ethno-religious community but recognizes the complementarity of gender roles within four "networks of association"—church, parochial school, family, and the world external to the small ethnic community of German Lutherans in Block, Kansas, located a few miles from the Missouri boundary.

The author is herself descended from one of the families of Block. This enables her to penetrate the intricacies of this exclusive society; it infuses her account with an authenticity that would elude an "outsider." Like other authors in this book, she uses oral interviews to good effect: she knows precisely what questions to ask and who is likely to provide answers. Her analysis, though based on one community, describes gender relationships in hundreds of similar rural and small-town German-Lutheran communities in the American Midwest and West.

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Ethnicity, religion, and gender shape our past, providing a richness and texture to individual and group experience. This experience creates identities and communities that in turn educate the young and ensure the transmission of values, beliefs, and culture across generations. The women of Block, Kansas, provide an opportunity to examine the complex relationship of ethnicity, religion, and gender. Beginning in the late 1860s, this German Lutheran enclave used its ethnic heritage and its religious doctrine to create a separate, distinct community in south central Miami County, Kansas. Trinity Lutheran Church and School served as focal points in the development of this rural community.

To understand fully the role of ethnicity, religion, and gender in educating four generations of Block women, I have utilized an interdisciplinary approach combining aspects of history of education, social history, and women's studies. I use the term *education* in its broadest sense to include the acquisition of cultural knowledge, socialization, and the transmission of beliefs and values. By asking questions about ethnicity, religion, and gender, I intend this study to serve as a model for such interdisciplinary research. Specifically, how did the Block community transmit education to and through its female members? How did the religious institutions of church and parochial school serve as transmitters of education? How did the ethnic family function as educator? What role did the rural location and American cultural environment play in the transmission of education and culture?

To comprehend the lives Block women created for themselves in this male-defined community, 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. While the public/private construct is useful in many contexts, it is not always helpful in describing rural or ethnic women's experiences because for many women a clear separation of worlds does not and never has existed. For historians to operate solely within such a polarized construct may render many past individuals' contributions and experiences invisible or insignificant or may lead scholars, following their own cultural biases, to view one side or the other as more valuable. Separating female and male behavior into competing and opposing ideologies does little to enhance understanding of the reciprocity needed to maintain any community. This is not to ignore gender differences nor to assume that reciprocal interactions ensure equality of opportunity or experience. Certainly the Block community was a social and theological patriarchy. Under this patriarchal umbrella, however, individual women and women's groups created their own consciousness and behavior, which the historian may better understand by setting aside preconceived notions about dichotomies and polarities.

To avoid entering the Block community from the front door of male domination/female victimization or the back door of female superiority/male indifference, I have attempted to construct a side door into the intricacies of the Block community. I will utilize a theoretical framework that was designed to examine women's "networks of association" and how these networks transmit education and culture. Historian Barbara Finkelstein's "networks of association" allow the researcher to analyze the transformation in networks of association, the structures of authority, and the character of women's activities.¹ This approach permits the historian to study the relationships between social structure and human consciousness within the context of a specific setting.

For the women in the Block community I have chosen four networks: church, school, family, and the outside world. Analyzing these networks gives me the opportunity to discuss formal as well as informal ways women functioned within this rural ethnic community. Within each of these networks, life cycle differences and continuity/change across generations can be assessed. This analysis also facilitates examining the influence of American technology and culture within the community.

The sources available for this interdisciplinary study are varied and rich. They include state and federal census data, official church records of births, baptisms, confirmations, marriages, and deaths, and minutes of all formal church meetings of male, female, and youth organizations. Also, official journals, booklets, and yearbooks published by the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod provide insights into religious attitudes and prescriptive literature. "Alien Registration" documents required during World War I are repositories of information about immigration, occupation, literacy, and family of the German Americans at Block. Combined with these quantitative and literary sources are my interviews with twelve current or former Block women born between 1898 and 1920. Their stories, anecdotes, and memories enrich this study and give life to the reams of written material. Photos, personal correspondence, and newspaper accounts add to the documentation.

COMMUNITY BACKGROUND

Block is located in East Valley Township, eight miles southeast of Paola in Miami County, Kansas. It served as a hub for German Lutherans living on the periphery of four townships within the county. The first German-Lutheran immigrants came to the Block area in the 1860s, soon after Native American tribes in the area were sent to Oklahoma Territory and land became readily available for homesteading. Most of the immigrants were farmers from North-

ern Germany, many from Hanover province, who migrated in families and made brief stopovers in Indiana, Missouri, or other midwestern states.

The Trinity Lutheran Church and School were organized in 1868, and by the turn of the century the community boasted two general stores, a blacksmith shop, a creamery, and a post office. Social and recreational activities focused on church, school, and kinship networks. Church membership peaked in 1920 with 485 members, never dipping below the 400-mark through 1940.² Until the advent of the automobile, travel was difficult and most members of the community were geographically isolated from other German Lutherans and from urban influences. The church was Missouri Synod, one of the most conservative synods in American Lutheranism.

The Missouri Synod and its attitudes concerning women shaped the roles of women in the Block community. Since its founding in 1847, the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod has charted its own course, often independently and at odds with American Protestantism as well as with other Lutheran bodies. As an immigrant church, it long insulated itself by the creation of its own parochial school system, use of the German language, and its claim to *reine Lehre* or pure doctrine based on divinely inspired, inerrant Scripture.³ The enemy was American liberalism and a secularism that destroyed God's natural order and threatened the very core of Lutheran doctrine and beliefs. According to historian Alan Graebner, "Synod leaders attempted to maintain a social structure defined by ethnic and religious boundaries that was, save for politics and economics, as self-contained as possible."⁴

This highly conservative, authoritarian structure compounded problems for women in the church. Unlike their sisters in Catholicism who had a female representative in the Virgin Mary, and unlike their Protestant sisters who could participate in revivals and evangelical practices of preaching and teaching, Missouri Synod Lutheran women operated within a structured, male-dominated world. Synod theology made clear the complementary but different callings of males and females. For women to challenge their maternal and domestic roles was to question God's order and their natural subordination brought about by the sins of Eve. Compounding the assumption of women's innate inferiority, Synod doctrine exalted biblical directives of Saint Paul and excluded women from speaking, holding office, or voting in congregational affairs.⁵

Rural congregations such as Trinity Lutheran in Block exemplified this closed, hierarchical system, content to maintain and insulate itself from outside influence and potential threats to its unity. Clergy/lay interactions were based on this respect for authority, and the continued use of the German language well into the twentieth century bolstered the local pastor's control

and power. According to *Protokoll* (voters' assembly minutes), all services at Trinity Lutheran were conducted in German until 1925, when English was introduced for one service per month. The last German service was held in 1950. An all-male voters' assembly, the formal male network in the church, and the all-male clergy ensured dominance in all governing bodies and church-related activities.⁶

CHURCH

Within a restrained, inclusive structure combining religion and ethnicity, how did the women of Block create a place for themselves, trapped between a perceived "hostile" outside world and a theology that seemed to offer few, if any, options? Block women had no opportunities to create a formal organization within the church until May 1912, when twelve women under the direction of Pastor F. Droegemueller established the Trinity Lutheran Ladies Aid of Block, Kansas. These second-generation women, mostly middle-aged or older, molded themselves into an organized group with the stated purpose "to sew and quilt for orphanages, charitable institutions and such who are in need of help."⁷ Their weekly gatherings included a business meeting with the remainder of the day spent in sewing, quilting, and socializing. Although the pastor was always present for the business meeting, the group elected its own officers and its president ran the meetings. Local secular women and other Protestant women had a long history of charitable work, but Block women had no female role models for conducting meetings or organizing themselves into a cohesive, formal network.⁸

After a tentative beginning, the Ladies Aid thrived in the 1920s and 1930s with the addition of younger women who expanded the group's activities and the organization's budget. Minutes over the years systematically documented the success of an expanding array of money-making activities. These included: sewing and making gifts for church charities; consignment work for dinners, quilts, and blankets; and monetary loans and gifts to the church, school, and synod.

Although the pastor's presence certainly affected the group's behavior, minutes of the meetings throughout the 1930s demonstrate the group's growing autonomy. The group initiated its own money-making activities and accepted or rejected consignment offers for dinners or quilts. Young women learned to drive and were no longer dependent on husbands and sons to get them to meetings. By the 1930s, the group had its own savings account, recording secretaries began signing their own names, and women were no longer identi-

fed in the minutes by their husbands' names. The death of a member brought a eulogy in the minutes. The group planned birthday and anniversary celebrations for the teachers and clergy as well as its own twentieth anniversary celebration, which included the entire congregation.⁹

The character of the women's activities varied little from the domestic chores they performed for their family or the church. As with many secular women's organizations, however, domestic activities on behalf of the church often were "elevated" to formal status. Typically, interactions between women began in kinship networks or among neighbors caring for each other's children and sharing domestic tasks at home and church. Nora Ohlmeier Prothe described a women's tradition for the Saturday before Palm Sunday services.

We'd get down and take our bucket, we'd walk to church. There they'd have a black kettle and a heap of water. We'd get down on our knees and scrub the floor and wash the windows in that old church.¹⁰

She went on to describe the activity as a social outing for women and children although the work was arduous and splinters were prevalent.

The formal organization of the Ladies Aid gave "women's work" some formal status but also provided opportunities to women who previously had been given little chance to participate in church affairs. Although the organization in no way challenged male authority, women now had a place to develop skills in leadership, money management, and group interaction. The Ladies Aid also gave individual women the excuse to spend time away from family concerns, socialize with each other, and donate their work to larger charitable institutions outside the local congregation. Their donations and handmade items were sent to synod-affiliated programs primarily in Kansas, Nebraska, and Colorado, but also to a black congregation in Alabama, a missionary hospital in India, and a German relief fund.

For women who had little opportunity to develop skills outside their homes, the Ladies Aid provided an expanding though informal educational network of a sort that scholars have often ignored or not viewed as educational at all. Ellen Condliffe Lagemann proposes close examination of women's nonschool activities, suggesting that, since women have been traditionally excluded from formal educational networks and since formal education may not be relevant to their own experience, informal educational settings (like the Ladies Aid) may be more important for continued growth and development, particularly for adult women.

As the autonomy and budget of the Ladies Aid increased, third- and fourth-generation women made an easy transition to Ladies Aid from the Walther

League, a formal youth program begun in 1924 to keep young people within the church, to encourage Bible study, to furnish opportunity for Christian education, to provide wholesome entertainment, and to assist in charitable endeavors. For Block girls age fifteen and older, Walther League provided a unique opportunity to participate and have equal voting power with boys in a formal church organization—an opportunity adult women rarely shared. Girls were elected as officers and committee members and served as debaters and lecturers on an equal footing with boys of the same age.

One night a month, the young people met in the schoolhouse for their business meeting and presentation of an educational topic. The church maintained a small library in the schoolhouse and presenters were expected to investigate their topics before they made their presentations. Another night during the month, they met for a social evening with entertainment of their own choosing. This included wiener roasts, ice-cream socials, outside speakers, and plays presented by the young people. These educational and social activities were particularly important since most girls did not attend high school and had little opportunity to develop such skills elsewhere.¹³

Trips to local and regional Walther League conferences exposed the girls to people and places they rarely had opportunities to visit. One interviewee stated these large gatherings were the most fun because you could "meet all the boys from other places" and see what other churches did differently.¹⁴ For Block girls, most of them third- and fourth-generation German-American, the league served as a valuable network to interact socially and to develop skills in leadership, organization, and communication. With the addition of Walther League, girls now had a place upon completion of parochial school. This became an intermediary step for them before they began work in the outside world or married and joined their mothers in Ladies Aid.

SCHOOL

For girls the main network of association centered on the parochial school. The synod considered the school "an agency for ideal Christian training." Like the church, the school functioned to instill Lutheran doctrine and preserve ethnic culture and language, and theology was fundamental to the curriculum. Although the Block school taught the "3 R's," it emphasized religion, music, and the German language.¹⁵

Based on nineteenth-century German tradition, Lutheran schools were highly structured, authoritarian, and typically taught by male teachers. Unlike their peers in public schools, Block girls learned early that all authority in

church and school was male. Block did not hire its first female teacher until 1906, when school enrollment had reached seventy-six pupils. Women were hired throughout the following decades, but never to replace a male teacher, to teach the upper grades, nor to serve as principal.

Besides the formal doctrinal messages demanding female subservience, girls received informal messages concerning identity and appropriate gender behavior. As in public schools, gender differentiations were common. Boys and girls sat on opposite sides of the room and played together in separate groups at recess. Minnie Cabman Debrick described a special marching drill the children were to perform for the annual school picnic:

We'd practice and we'd practice, and the boys carried the flag and we [girls] carried a broom over our shoulder. . . . I don't know why, I guess because the boys had the flags and the girls had to have something. So since girls done the housework . . . if you can figure out that puzzle, you can do more than I can.¹⁶

Lifelong female friendships began in the Block schoolroom and the experience of confirmation class solidified those early years of camaraderie. During the seventh and eighth grades, all children took special religious training to prepare for final adult confirmation into the church. Each day the oldest classes met with the pastor to memorize and recite doctrine. The activity most remembered with terror was *Christenlehre*. Each Sunday the students in the confirmation class would be lined up in the front of the church and asked doctrinal questions to be answered out loud in the presence of the congregation. An incorrect answer caused acute embarrassment long remembered by the humiliated child or parent.¹⁷

Confirmation was an important rite of passage for girls. They gained the right to partake in Holy Communion but also to leave school to earn money doing domestic work for other families or at least to take on more responsibility in their own homes. Until the late 1930s, when more Block girls began attending high school, confirmation and some adult status came at the age of fourteen.

FAMILY

As was true in most rural areas, the focus and main arena of activity for Block women was the family. The farm family functioned as both an economic and social unit, producing goods for home consumption and market while socializing children in cultural and gender-related roles.¹⁸ Block families de-

pend on each member to carry out certain roles and duties to ensure the overall welfare of the farm and home. Woman's role within the family focused on child-bearing, on child-rearing, and on the subsistence services necessary to feed, clothe, and nurture all family members. Nineteenth-century German ideology, defining woman's role as housewife, wife, and mother, ran deep, and the Block community certainly supported and maintained these attitudes.¹⁹ Although young children of either sex performed many domestic duties, gender-defined activity became more prevalent as puberty approached and girls began an informal apprenticeship for future domestic roles.

As was true in many rural areas, in the early German-Lutheran families at Block uncles, aunts, and cousins served as sources of support, advice, and control for children. The elderly received respect and special treatment as they continued to contribute to the household as workers and storehouses of folk wisdom and cultural heritage.²⁰ Older women usually spent their widowhood in the home of a daughter or son where they performed domestic tasks until physically unable to do so.

Child-rearing practices varied widely among families, but both parents usually disciplined children. My interviewees often described their fathers as stern and quite willing to use corporal punishment and their mothers, in contrast, as often talking with children and using a more "tender-hearted" approach. Marie Dageforde Montney told of her mother calling her and her misbehaving siblings into the kitchen for a talk. "She took us out into the kitchen. She said, 'You've all got me today yet but many a little child would be happy if they could have me as [their] mother.' We all broke down and cried."²¹

A girl's adult experiences began with marriage and childbirth. The average marital age for women in Block was 22.2 years and for men 26.6 years. Even third- and fourth-generation women typically chose German-Lutheran husbands from the Block area or from another German-Lutheran community closely associated with the Block Germans.²² After marriage, motherhood and childbirth epitomized adult womanhood and its duties and responsibilities.

Midwifery was extensively practiced in Block until Gesche Mahnken Block, one of the community's original settlers, died in 1911. Highly respected and affectionately known as Grandma Block, she emigrated from Germany as a young wife in the 1850s. She and her husband, Dittrich Block, had sold the property to the church for its original buildings and the community was named after the Block family. When Grandma Block delivered babies, doctors were called only if she felt the mother might experience serious complications. Women essentially controlled the birth room when a midwife was present, but the growing availability and prestige of male doctors discouraged young women from taking over from the aging midwives of the nineteenth century.²³

Accompanying this shift in birth practices, family size was beginning to decrease and by 1920, when the community was at its population peak, Block women were having fewer children. Third-generation Block women had smaller families than their mothers or grandmothers.²⁴

Throughout the female life cycle, kinship ties were important, fostering strong family and community bonds. Work sharing was not uncommon. Often a woman performed one task, such as sewing, for the entire family while other female family members divided the other domestic chores. In Marie Block Prothe's family her oldest daughter sewed, another assisted her in the kitchen, and the youngest daughter lived with and worked for a married sister.²⁵

Sunday afternoons regularly became social events for kin and non-kin alike. On Sunday afternoons an entire family would visit another household for dinner, bringing together three generations for relaxation, recreation, and conversation. Annual mission festivals, similar to a long-practiced German custom, brought the church community together for worship services, guest speakers, and a basket dinner.²⁶ Family events such as baptism, confirmation, marriage, and death carried even more meaning when church ceremonies celebrated these passages.

Such social activities were ordinarily closed to "outsiders"—the term commonly used to describe individuals not in the Missouri Synod fold. For women at Block, whose activities were already narrowly defined, this synodical warning against the "hostile" secular world kept them effectively isolated from women outside the Block community. Only in economics and politics was the secular world tolerated and customarily these were domains of fathers, husbands, and sons. Theologically and socially, outside interaction was discouraged for all members well into the twentieth century. Mildred Block related a story her mother told her about "outsiders."

Pastor taught Mom and them in the school that if you weren't a Lutheran you shouldn't have anything to do with them or go to Hell. That was his philosophy. Wasn't that something?²⁷

RELATIONS WITH THE OUTSIDE WORLD

Although outside contact was minimal, Block women and girls were heavily involved in domestic production on the farm, and this created a pathway to the outside world. Women produced goods for their families, neighbors, and friends, with the surplus going to Block, Paola, and neighboring general stores

that sold their products to consumers. At times, the demand for domestic goods may have outstripped the supply.²⁸ Sometimes goods were bartered and at other times sold for cash. The sale of women's domestic production was a reciprocal exchange that took place so often, usually weekly, that money was rarely deposited in banks or documented in legal transactions. Women, unlike men, were not involved in exchanges of large amounts of cash that resulted from annual harvest or periodic sale of livestock. Although women's domestic goods brought in small amounts of money, the value of women's production lies in the fact that it provided a steady, continuous income even through the depression years.

First- and second-generation women varied in their ability to control their own production. Husbands and fathers initially took the domestic goods to market, although many wives went along and the task was performed together. Women who married after 1920 and learned to drive cars began taking their own goods to town, bartering and collecting the cash themselves. The experience of Lydia Prothe Schultz is typical of the transition between second- and third-generation women. Lydia's father taught her to drive the family car when she was seventeen, and she often ran errands to town alone. Her mother never learned to drive either a car or the family's horse-drawn wagons.²⁹

Domestic service provided women with a slow transition into the outside world. Initially, girls worked for the immediate family or relatives in the community. By the end of the nineteenth century, the neighboring town of Paola began advertising for live-in domestic servants or hired girls. Hiring out became a girl's rite of passage to womanhood and marriage.

The importance of exposure to the outside world cannot be overemphasized, particularly in its power to assimilate girls into American culture. Some scholars convincingly argue that because of this live-in experience, German-American girls had better English skills and assimilated more quickly than their brothers.³⁰ For girls from Block, hiring out exposed them to their first financial and social independence. They used their wages for clothes, trips home, or for building their trousseaus.³¹ The opportunity to be in town with the excitement of new faces, shops, and movie theatres was simultaneously frightening and thrilling but always highly educational.³²

For girls coming of age after 1920, domestic service in Kansas City provided higher wages and better educational opportunities. The contrasts in community size and lifestyle loomed large for girls who had rarely if ever been away from home and family. For Irene Minden Prothe, her hired girl experience included her first train ride, her first streetcar ride, and exposure to kitchen appliances and foods she never knew existed.³³

Train travel home once a month provided a continuous link with Block and

the family. Although most young women returned home after two or three years in Kansas City, some stayed and married men in Kansas City. Most, however, returned home to care for ill parents, help the family, or to marry local men. Hiring out definitely gave these women new perspectives upon themselves and the outside world. The combination of urban lifestyle, financial independence, and living in the homes of non-Lutherans afforded a broad, rich experience unparalleled in the lives of their mothers or grandmothers.

In 1917, the outside world came to Block. The United States entered World War I and anti-German sentiment escalated nationally. In February 1918, the local newspaper announced President Wilson's order for registration of "alien enemies," or all German-born men who were not American citizens. In June, all German-born women and women born in this country but married to German-born men were also required to register as "Enemy Females." Eighteen women from Block, including six American citizens born in the United States, came to the Paola post office to be interviewed, fingerprinted, and photographed. Threatened with deportation solely because their husbands had been born in Germany, they were doubly stigmatized by gender and ethnicity. American-born husbands of German women were not required to register.³⁴ Esther Prothe Maisch reported that her American-born mother was so angry about the registration that she refused to give the family extra copies of the required photograph even though they pleaded for it as a keepsake.³⁵

The Block community had no major incidents of violent anti-German behavior during the war years. While nationally the Missouri Synod was under heated attack, the Block community struggled internally with issues of assimilation and particularly with the use of the German language. Attitudes about the war varied from anger and resentment to outward patriotic displays of American loyalty.³⁶ Even as grandsons, sons, and brothers were drafted for military service, Block women were forced to deal with marginal status in the outside world where being female did not protect them from ethnic and religious bigotry.

CONCLUSION

The women of Block, Kansas, created and participated in networks of association that shaped and molded four generations of German Lutheran women. Church, school, family, and outside networks each played a role in the transmission of beliefs, values, and culture. The institutions of church and school functioned with unparalleled authority in the lives of girls and women. The

networks of family and the outside world provided the most opportunity for change and growth.

Church networks were gender defined, and age determined the entry and exit patterns of girls and women. The hierarchy of authority remained solidly male in a church that firmly believed in the subordination and silence of women and children. Women and eventually adolescent girls defined a place for themselves by creating church-related activities that justified separate associations. The Ladies Aid operated at the discretion of the male voters' assembly, but in time the women achieved independence of action and governance. These women successfully combined social gatherings with domestic activities, and the girls in the Walther League combined Bible study and educational activities with social activities and trips. In true American entrepreneurial spirit, each organization learned to parlay these activities into money-making endeavors that increased their importance and assured their existence. It can even be argued that girls in Walther League enjoyed a closer parity to their male peers than did adult women.

Of all the networks, the church was affected least by Americanization and the passage of time. For more than seventy years, its formal networks, structure of authority, and character of activities changed only by degree. It is not difficult to understand the lack of female visibility and power. 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 women and girls.

The school gained authority through its close association with the church, and girls received strong messages concerning beliefs and behavior. Young girls learned social and gender roles in conjunction with religious doctrine, firmly linking appropriate gender behavior to religious imperatives. Male authority, like the church itself, was to be unquestioned. In distinction from public schools, girls saw few female role models in the classroom. The much acclaimed "melting pot" of the public schools remained remote and had little effect until Block girls started attending public high school in the late 1930s.

Aided by rural isolation, Block's protective and insular institutions staved off religious and cultural threats. Even if young women were tempted by the outside world, Block's institutions remained unwavering in their authority and "truth." For some, the protection was unwanted and resented, but for many it offered strength, assurance, and unfailing support from birth to death. Unlike some urban environments that created dissociation and conflict between families and generations, the rural environment buffered the cultural shock many first- and second-generation Germans faced in large American cities. According to Frederick Luebke, "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."³⁷

Family networks functioned as productive work units and provided the arena for all manner of interactions. Women and girls worked together. As in other rural environments, when girls and women worked with males it was typically perceived as "helping out." Because of the complexity, variability, and privacy of family life, the structures of authority are difficult to assess. Bolstered by religious doctrine, patriarchy was unmistakable; however, the German reverence for motherhood placed women squarely in the core of family interactions. Women's public deference to their husbands in no way determined the private interactions of husband and wife or parent and child. In assessing women's experience, Claire Farrer suggests that historians may assume that public roles are dominant over private ones simply because they are more accessible to the scholar.³⁸

As women ventured into the outside world, outside networks changed family dynamics and individual behavior. Outside activities played a large part in expanding the role and activities of Block women. 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 and increased their mobility through their use of the automobile. Twentieth-century Block women, like many rural women, functioned as both producers and consumers much longer than their urban counterparts.³⁹

Questions remain to be answered concerning religion, ethnicity, and gender. How representative are Block women when compared to other rural ethnic women? Nineteenth-century Kansas was replete with small rural/ethnic settlements. What made Block different from other ethnic enclaves? In many ways, Block was not different. Many such rural communities developed around an ethnic church and espoused traditional family values. Some differences, however, are evident. For a Missouri Synod Lutheran, religion and ethnicity were inseparable. As Robert M. Toepfer has pointed out, the rural immigrant character of the synod, its well-organized parochial education system, and its explicit linkage of theology and the German language, bound the Missouri Synod into "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."⁴⁰

Even if ethnic communities had foreign language or parochial schools, most did not experience the longevity or religious exclusivity of Missouri Synod schools. In many ways, Missouri Synod communities, like Block, were one

pole in a continuum running from them through ethnic communities that created parochial schools but had a more mixed ethnic population to ethnic groups who sent their children to heterogeneous public schools.

Although the study of gender remains a difficult task in traditionally male-defined communities, it continues to deliver rich rewards. Additional ways must be devised to uncover the attitudes and activities of women in a strongly patriarchal community. Block women had limited personal and work options and, unlike other Protestant women, they could not resort to evangelical causes to assert their independence and worth. And, for busy rural women, reform societies such as suffrage or temperance organizations were a luxury when domestic work had to be done and families fed and clothed. Numbers alone provide limited information, particularly when much quantitative analysis has been based on male work or urban female work patterns. Also, the public/private construct fails to provide a meaningful format when discussing rural or ethnic women's experiences. More research must be focused on finding objective and subjective ways to assess rural women's work experience and attitudes.

By looking at networks of association, I have drawn a composite portrait of four generations of women in the Block community. The purpose of this study was not to create a story of female victims or rebellious heroines fighting for recognition, although individually they may be found. I chose to examine four generations of women and the nature of their everyday lives. Historian Gerda Lerner stated, "The true history of women is the history of their ongoing functioning in a male-defined world on their own terms."⁴¹ The powerful combination of religion, ethnicity, and gender provides a fascinating backdrop for such a study.

NOTES

1. Barbara Finkelstein, "Casting Networks of Good Influence, in *American Childhood: A Research Guide and Historical Handbook*, ed. Joseph Hawes and N. Ray Hiner (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1985), xii-52. Although Finkelstein uses the concept of "networks of association" only in analyzing history of childhood, I believe the concept is adaptable to women's history and provides a way to view women's interactions in a male-defined culture.
2. *Statistical Yearbook of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod 1924* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House), 172 and *Statistical Yearbook* (1940), 83.
3. See Carl S. Meyer, *Moving Frontiers: Readings in the History of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1964) and a series of articles by Heinrich H. Mauert in *American Journal of Sociology* 30-34 (1924-28).
4. Alan Graebner, *Uncertain Saints: The Laity in the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, 1900-1970* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1975), 113.

5. *Ibid.*, 17–18.
6. For specific information on church governance see Carl S. Mundinger, *Government in the Missouri Synod* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1947).
7. *Constitution of the Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church Ladies Aid* (Block, KS: Trinity Lutheran Church [TLC] Archives), 1. Although the first Ladies Aid in the synod began in St. Louis in 1852, the organization in small rural congregations did not become common until after the turn of the century.
8. The nineteenth-century Lutheran Church in Germany did not have a long history of women's philanthropy. See Catherine M. Prelinger, "The Nineteenth Century Deaconessate in Germany, in *German Women in the 18th and 19th Century: A Social and Literary History*, ed. Ruth-Ellen Joeres and Mary Jo Maynes (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 215–29.
9. Ladies Aid Minutes, 6 April 1932, p. 90.
10. Author's interview with Nora Ohlmeier Prothe, 24 June 1986, Block, Kansas.
11. Ellen Condliffe Lagemann, "Looking at Gender in Women's History, in *Historical Inquiry in Education: A Research Agenda*, ed. John Hardin Best (Washington, DC: American Educational Research Association, 1983), 251–64.
12. *Constitution of the Trinity Lutheran Walther League* (TLC Archives), p. 192. Walther League was a national organization begun in the 1890s in St. Louis. The name came from C.F.W. Walther, who served as one of the primary founding fathers of the Missouri Synod.
13. Rural bus service did not become available in Block until 1937. Until then, the completion of eighth grade at the parochial school marked the end of most children's formal education.
14. Author's interview with Ada Ruth Schultz Coburn, 6 October 1986, Paola, Kansas.
15. Walther H. Beck, *Lutheran Elementary Schools in the United States* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1939), 101. No lesson plans have survived to reveal Block's exact curriculum, but since schools had synod-trained teachers it is reasonable to assume the curriculum was similar to synod recommendations presented in official school journals and teacher training books. See Beck, *Lutheran Elementary Schools*, 379–80.
16. Author's interview with Minnie Cahman Debrick, 23 September 1986, Paola, Kansas.
17. All my interviewees mentioned *Christenlehre* and many told of anxious moments and nightmares before Sunday morning services.
18. Karin Hausen, "Family and Role-Division: The Polarisation of Sexual Stereotypes in the Nineteenth Century—An Aspect of the Dissociation of Work and Family Life, in *The German Family*, ed. Richard J. Evans and W.R. Lee (Venonah, NJ: Barnes & Noble Books, 1981), 52.
19. Juliane Jacobi-Dittrich, "Growing up Female in the Nineteenth Century," in *German Women in the Nineteenth Century: A Social History*, ed. John C. Fout (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1984), 199.
20. Charles H. Mindel and Robert W. Habenstein, eds., *Ethnic Families in America: Patterns and Variations* (New York: Elsevier, 1976), 420.
21. Author's interview with Marie Dageforde Monthey, 16 August 1986, Block, Kansas.
22. *Trinity Lutheran Church Recordbook Marriages* (TLC Archives). These figures are average marital ages compiled from 1885 to 1940. There were marriages before 1885 but ministers did not begin recording ages until that year. Church minutes repeatedly describe clerical and holiday exchanges with German Lutheran churches from Franklin County and Crawford County. The *Paola Western Spirit* lists many social exchanges, including marriages, with the Palmer Germans in Washington County.
23. My interviewees born after Grandma Block's death or who had younger brothers and sisters born after 1911 referred less to midwives and women helpers and more to male doctors who came by car to deliver babies. See also Judy Barrett Litoff, *American Midwives: 1860 to the Present* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1978).
24. Church records of birth and baptism generally confirm this decrease in fertility (TLC Archives). In addition, records of the sixteen first- and second-generation Block women required to register as "Alien Females in 1918 reveal large families. Two-thirds of the women had home at least six children and three had borne ten or more ("Alien Enemy Registration, Box 17, Federal Archives, Kansas City Branch, Kansas City, Missouri). Of the twelve third-generation women I interviewed, more than half came from families with at least seven children. None of the third-generation women had more than four children and six had only two children.
25. Author's interview with Lydia Prothe Schultz, 26 January 1985, Paola, Kansas.
26. Mission festivals were celebrated yearly as noted in *Protokoll* minutes from 1888 through 1940 (TLC Archives).
27. Author's interview with Mildred Block, 22 November 1985, Fonzana, Kansas.
28. In 1900, the Peiker-Wishropp grocery store in Paola printed a large front-page advertisement in the newspaper asking "to take all produce our county customers can offer. *Paola Western Spirit*, 24 August 1900.
29. Author's interview with Lydia Prothe Schultz, 13 February 1982, Paola, Kansas.
30. Doris Weatherford, *Foreign and Female: Immigrant Women in America, 1840–1930* (New York: Schocken Books, 1986), 148, and Laurence A. Glasco, "The Life Cycle and Household Structure of American Ethnic Groups: Irish, Germans and Native-Born Whites in Buffalo, New York, 1855," in *A Heritage of Her Own*, ed. Nancy F. Cott and Elizabeth H. Peck (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979), 288.
31. Block women who had worked as hired girls all told me that they kept their own money and either saved it or bought items for themselves. The family did not expect their daughters to send money home but to take care of their own financial and personal needs.
32. Sylvia Lea Sallquist, "The Image of the Hired Girl in Literature: The Great Plains, 1860–World War I," *Great Plains Quarterly* 4 (Summer 1984): 166–77. Although Sallquist focuses most of her analysis on fiction, she wrote that the hired girls' memoirs mention "education as a motive for being a hired girl" and the "opportunity to be in town."
33. Author's interview with Irene Minden Prothe, 18 July 1986, Block, Kansas.
34. *Paola Western Spirit*, 1 February 1918, explained "Alien Enemy" registration, and 21 June described the registration of "Enemy Females."
35. Author's interview with Esther Prothe Maisch, 25 June 1986, Block, Kansas.
36. *Protokoll* minutes from 1918 until 1950, when German was officially discontinued, describe the anxiety, anger, and frustration of the church in dealing with English. My

interviewees confirm the wide range of attitudes and emotions brought about by World War I. Many second- and third-generation residents were ready to assimilate at a faster rate but others consistently attempted to slow the process and succeeded for decades.

37. Frederick C. Luebke, *Immigrants and Politics: The Germans of Nebraska, 1880-1900* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1969), 35.
38. Claire Farrer, "Women and Folklore: Images and Genres," *Journal of American Folklore* 88 (January/March 1975): ix.
39. See Joan M. Jensen, *Loosening the Bonds: Mid-Atlantic Farm Women* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 91.
40. Robert M. Toepfer, "Rationale for Preservation of the German Language in the Missouri Synod of the Nineteenth Century," *Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly* 41 (February 1968): 167. Toepfer cites Heinrich H. Mauer, "Studies in the Sociology of Religion," *American Journal of Sociology* 31 (July 1925): 49-50.
41. Gerda Lerner, *The Majority Finds Its Past: Placing Women in History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 148.