

*Cottonwood Roots* makes a unique contribution to the historical literature. It bridges the gap between two different enterprises, social history and genealogy. Genealogy has never been taken seriously by historians. Despite the fact that social history often uses the same source materials, and historians sometimes find themselves rubbing shoulders and competing for space with genealogists in archives and libraries, social history and genealogy seem to have little in common. Social history tries to generalize about trends in the past, and utilizes censuses and demographic records to build up a picture of the behavior of a population over time; genealogy is only interested in the particular. The genealogist traces a family line backwards and forwards, and concentrates on members as a unique entity. The researcher attempts to expand the family net to include as many individuals as possible. Although genealogists are concerned with the socio-economic background of their relatives, they generally show little concern, and have little knowledge of, the nuances of the past which the social historian brings to his labors. For the genealogist the fascination and reward of research is in the detective work of making a positive connection with the unknown. Few genealogists produce a narrative which summarizes their work; in contrast the social historian tries to write an elegant volume which generalizes about the behavior of many individuals in the past.

Luther has initiated a dialogue between these two camps. His book which is engagingly written, uses the device of a travelogue to draw the reader to the subject, and then traverses not only the backwaters of contemporary and nineteenth-century America, but also the methods and research dilemmas which confront the genealogist.

He embarks on what he calls a pilgrimage: a nine day jaunt from his birthplace in rural west central Nebraska to western New York. The west-east route, contrasts with the east-west migration of his family. Thus in the space of a few days he visits all the sites where his family settled from the 1840s onwards.

Luther provides more insight about the migration process of obscure farm folk than most academic treatises. Through the experience of his own family, he nicely encapsulates the path of millions of families who drifted west as they squatted, rented, owned, and speculated in frontier land. Perhaps because Luther holds a doctorate in philosophy, and teaches computer science, he is not afraid to utilize broad analytical concepts to give meaning to nineteenth-century rural history. He sees the northern United States moving through a three phase cycle--from what he calls a foundational period, through a transitional period around the time of the Civil War, into the modern era around 1880. Despite all the pressures which industrialization and urbanization brought to farmers in these years, Luther sees his ancestors and thousands like them turn their backs on modernization and escape time and again to the frontier. Eventually their marginal position caught up with them. For although they liked to think of themselves as agrarian producers, and the backbone of the nation, the government and large industrial concerns treated them as consumers. As price takers not makers many on the Great Plains joined the agrarian revolt. The author's given name apparently reflected these sentiments: Kem was a local populist hero who represented Nebraska farmers in the state legislature.

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