

(e.g., “Five Pen-and-Paper Games”). The Hirsch-type entries on some topics—the “Declaration of Independence,” famous battles, “The Fifty States,” and “Sampling Shakespeare”—reflect the current worry that a common heritage has been lost, a worry fraught with ideological tensions about multiculturalism, though you would not know that from this book. The authors assume here a very middle-class, very white, very Eurocentric view of the world (read “The Alamo,” for example).

Despite the title’s tantalizing promise that this is a “dangerous book for boys,” I feel certain that the boys who buy and read this book are nostalgic baby boomers living in a white, middle-class, safe world. This book is fantasy material for these readers, just as Martha Stewart books and magazines are fantasy reading for white, middle-class women who imagine that they will create fabulous parties but who won’t. The reason I feel certain that *boys* will not read this book (even if somebody gives it to them) is that the current crop of boys knows where to find any information or any instructions on how to do or make something—they are adept at finding things on the Internet. Boys in scouting learn a lot of this from their handbooks and camping experiences; other boys acquire skills not represented in these pages. Those skills sometimes are not the sort we want boys to have—truly dangerous skills, illegal skills, violent skills. Who teaches boys how to play? Not books, and not even the Internet.

One of the mantras of the 1990s’ culture wars held that the culture is waging a war on boys. While there are statistics to bolster the claim that by many measures boys are more at risk than girls, there is more adult ideology at work in these

claims than actual evidence that today’s boys lack the creativity and ability to play. The book gives voice to baby boomer nostalgia for the largely imagined, romantic, and idyllic childhoods of the 1950s and 1960s.

The books by Louv and by the Igguldens share the child-saving pedigree that tells us more about adult anxieties than about kids. The authors sound the alarm that today’s children have lost creativity, wonder, an aesthetic sense, and the ability to play. Louv’s book at least actually consults some children about their view of the world; the Igguldens cannot possibly have talked with or observed real boys, who are plenty creative and know very well how to play. Parents, teachers, youth workers, and other adults need to pay attention to the real threats to children, to the real dangers for boys, and stay away from the politically loaded nostalgia that misdirects our efforts.

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### **Childhood on the Farm: Work, Play, and Coming of Age in the Midwest**

*Pamela Riney-Kehrberg*

Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2005. Notes, bibliography, index, photographs. \$34.95 cloth. xi, 300 pp. ISBN: 9780700613885.

As the nineteenth century came to a close, a Midwestern farm boy ruminated about the assigned theme of “Life on the Farm.” For child and adult, he wrote, “It is work from early morning till late at night, with

a few minutes set apart for each meal” (p. 199). He must have been well aware of a dramatic shift sweeping across the nation’s breadbasket. Whereas earlier generations had flocked to the West to stake their claim to land and to see harvests they could call their own, turn-of-the-century youth were leaving the farm for the possibility of better pay for less arduous work. One youngster leaving an Olmsted County, Minnesota, farm for a job in St. Paul in the 1890s sounded downright liberated in his letter to his sweetheart when he wrote, “I do not have to work as many hours a day as I would on a farm; only eight; so you see I have all the evenings after 5 O’Clock to my self, and a half holiday on Saturday, during the hot weather” (p. 198). These are only two of the many testimonies in agricultural historian Pamela Riney-Kehrberg’s detailed account of the harshness and toil on the farm for children and the growing lure of the urban landscape. If modern-day readers have romantic notions generated by Currier and Ives or a Winslow Homer painting of rural children carefreely romping in the fields, this book will assuredly dash them.

The message of the book is more than that rural children were viewed primarily as farm labor in agricultural America. Riney-Kehrberg nuances her argument by examining photographs, diaries, and public records of children at school to complicate the coupling of school and children as a signifier of what youth did with their time. She shows that farm parents had mixed feelings about education, because of their fear that book learning would draw their offspring away to the cities (which had become more accessible in the twentieth century because of improvements in transportation and more attractive

because of job opportunities in industry and the service sector). Many rural teachers were not much older than the students themselves and likely had little more than an eighth-grade education. Responsibility for work on the farm held priority over schooling, as Riney-Kehrberg shows in chronicling the states’ difficulties in initiating and enforcing compulsory attendance laws as well as child labor legislation.

Another eye-opening section of the book concerns the use of farms in child welfare programs. Mining Wisconsin state records, the author documents programs to remove wards of the state by sending them to farms where they worked. She augments the case files with first-person accounts from children who detail the round of work and, frequently, the abuses of host families. Many children were not orphans, but half orphans, having one living parent who was unable to care for them. Riney-Kehrberg gives these cases as a “corrective to the idea of a mythic past in which children were better treated and more carefully raised” (p. 163). Later she adds another corrective, as she calls it, “to the idea that farm homes provided, in all cases, the best place to raise children” (p. 173).

Her focus on the Midwest—defined as the area containing the states of Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Nebraska, and Wisconsin—derives from the region’s legacy as a land of many farm settlements. In Iowa, famed for its expanse of farmlands, the author defines a problem of acute rural population loss. Although there between 1850 and 1880 the portion of the population that was rural declined only a relatively meager ten points from 94 to 84 percent, by 1920—during a time that Riney-Kehrberg views as pivotal—the portion of the population that was rural had

dropped to 63.6 percent. By 2000, the rural population in Iowa was below 40 percent of the total. And elsewhere the trend was much more pronounced. Nationwide by 1920, for the first time, more people lived in cities than in the countryside.

With so much attention paid the work plied by children, where is the play listed in the subtitle of this book? It is relegated to the fifth chapter, which baldly states that “time for play had to be wrested from hours spent plowing, weeding, and milking” (p. 126). Riney-Kehrberg finds that recreation was important to youngsters, judging from the diaries they kept while growing up and from the memories of play recorded by adults raised on farms. Today we define childhood, she argues, by its engagement with play, which we suggest has a socially sanctioned function of learning life skills, including adult work habits. But for Midwestern farm children at the turn of the twentieth century, play was an escape from toil of farming occupations. Organized activities, such as the circus and holiday celebrations, became ingrained in memories and recorded in diaries because they were special occasions in a farm child’s life. Riney-Kehrberg also teases the reader with the child’s perception of hunting and fishing as recreational activity based on references to diaries without supporting details, a perception that is not fully confirmed by ethnographic accounts of historic childhood.

Although the praxis of play takes on a minor role in this book, it is noteworthy as a major element in how adults raised on farms recalled rural days as character building. Riney-Kehrberg notes that with few facilities and little time for recreation, “children created their own diversions, making use of the landscape and the re-

sources offered them by the farm. Their imaginations allowed them to create playgrounds where others might only have seen a working environment” (p. 157). She recognizes the home-crafted world of rural play apparent in photographs, leading to speculation about the coconstruction of material culture by children and grown-ups on the farm. Absent in her survey of farm children’s diversions are the play parties, nature play, singing (or ring) games, and storytelling that have been collected and interpreted by folklorists since the nineteenth century as crucial texts to the understanding of rural life. Perhaps part of her historiographical reluctance to include this material comes from her skepticism about oral sources, evident in her epilogue, where she calls oral historical accounts nostalgic because they filter out the harshness of farm life. She is more comfortable with diaries, letters, and documentary records, although they can be selective too when it comes to the details of everyday life. Regardless, the chapter could easily have been expanded without undermining the thesis that farm life was hard for children.

Elsewhere in the book, Riney-Kehrberg frankly discusses premarital sex, which she includes in an expanded notion of play. The discussion is critical to Riney-Kehrberg’s perspective on the coming-of-age in her title, and contains, in my view, some of the most original and thought-provoking pieces of her generally fine scholarship. Her data reveals it was not only the population shift to the city or growing industrialization that marked the period between 1870 and 1920. It was also marked by the rise in premarital sex. She smartly observes that child laborers had the responsibilities of grownups but were barred from adult pursuits when it

came to social activities. Living far away from such new institutions as dance halls and movie theaters and restricted from attending them in any case, farm youth—so Riney-Kehrberg asserts—embraced intimacy as never before as a form of rebellion. Especially for girls, she says, “engaging in premarital sex was as great a statement of independence as a young female could make, asserting that her body was her own, to do with what she pleased. She was asserting that she did not belong to her parents” (p. 191). In the context of this time and place, engaging in premarital sex thus represented maturation and could hasten the decision to leave the community and build a life of one’s own, again especially for young females, who felt even more socially suppressed than males. The fissure between a youthful generation lured to the city and an older one that had staked its status on making a living off the land was apparent, Riney-Kehrberg implies, in the rise of premarital sex.

Riney-Kehrberg carefully notes that the hinterland did not empty out, however. Many children made the conscious decision to stay in agriculture, and she documents the orchestrated campaigns to “keep ’em on the farm” during the period. Popular magazines such as the *Nebraska Farmer*, she shows, underscored the control and independence farmers enjoyed by living off the land, as well as the healthy effects of working outdoors. As the twentieth century dawned, youngsters raised on farms were reminded of the sense of belonging and rootedness that staying at home offered. When we look back on the experience in old age, says Riney-Kehrberg, “It is in play, perhaps, that we feel the greatest nostalgic

pull for a past we have lost” (p. 231). As the book closes, she ruminates about the kids of that earlier day: “Unlike modern children, their play, for the most part, was free-form and unscripted, and parents and other adults interfered as little as possible. It was their own. In that way, it was, perhaps, far more physically dangerous than the play allowed to many modern American children” (p. 231). Her book is more about labor than play, but it is a valuable foundation for assessing historically the distinctions Americans make between child and adult, farm and city, work and recreation.

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### **To Play or Not to Play: Is It Really a Question?**

*Christine Jeandheur Ferguson and Ernest Dettore, Jr., editors.*  
Olney, MD: Association for Childhood Education International, 2007.  
References, diagrams, photographs, tables. 101 pp. \$18.50 paper. ISBN: 9780871731708.

When you read this slender volume, the wonderful compendium of play-dense information contained between its covers erases the question posed by its title. The book makes a good case for the rewards of play and the necessity for its inclusion in our lives, with a major emphasis on children and the contributions of play to their learning and well-being. The data provided documents the urgency with which we need to reverse social trends that decrease access to the many benefits of play.