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Union Heartland: The Midwestern Home Front During the Civil War

Jeff Bremer

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Review

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Aley, Ginette and Anderson, J. L.. *Union Heartland: The Midwestern Home Front During the Civil War*. Southern Illinois University Press, \$39.50 ISBN 9780809332649

Essays on the West

The American Midwest has been the orphan region of Civil War history, while the Confederacy and the South have dominated the era's studies. Midwestern states, from Ohio to Iowa, contributed greatly to the war effort, producing agricultural surpluses to feed the Union army and providing the manpower to help win the war. Antebellum conflicts in the region over the Fugitive Slave law or the Kansas-Nebraska Act helped contribute to the outbreak of the war as well. But the absence of fighting and a historical focus on the South has left a major gap in our understanding of the important role of the Midwest in the Civil War.

Union Heartland's goal is to focus on role of this region in the war and to help explain its diverse stories. This collection succeeds in its goal by presenting a useful set of essays that detail the experiences of women on the home front, as well as Union prisons and political dissent in Ohio. It builds on synthetic studies, such as Phil Paludan's *A People's Contest: The Union and the Civil War* and *American Midwest: Essays on Regional History*, by Andrew Cayton and Susan Gray, and focuses on rural history.

The best essays in this slim volume focus on the role of farmwomen. Nicole Etcheson's chapter on Indiana women and their in-laws details a neglected topic by exploring how absent soldier husbands continued to exert their authority in the household. An imperfect solution to a family crisis, living with in-laws was usually the least bad option. Some families could be tough on their long-term visitors. Etcheson writes that the war did not liberate the women, as their husbands—or his family—remained in charge. Ginette Aley's essay on rural women is a broad survey of the disruptions and challenges the war presented to

women's lives. Soldiers trusted their spouses to operate a farm as a partner. Farm wives sometimes took up physically challenging tasks that have been completed by their husbands. Tragedy often struck, but families survived because women sustained them.

J.L. Anderson's essay on absent soldiers and farm wives is a fine case study of the home front in Iowa. The correspondence between men and women helped provide direction to the family farm, even as remaining members managed it on their own. Many families moved in with relatives or rented their property or had a neighbor watch their land. Relatives helped with labor, as farm wives added to livestock herds and otherwise managed production. Other essays are also valuable, including R. Doug Hurt's chapter on "The Agricultural Power of the Midwest During the Civil War," a fine introduction to the topic, which will be fleshed out in a forthcoming monograph. An essay on Republican attempts to stifle Democratic expression in southern Ohio in 1863 provides a smart examination of the subject in a crucial year. Here, intimidation and mob violence helped to limit dissent. Other essays on prisons for Confederate soldiers and student patriotism in Michigan are less valuable than the other contributions, but add to the volume's overall usefulness.

This collection will be of interest to scholars of the Civil War, as well as to those interested in the Northern home front or nineteenth-century rural history. The authors have demonstrated the vitality of this region and its variety of experiences. Hopefully the themes explored here will spur additional research into this region.

Jeff Bremer is an assistant professor of history at Iowa State University and author of the forthcoming A Store Almost in Sight: The Economic Transformation of Missouri from the Louisiana Purchase to the Civil War.