

Tied to the Great Packing Machine: The Midwest and Meatpacking. By *Wilson J. Warren*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2007. xii + 317 pp. Illustrations, maps, tables, bibliography, notes, index. Cloth, \$39.95. ISBN: 978-1-587-29536-2.

Reviewed by Shane Hamilton

For most historians, “Midwest” and “meatpacking” likely conjure up thoughts of either Cincinnati (“Porkopolis”) or Chicago (*The Jungle*). In this work, Wilson Warren sets out to correct what he calls a “geographic imbalance” (p. x) of scholarly attention to these urban centers of meatpacking. Exploring the production and distribution of red meat from the mid-nineteenth to late-twentieth centuries as a regionwide phenomenon, Warren examines how meatpackers shaped the economic, social, and environmental fabric of the entire U.S. Midwest—from farms to small cities to the largest urban centers. Deploying a broad geographic and chronological framework, the author provides a wide-ranging study of the business, labor, and environmental history of midwestern meatpacking.

Encyclopedic in tone and in scope, this book synthesizes existing literature. The work of business and labor historians, including Roger Horowitz, Margaret Walsh, and Mary Yeager, figures prominently, as do studies by geographers Brian Page and Michael Broadway and anthropologists Deb Fink, David Griffith, and Donald Stull. The first three chapters explore the economic impacts of meatpacking on the Midwest, tracing the industry through four distinct phases. Atomistic merchant-wholesaling enterprises dominated in the early nineteenth century. After the Civil War, the Chicago packers known as the Big Five (Four after 1923) anchored the industry through the 1950s, relying on centralized stockyards and rail transport to capture economies of scale and scope. In the first half of the twentieth century, however, competitors arose in smaller cities of the Midwest, buying livestock from the immediate hinterlands. In the 1960s and 1970s, the fourth phase witnessed IBP, Excel, and ConAgra forging a new oligopoly by combining the direct-buying approach of independent rural packers with technologically sophisticated slaughtering and distribution.

These transformations in structure and strategy have been extensively studied, but Warren even-handedly evaluates the regionwide impact of these shifts on employment and ancillary business growth. He describes the second and third phases of meatpacking's evolution as bringing relative prosperity to both small towns and metropolitan centers through the 1950s but returning "fewer economic benefits" (p. 29) in the post-1960 phase. This is an understatement. As Warren notes, meatpacking wages collapsed under the union-busting strategies of IBP and its imitators in the 1970s and 1980s. Small towns, such as Garden City, Kansas, witnessed extraordinary poverty, while older meatpacking towns, such as Austin, Minnesota, hemorrhaged population and jobs.

Notably absent in this section is any sustained analysis of the political and legal frameworks that shaped the industry's transformation over the twentieth century. As historians Meg Jacobs, Robert Aduddell, Louis Cain, and Charles Wood have shown, consumers and farmers railing against the oligopolistic power of the so-called Beef Trust drove the politics of antitrust in the first half of the twentieth century. Only the briefest consideration is given to the formation of the Federal Trade Commission in 1914, the Justice Department consent decrees of the 1920s, the half-hearted trust-busting efforts of the Packers and Stockyards Division of the Department of Agriculture during the New Deal, or the meat and livestock price controls of the World War II-era Office of Price Administration. A reader unfamiliar with the extensive literature on the problem of monopoly in meatpacking might be left with the erroneous impression that the industry developed in a political vacuum.

The second section is devoted to the social history of midwestern meatpacking. Warren's description of the ethnic, racial, and gender composition of the region's workforces is enlightening. Racial and ethnic tensions shaped the successes and failures of union organizers throughout the period of study. Small midwestern towns with relatively homogenous workforces developed union strength more readily than larger cities where ethnic hostilities had to be overcome through concerted effort by organizers from the Congress of Industrial Unions (CIO) in the late 1930s. Relatively homogenous rural regions have, since the 1960s, undergone what Warren calls an "ethnic disruption" (p. 51) as firms courted Hispanic and Southeast Asian immigrants to work for them, fueling anti-immigrant hostility in the American heartland. Warren also explores the subtle and not-so-subtle gender politics of meatpacking work, detailing

the humiliating sexual harassment, unequal pay, and uncertainty of employment faced by women workers throughout the twentieth century. Warren applauds the efforts of women labor activists who attained equal pay clauses in labor contracts in the 1940s, but notes the persistence of a sexual division of labor into the present.

Following an intriguing chapter on the social history of violence in animal slaughter, Warren briskly tracks regional and ethnic variations in meat-buying patterns, consumer and industry responses to concerns about tainted and unhealthy meat, and packers' efforts to promote red meat as convenient and nutritious through such vehicles as the 1939 pamphlet *Mr. Ham Goes to Town*. These chapters, while informative, could have been better integrated into the book's structure.

The environmental impacts of meatpacking conclude the book. Water and odor pollution, the threat of *E. coli*, and the genetic transformation of livestock to suit supermarketers' demands are studied in rapid succession. Besides exploring the backward links of meatpacking into the midwestern farmscapes of the nineteenth century, Warren details the forward links of the slaughter byproducts business with the fertilizer, pet-food, leather, and pharmaceutical industries. Everything but the squeal of the hog, it seems, is accounted for.

This volume usefully and adroitly marshals a broad array of existing literature. While a regional comparison of midwestern meatpacking to southern poultry processing might have added analytical heft, nevertheless the book effectively illustrates the interwoven histories of meatpacking and the midwestern economy, society, and environment.

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