

Harlo L. Jones *O Little Town: Remembering Life in a Prairie Village*. Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1995. Pp. xxviii, 236.

One great change in 20th century North American life has been the loss or near-death of small towns and villages, particularly on the Canadian prairies. To help his children and grandchildren understand what it was like to grow up in the 1920s and 1930s, Harlo Jones has produced a memoir of his native Dinsmore, Saskatchewan—a village sixty-three miles south southwest of Saskatoon, with a population around 200. In the vein of much non-professional local history, Jones talks about life as he remembers it without reference to records, maps, or original materials beyond photographs of home, family, neighbours, and village businesses. It is an easy-going, enjoyable read filled with stories of the friendly relationships at the core of small town life, childhood pranks and jokes, descriptions of simple amusements and distractions that filled a Prairie child's day, and the inevitable tensions as maturing boys and girls began to notice one another. Jones provides a clear, descriptive outline of one prairie village, its buildings, its services, its businesses, and the systems that helped life go on—the railway, postal service, outlying farms, town hall meetings, the volunteer fire department (and, of course, the “Bennett buggy”).

The book's twelve chapters begin with “The Homes”: prairie houses with little insulation, dominated by kitchen cookstoves and set in a landscape dotted with outhouses for use by all and sundry. Subsequent chapters on “School,” “Church,” “Stores and Shops,” “My Father's Business,” and “Farms” introduce the organization and activities of the more formal parts of the community. Chapters entitled “Nature,” “The Outdoors,” “Here and There,” “Sports,” “Entertainment,” and “Boys and Girls Together” attempt to probe the physical, cultural, and social aspects of growing up in Dinsmore.

Jones tells us a great deal about Dinsmore and its stores, shops, services, and practices in sports and entertainment. What he doesn't tell us much about are the people—who they were, their ethnic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds, how often they moved, the size of the average family, or how many attended which churches.

Saskatchewan experienced a huge immigration flow through the 20s, with close to 30% of the population from outside Canada, many from Central and Eastern Europe. Because Jones makes no mention of cultural or linguistic differences, the reader is left to assume that Dinsmore and its surrounding farms were peopled by only those of Anglo-Saxon heritage. Beyond a suggestion that one resident might have been a “remittance man,” only the proprietor of the Chinese laundry suffered discrimination and loneliness.

In his Preface Jones asserts the Depression affected the children of the village very little as everyone was in the same situation. Only as adults did he

and others realize the true burden of economic catastrophe upon their parents and the village generally. Despite his disclaimer that everyone suffered equally (albeit unknowingly), Jones' memoir alerts the reader to quite another story. Jones' father's car dealership survived, although deeply in debt, while he supplemented the family income by going into the mortuary business. Young Harlo spent many an hour pumping gas, assisting in the parts department, and occasionally taking delivery of a truck or tractor. A photograph of the Jones house shows a well-kept and relatively substantial home. I would expect that Harlo and his family survived the 30s in much better shape than many others. Since there is no mention of families pulling up stakes, farms abandoned, or children with health problems from poor diet, we do not really learn how the depression affected the village.

Jones' chapter on "The School" illustrates the book's strengths and shortcomings. He notes that the school was probably the most important Dinsmore institution, serving an area of approximately 100 square miles. There is a great deal of detail on the physical layout of the school: four classrooms for grades one through eleven, a basement divided to separate boys and girls, outhouses later replaced by chemical toilets, rows of desks, straight pens and inkwells, a hectograph for duplicating, and so on. The author talks about excellent teachers, mostly women (although the two singled out for praise, a history teacher and a science and math teacher, were clearly both male). But even Jones' compliments are impersonal. One gets no sense of the teachers' ages, backgrounds, marital status, or length of time in the community. Except in the two instances mentioned above, there is little about the curriculum, classroom management skills, or pedagogy. Even the other children remain faceless.

Jones asserts the teachers must have been competent "because so many went on to University." Without evidence it is not possible to assess this generalization, and again numbers are lacking. We know that university attendance during the 1920s and 30s was very low. Without statistics on graduation and/or dropout rates, without knowing who went to school and for how long, without knowing how many children helped out with younger children or on the farm instead of attending school, we cannot really grasp schooling in Dinsmore reliably. It is not only the trained educational historian who will find this frustrating. Strangely absent from this otherwise charming memoir are the people. Without some deeper knowledge and understanding of its citizens, the true heart of Dinsmore is missing.

*Nancy Sheehan
University of British Columbia*