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Review of Moving Out: A Nebraska Woman's Life

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Moving Out: A Nebraska Woman's Life. By Polly Spence. Edited and with an afterword by Karl Spence Richardson. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002. 225 pp. Illustrations. \$17.95 paper.

At the end of her memoir, *Moving Out*, Polly Spence assesses all the little ironies of her life and concludes, "[each] time everything seemed just right, each time I thought I'd found it all—the work, the love, and the ideal way to live—something brought change to me." Change is a central motif in her narrative, reflected in a title that underscores movement and mobility, not settlement. Spence's Nebraska life provides a toehold on the slippery surface of twentieth-century culture in America. The many changes in her life reflect the changeable decades from the 1920s to the 1970s in which many Americans moved from agrarian to urban lives.

Spence began life in the farming community of Franklin, Nebraska, where a young woman's existence centered on family, church, and respectable social events that excluded dancing. Under the demanding eye of an unbending mother, Spence resented the oppressive governance of a lingering Victorian America. Unable to express herself openly, she struggled with a "lack of identity," a condition afflicting many women she knew. Franklin was a role-driven society that placed high value on conformity. Yet a sense of instability stirred beneath the appearance of complacency: her father's printing business depended on the litigious nature of Franklin County's residents. The KKK infiltrated

Franklin in the 1920s and provoked conflict for a number of years. Many were lonely, including Spence.

When her father sold his printing shop to take up a new one in Crawford, Nebraska, Spence's life opened up. The high butte ranching country encouraged a tolerance of difference that the farming community did not. Here, Spence recalls, "the tempo and texture of life [were] different." The most momentous years of Spence's life played out among ranchers, resident Native Americans, and military men. The Depression abruptly ended her university career in Lincoln. She would marry, have children, bear the pain of her brother's and father's deaths, see a young son die as well. With her husband, Levi Richardson, Spence struggled to make their ranch survive lean years. World War II brought the first financial security they had known, and the postwar years increased opportunity for them as hunters, and then urban tourists, paid to share time on the ranch. A marriage that at first seemed full of promise and shared vision crumbled under the strain of finances, the death of young Charley, and adultery. The Crawford years of *Moving Out* present the most sustained, dramatic, and informative social history of the memoir. As postwar America seemingly pulled together with improved telecommunications, expanded highway systems, and growing transregional commerce, personal lives unraveled. Spence's final move in the memoir, to L.A., underscores the radical changes afoot in society. Undone by life at home, Spence left her rural roots and joined the great migration to urban America.

Moving Out makes for compelling reading, despite the hurried presentation of events once the author settled in California. Spence is an astute, thoughtful writer. Her reflections on topics ranging from family life, feminism, and work life in rural America to small-town social mores illuminate the tides of change that affected so many individuals in the last century. Karl Spence Richardson's valuable afterword provides further context for under-

standing Polly Spence's poignant journey from the Plains to L.A. *Moving Out* adds considerable distinction to the University of Nebraska Press's acclaimed Women in the West series and should be required reading for anyone interested in twentieth-century social history.

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