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Review: *Amber Waves and Undertow*

Reviewed by Ramirose Attebury

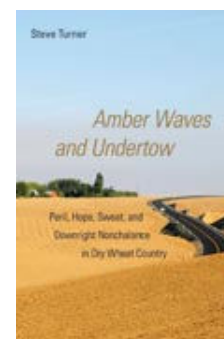
Amber Waves and Undertow: Peril, Hope, Sweat, and Downright Nonchalance in Dry Wheat Country

Steve Turner

Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2009

978-0-8061-4005-6, Paperback

206 pages, \$19.95



The title *Amber Waves and Undertow* signifies two of this book's major themes: first, the wheat industry, which has played a major role in the development of southeastern Washington; and second, a metaphorical theme of change. Throughout its history, Adams County, Washington, located in the dry, southeastern portion of the state, has been dominated by both. Turner, a freelance writer and journalist, successfully demonstrates the impact they have had on the geography, economy, and social fabric of the sparsely populated county. By looking at wheat and change from numerous angles, however, Turner's book is about much more than either subject alone. Individual histories, ranching, potato growing, and combine derbies all feature prominently and help to make up the total sum of a county not typically noticed by the outside world.

Each chapter in the book could easily be an essay in its own right. Turner begins his informal ethnography with background about the mammoth ice age floods that emerged from Glacial Lake Missoula around 12,000 years ago. The coulees formed and sediments deposited as a result of repeated flooding made Adams County attractive to early European-American settlers, who quickly learned what crops worked well in the fertile soil and ultra-dry climate. But later shifts in technology changed Adams County as much as the original floods. The advent of roads so altered the nature of the county's small communities that Turner appropriately devotes an entire chapter to their impact.

Subsequent chapters retain the overarching themes but each explores a different aspect of the county in an attempt to capture the essence of the whole. Turner thoroughly researched and wrote about all of the following in various chapters of the book: forgotten towns, houses, and cemeteries; the history of the early landowning families; the tenacity of the tiny town of Lind in retaining its relevance as a community; the cattle ranchers and potato farmers who bucked the wheat-growing trend; the portrayal of Ritzville as a town at once both eccentric and listless; and the strong communal ties among the county's many Mennonite and Hutterite families. These topics are all an integral part of what gives Adams County its individuality.

The three chapters most directly related to the title, and hence the overall purpose of the book, are those that discuss wheat growing operations. In chapter four, readers learn about the author's connections to Adams County and the reason behind his strong affinity for it. As a teenager on a summer adventure, Turner and three of his friends arrived from Vermont and somehow convinced a wheat grower that they deserved to be hired on as help for the annual harvest. A more economic take on wheat follows in chapter eight, as government subsidies and grain markets dominate the discussion. Finally, and perhaps most importantly for Adams County and agricultural operations everywhere, the issue of disappearing water takes center stage in the last chapter.

The diversity of chapters and the ability of each to stand alone as a mini-narrative could have led to a disjointed book that

left readers asking, "So what?" But Turner avoids this possible pitfall not just by tying each chapter to the larger whole of Adams County, but also by tying Adams County to the larger whole of rural American society. The author's environmental and geologic take on the controversial issue of disappearing water and the impact this has had on agricultural operations nationwide serves to make this book timely and relevant to a wide audience. While the book mentions Idaho only briefly as a former home of the author's parents, the strong themes of agriculture and rural change make this selection appropriate for any Idaho library whose patrons are affected by either.

Reviewed by Ramirose Attebury, Reference/Instruction Librarian and Assistant Professor, at the University of Idaho in Moscow.

*The Idaho Librarian is a publication of the **Idaho Library Association**.*