Prairie Gothic: The Story of a West Texas Family. By John R. Erickson. 2005. University of North Texas Press. 208 p. US\$16.95 softcover. ISBN 1-57441-203-5.

I met John Erickson at the Texas Book Festival in October 2004 in Austin. That was the same month that *Rangelands* featured my review of Erickson's book *The Modern Cowboy*. While attending the 2005 Texas Book Festival I learned about his latest book, *Prairie Gothic*. I then asked him if I could read and write a review for *Rangelands*. He readily agreed and I can say I thoroughly enjoyed reading stories of his West Texas family.

Erickson begins by saying this book was difficult to get started. He tried many times to write the story of his West Texas family, even trying to make it into a novel. He put his research notes away in a drawer and forgot about them for many years, even decades. When he went back to the material in May of 2004 he said his motivation was simple, "I needed an escape from the boredom of sitting in my writing office every morning, for 5 hours. Anything would do." Out of "anything would do" Erickson produced the story of his mother's family.

The author's mother, Anna Beth Curry Erickson, loved language, told wonderful stories, and believed that passing those stories to her son was more important than doing other things for herself. She told stories about her family in West Texas. Some involved kinfolk: the Sherman great-uncles, Roy, Burt, and Roger; their sisters, Aunt Olive and Grandmother Curry; Great-grandmother Perlina Sherman; and Buck Curry, the author's grandfather. Some stories involved people who were more distant, but part of the family history: the Quaker Underhills; Martha Sherman, who died under a Comanche scalping knife; Tom Ross, the notorious outlaw and killer; and the author's great-grandfather, Joe Sherman.

One branch of relatives, the Underhills and the Singers, helped establish the first community on the South Plains, the Quaker Colony of Estacado. They had joined a group of Quakers from Iowa, then boarded a train in Kansas City, where each family member was allowed 200 pounds of baggage, and rode to Fort Worth, where they saw buffalo bones beside the railroad tracks. They transferred to wagons that took them to the last outpost of civilization at Fort Griffin. Citizenship in Fort Gibson was made up of a small company of soldiers, along with some ranchers and buffalo hunters. But most of the citizens were the scum of the earth—desperados, fugitives from justice. There were saloons and dance halls, gambling and drinking, and all kinds of crime. There was a small tribe of Tonkawa Indians camped near the town. By the time the family reached the Llano Estacado, they may have had second thoughts and wondered if they should turn around and go back. The families lived in tents until houses were built. Once they were established, Harvey Underhill built and operated a hotel. These Quakers were industrious, law abiding, kind hearted, and honest people. They established schools and helped build a community in the wilderness.

Another branch of Erickson's family arrived in Texas in 1858 and settled in Parker County west of Weatherford. Erickson's mother, Anna Beth, told many stories about her grandfather Joe Sherman. When Sherman was a boy his mother, Martha, was killed by Indians. Always curious about this family story, Erickson wondered about the details: such as when, where, why, and what kind of Indians. In the summer of 1966, while visiting his Grandmother Curry, Erickson found J. Evetts Haley's biography of Charles Goodnight. In that book there is a wonderful passage about the fate of Martha Sherman. This was the story Erickson's mother had told him years before. Now he had a place and a time: Parker or Palo Pinto County, Texas, in November of 1860. After searching the Texas Archives in Austin and poring over newspapers, files of letters, books on frontier history, and microfilm records, the author realized that the death of Martha Sherman was a major news event on the Texas frontier in the winter of 1860–1861.

The theme that runs throughout the book is that of 4 generations' efforts to nurture the values of civilized people. It is a story of pioneer men and women and their struggles to keep their families together. Erickson writes about the history of his family and the region. In his foreword, author Elmer Kelton writes, "Erickson has given us a vivid and well-rounded picture of several generations in a pioneer family. He offers sharp and clean images, and his prose often has a poetic quality."

John Erickson, a fifth-generation Texan, was born and raised in the Texas Panhandle town of Perryton. He and his wife, Kristine, run their own ranch and commercial cattle operation. In 1982, Erickson created the *Hank the Cowdog* series, seeing sales of more than 6 million copies.

A story rich in family history, *Prairie Gothic* is enjoyable reading.

Jan Wiedemann, Texas Section Society for Range Management, College Station, TX. ♦