

*The Awkward State of Utah: Coming of Age in the Nation, 1896–1945*, by Charles S. Peterson and Brian Q. Cannon (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2015)

The authors describe the era 1896 to 1945 as the “awkward adolescence” of Utah history. This period saw the pivotal change from an agrarian and inward-focused society to one that embraced mainstream America and global modernity. While historians such as Leonard Arrington, Thomas Alexander, and Ethan Yorgason have focused on the years 1890 to 1920 as the era of greatest change, Charles Peterson and Brian Cannon show that this discussion needs to include 1920 to 1945 because of the many social shifts that continued to reshape the state. During this time, democratization and efficiency through centralization of authority increased. Peterson and Cannon use Alan Trachtenberg’s term *incorporation* to encapsulate the many types of changes, including cultural, economic, technological, political, and religious factors (2).

With statehood, Utahns enlisted in American armed forces and signed up for the Spanish American War and the World Wars in large numbers. Enlisted men thus came into contact with diverse cultures and races and saw the ways in which some nationalities and minorities were excluded from voting and other basic rights, leading them to civil rights activism. The authors include discussions of labor violence, the Latino movement of the 1920s and ’30s, development of the Navajo reservation, women’s suffrage, and women entering the labor market.

During the depression, federal funding flowed into Utah via the Civilian Conservation Corps (although this entity

brought in most of its workers from the East) and the Works Progress Administration (which employed more Utah residents). The LDS First Presidency tried to wean Utah from federal welfare programs (the dole) and work welfare by introducing their own program of cooperative enterprises.

These years saw a shift from subsistence to commercial farming, leading to the use of technology for selling dairy products, wheat, and especially sugar from beets. Farmers became incorporated into the national economy, and they brought in workers from Japan, Sikhs from India, Native Americans (primarily Shoshone), and others to labor on the farms. The unintended effects of agricultural growth included pollution, greater division between rich and poor, and profits going out of state. Mining capacity also grew as mechanical technology advanced.

The authors look in detail at thousands of ordinary people whose lives spanned this era. The information they gleaned from many oral histories adds life and personality to the book. This era’s people were the generation that drove oxen and milked cows in their youth but flew in airplanes and traveled the world as adults, and they recognized the value of documenting their own lives.

Charles Peterson, who passed away in 2017, was a professor emeritus of Utah State University where he taught history, and Brian Cannon is a professor of history at Brigham Young University and also directs the Charles Redd Center for Western Studies there. This book can be seen as a final capstone on Peterson’s many distinguished contributions to Western American history. The writing style is clear and simple, making this book an understandable and enjoyable read for all.

—BYU Studies Staff