Although Willson wrote three autobiographical volumes and a semiautobiographical novel that provide useful information, he avoided talking about two topics that readers would like to know more about. One was his sister Dixie's claim that she played a major role in the writing of *The Music Man.* It is hard to believe that a person widely acknowledged to be as considerate, open, straightforward, generous, and decent as Willson would have denied his older sister the recognition and financial reward that her contribution would have merited if she accurately described the role she played in the making of the musical. Skipper rejects the allegations, siding with local newspaper editor Earl Hall, who told Dixie that she was grossly mistaken in her accusations. Willson's reluctance to air this "dirty linen" in public paralleled a similar unwillingness to talk about the rift between his father and mother and his father's almost complete shunning of him—the youngest of three and an unwanted child—while he was growing up. Shortly after he graduated from high school, his parents went through bitter divorce proceedings. Skipper does not avoid these dark secrets in the Willson household, but the trail of evidence that might answer our questions about them ends almost before we even start.

The paradox of Meredith Willson's life is that someone growing up in the midst of such darkness and recriminations turned out to be, in the words of Mason City Mayor Kenneth Kew, "the personification of light . . . not darkness" and "a giver of joy . . . not despair." Skipper's biography competently describes Willson's rise from flutist in John Philip Sousa's band to musical director for NBC radio and television programs to Broadway playwright. More importantly, he describes a delightful man who truly loved life and people and was dearly loved in return. Most significantly, this is a book about a small-town boy who just couldn't get his home town out of his mind and about how the whole world came to know about Mason City, thanks to *The Music Man.*

*Saving the Heartland: Catholic Missionaries in Rural America,* by Jeffrey Marlett. DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2002. xi, 233 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. $40.00 cloth.

Reviewer Philip J. Nelson is a lecturer in history at the University of Northern Iowa. His research interests include twentieth-century American history and rural and communitarian studies.

Agrarianism is a popular and much-mined natural historical resource; in *Saving the Heartland,* Jeffrey Marlett revisits that mother lode of rural America by way of a secondary but significant vein—Catholic agrarianism. He tells the story of Catholic missionaries in the Midwest from

1920 to 1960. The National Catholic Rural Life Conference (NCRLC)—which emerged in 1923 as the primary manifestation of the Catholic interwar revival in rural America—and the "agrarian agenda and the theological vision that motivated it" are the main foci of the book (6).

The NCRLC made the land a touchstone for rural reform. Combining Jeffersonian agrarianism, a proto-agro-environmentalism, and the faith of the Catholic revival, it promoted better farming techniques, the repopulation of the countryside, and the "spiritualization" of farm life as solutions to the "Catholic rural problem." According to the agrarians, declining urban birth rates threatened the continued existence of the predominantly urban church. Rural Catholics, with their higher birth rates, would have to be the source of future demographic strength. But NCRLC founder Father Edwin O'Hara believed that rural Catholics who understood their own faith poorly would exert little influence when they migrated to the cities. Unfortunately, the agrarians' staunch antiurbanism meant that even the most influential Catholic agrarian leader, Msgr. Luigi Ligutti, never really addressed the tension between the need for rural society to breed urban replacements and the agrarians' fervent belief that the modern industrial city was anathema to almost everything they held dear. A deeper analysis of this contradiction would have enriched Marlett's well-presented background on agrarianism and the NCRLC.

By the 1930s, the NCRLC was in the vanguard of the church-affiliated agrarian movement. It developed idealistic views on the independent ownership of land, the primacy of the family farm, biodynamic farming, hard work, and alternative finance embodied in credit unions. Marlett accurately portrays the utopianism that underlaid the movement. Other sources of twentieth-century Catholic thought are sprinkled throughout the book, including radio priest Charles Coughlin, converts Dorothy Day and Thomas Merton, the European Catholic apologists G. K. Chesterton and Hilaire Belloc, and popes Pius X, XI, and XII.

After 1940, the shortcomings of the NCLRC became evident. Few of its programs were successful. In addition, it lost direction after World War II. By 1957, it was virtually bankrupt. Marlett blames Ligutti, its longtime director, for most of its woes. He unintentionally alienated farmers, focused on anticommunism, and took the organization in an international direction. Marlett also rightly identifies larger societal changes as part of the cause for the decline in the NCRLC's influence and the demise of agrarianism in general. But he is reluctant, as are many students of the subject, to state explicitly that the disappearance of a distinct rural subculture ended the practical viability of agrarianism.

Between the leaders' theories and the hard lives of family farmers, there was the Catholic version of the back-to-the-land movement—colonization projects. These colonies and communes, seen as "cities on a hill," examples of the truly virtuous life, were energized by the same characteristics as were evident in the long history of American international communitarianism. Marlett's representative selection of cases conveys the drama of their tribulations. Although he fails to provide enough details on some of the featured groups and never tells us how many there were, one can see that the "farm communes were . . . the most avant-garde expression of the Catholic Revival in America" (70).

Next, in a section that functions as a catch-all for miscellaneous activities of the Catholic church in rural America, Marlett examines the church's unsuccessful publishing efforts, outreach work of the Knights of Columbus, rural life prayer books, and the successes of some predominantly Catholic towns such as Westphalia, Iowa. More could have been done with this last topic since small-town revitalization preoccupied rural reformers throughout the forties and across the nation. Marlett concludes that the Catholic agrarian response did not keep pace with the emerging culture of abundance.

The book's most original contribution is the final chapter on "motor missions." Street preaching done from the ends of specially designed trailers became a fixture in midwestern towns during the thirties and forties. The missions took on the appearance of old-time revivals, with five or six evenings of talks, music, and services in each rural town visited. The stops were well planned and effective, employing advance advertising, public address systems, films or filmstrips, and earnest but moderate preaching. Although Marlett does not say how many trailers operated, the research and presentation, on the whole, are satisfying and impressive.

The book concludes with reasons for the decline of Catholic agrarianism: the advance of technology, the lapse of community cohesiveness and organizations, the passing of generic agrarianism, the failure to convert the intellectual class, and the "tastelessness" of popularized religion. Here Marlett is on the mark, but tends to drift in his description of the movement's legacy. He also fails to adequately explain complex concepts, such as the neo-Thomistic synthesis. Finally, even though he goes to great lengths to show that Catholic agrarianism did not keep up with the times, that is not the same as proving that it was modernist in the thirties, only to become antimodernist by 1960. If modernity was the fundamental issue of the twentieth century, Catholic agrarianism was one among many attempts to define it. And Marlett's useful and readable book helps us understand it.