

The Editor's Perspective

THIS ISSUE of the *Annals of Iowa* contains an article about a farmer in northwestern Iowa who belonged to the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s. The article is by a woman I like to call the dean of Iowa historians, Iowa State University history professor emeriti Dorothy Schwieder. A longtime supporter of the State Historical Society of Iowa, and of the *Annals of Iowa* in particular, Dorothy has become a friend and mentor. As I waited for her to correct page proofs, I read her latest book, *Growing Up with the Town: Family and Community on the Great Plains* (University of Iowa Press, 2002), a combination of personal memoir and scholarly community study. The contrast between that book and her article in this issue yields a valuable history lesson that is at the heart of Dorothy's contribution to Iowa history.

As I read *Growing Up with the Town*, I found myself identifying closely with the experiences Dorothy describes. I grew up about 20 years later than Dorothy and almost 1,000 miles to the east, in a rural Ohio village about half the size of Presho, South Dakota, where Dorothy grew up in a family that contributed ten children to the total population of about 600. My father, like hers, was a small-town merchant who supplied a critical need for farmers in the surrounding market area. And the children in both families got involved in the business early on and carried it on in the next generation, while one of them went off to become a historian. When I got done reading, I wrote five single-spaced pages of my own memories and reflections about my home town and the role my family's business played in the town and in my experience, comparing and contrasting my recollections with Dorothy's as I wrote.

History comes alive for us when we can make such a personal connection with it. We get excited about history when we visit a museum with our children, see an exhibit with an old artifact, and explain to our children how our grandparents used an item like that one. Or when we visit a historical library to construct a family tree that connects us with our ancestors. Or

when we pass through a historic district in our community that connects our present communal existence to those who lived in the community before us. Much of Dorothy Schwieder's published work on rural women performs this same function of connecting us to a familiar past, while helping us to see it in new ways.

But if it is not handled carefully, such history can become exclusive or devolve into nostalgia. We also need to seek out the kind of history that does what Dorothy's article in this issue does. Her look at a farmer's experience in the Ku Klux Klan—like her earlier work on Iowa's Amish population and on the coal-mining town of Buxton, where African Americans found unprecedented economic and social opportunities—reaches out to include experiences that may appear alien to many of us. By placing them in the context of their time, however, she succeeds in making them a familiar part of our shared experience.

We need both kinds of history. History that connects us to the familiar reveals to us the people and forces that shaped us (for better and for worse) and constructed the boundaries that constrain us. History that reaches out to include the "other" can teach us that the conditions passed down to us by the choices our descendants made were not inevitable; history can reveal options that open up (or warn us against) new possibilities in the future. We can be grateful that Iowa history has had someone like Dorothy Schwieder to show us the way to maintain a balanced historical perspective.

—Marvin Bergman, editor

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