

About the only problem with Mikós's highly informative and entertaining volume is that it has no footnotes or endnotes. The major source of documentation is a single-page "selected bibliography" of ten books and five articles in scholarly journals. This, unfortunately, makes it difficult for researchers to link up specific material in the text with its source. That aside, this is an excellent study of one of the most important ethnic groups in the upper Midwest.

*The Depression Dilemmas of Rural Iowa, 1929–1933*, by Lisa L. Ossian. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2011. xiii, 237 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$45.00 hardcover.

Reviewer Catherine McNicol Stock is Barbara Zaccheo Kohn '72 Professor of History at Connecticut College. She is the author of *Rural Radicals: Righteous Rage in the American Grain* (1996) and *Main Street in Crisis: The Great Depression and the Old Middle Class on the Northern Plains* (1992).

Wednesday morning, November 9, 1932, brought news of a landslide victory for Franklin Delano Roosevelt, whose promise of immediate action to help the devastated economy convinced many Americans to vote for a Democrat for the first time in their lives. It also brought a record snowfall to rural Iowa. This forgotten detail, one of hundreds collected and preserved in Lisa Ossian's *The Depression Dilemmas of Rural Iowa, 1929–1933*, reminds us that even the most transformative moments in national or global history are inevitably experienced by individual men and women in one place and one time. Thus, no matter how important it is to see the "big picture," to focus on comparative and transnational accounts, and to understand the past more completely, the foundation of our knowledge must still lie in the small view, the local experience—the snowstorm as well as the landslide. Ossian delivers on her promise to explain how rural people in Iowa managed to "make do" in the early years of the 1930s. Even for readers who believe they already know how hard these times were in the countryside, she presents a sense of place and time rarely crafted with such care elsewhere.

Historians of the Great Depression tend to write about its broad, signature events—the stock market crash, the end of Prohibition, the election of 1932, and the First Hundred Days of the New Deal—from a national perspective, since they affected all Americans. But Ossian turns the tables on the familiar. Rather than simply recount the failures of the Hoover administration, for example, she reveals how the people of his home state, Iowa, who had enthusiastically celebrated his election in 1928, came to terms with his lackluster response to

the crash. As Election Day drew near, one Hoover speech was only attended by local postmasters—federal employees—and even a few of them booed. Likewise, she recalls how Iowans who had proudly supported Prohibition responded to the movement for repeal. The stalwarts, she said, never gave up the fight because, as one leader wrote, “no question is ever settled until it is settled right” (149).

Even more importantly, by detailing the local “dilemmas” Iowans faced in these years and the solutions they concocted, she unearths data, images, and narratives never assembled in one place before. It is well known that women added productive labor and real income to their families in the 1930s by increasing home production of canned goods, garden products, and dairy, and also by learning to scrimp and save—to “make do.” But Ossian enriches this familiar concept by adding pages of rich detail. She draws one of the most memorable from a local woman’s story, “The Apron.” “Mom’s apron served many purposes. . . . They kept her dresses clean, covered up missing buttons, or a dirty dress. . . . At times she had several on. They brought garden stuff into the house, held eggs gathered from the chicken coop and more. . . . If it was a bad day she threw it over her face to cry, and no one would know it” (175).

Ossian does not stop with inspiring stories of overcoming hardship, however, nor should she, given the real tragedies that befell many rural families in the state. The chapter “Violence” examines the rise in robberies, murders, and suicides during the depression years. A neighbor killed two elderly women in the hope of finding money in their home; a son killed his father as he slept, so certain was he that the drunken father’s threat to kill his wife would come to pass; a young farmer who could not pay his debts killed himself in the barn with his own rifle. In the chapter “Welfare,” Ossian also reminds us of the unending work children performed on the farm and of their alarming rates of poor health. In one study in the late 1920s, officials reported that the vast majority of children in rural Iowa entered school without ever having seen a doctor or dentist. Economic hard times in rural America began long before the stock market crash, and its impact only increased during the 1930s.

Ossian has done a remarkable job making the years just before the New Deal in one small corner of the nation come to life. That alone makes the book worth reading. But in an important epilogue she ventures into the broader questions of twentieth-century agricultural policy that with each decade beyond the Great Depression has decreased the number of family farms and increased the power of monoculture and agribusiness. This highly analytical and policy-oriented chapter comes as a bit of a surprise—perhaps some of these critiques might

have appeared earlier in the work as well. As a whole, however, the book recaptures the details of a by-gone era in Iowa history, along with the resourcefulness of its people and communities, and makes us wonder exactly what we have left behind.

Lisa L. Ossian won the State Historical Society of Iowa's Benjamin F. Shambaugh Award, recognizing *The Depression Dilemmas of Rural Iowa, 1929-1933* as the most significant book on Iowa history published in 2011. — Ed.

*The Death and Life of Main Street: Small Towns in American Memory, Space, and Community*, by Miles Orvell. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012. xiii, 286 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$39.95 hardcover.

Reviewer Jan Olive Full is principal at Tallgrass Historians L.C. Her dissertation (Loyola University Chicago, 2006) was "Hinterland or Heartland: The Survival of Small-Town Lake Mills, Iowa, 1850-1950."

Far from being any sort of history of small towns or of small-town Main Streets, *The Death and Life of Main Street* is a broad study of the *idea* of Main Street—acknowledged symbol of small towns—using a classic myth-and-symbol approach. The short title is purposefully crafted to suggest that while "real small towns" (235) may be dead or moribund, the *idea* of the small town survives on a vastly greater scale through popular culture, planning theories, architects' drawing boards, and developers' business plans. Miles Orvell's small towns are not limited to any particular size or place, however, and are not confined by historic definitions or geographic borders. And Orvell argues that Main Street is no longer strictly a town center or marketplace but a set of paradoxes and contradictions to be navigated in order to understand today's cultural landscape. The "real small towns" of our past and the values they held have given way to the power of idealized Main Streets starting in the 1930s and culminating in Disneyland's mythical Main Street of the 1950s. Disneyland's Main Street USA has become the physical model encapsulating the values and aspirations of today's American public, often employed by those who plan our newest communities, especially the New Urbanist movement.

Early on, Orvell explores the persistent cultural dichotomy of attitudes about small towns as paradoxical places that both sustain ideal American values and stifle individual vitality. He then develops his thesis—that the reality-turned-myth of Main Street has become the vehicle representing our desire for safe and happy communal life—over eight chapters. Orvell draws on a wide range of evidentiary