

Book Reviews and Notices

Centerville: A Mid-American Saga, by Enfys McMurry. Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2012. 730 pp. Illustrations, map, notes, index. \$32.99 paperback.

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The opening lines in Enfys McMurry's book, *Centerville: A Mid-American Saga*, introduce readers to a consistently vivid and engaging tale of a southern Iowa community. She writes, "He waited for a killing frost. Then, on a late fall day in 1846, forty-four-year-old surveyor Jonathan Stratton moved through the blue-stemmed prairie grass, the dried seed clusters of asters and goldenrod, the hazel brush and the trees in Iowa's newest county, the twenty-ninth, the one they'd named Appanoose" (11). She then proceeds across approximately 500 pages (excluding notes) to skillfully paint equally rich and textured word pictures to create a sweeping history of a county seat town from its establishment in the 1840s to the community's involvement in World War II.

McMurry's commitment to her subject matter is obvious throughout this enlightening investigation of 100 years of midwestern community life. Her artful word craft joins her familiarity with her subject based on her personal connection to the town—she has taught English and humanities for many years at the Centerville campus of Indian Hills Community College—to offer an eclectic study with particular emphasis on the community's connection to national trends and events.

She begins by describing the experience of the town's founders, the community's participation in the Civil War, and the dramatic economic growth of the late nineteenth century. She chronicles how the town blossomed with the arrival of the railroads, the emergence of a thriving coal-mining industry, and the influx of diverse groups of immigrants. Along the way, readers will be pleased to find intriguing sections about the Underground Railroad, the Jesse James Gang, and commercial development. She also includes an examination of early twentieth-century intellectual trends such as eugenics and rising concerns about crime. She consistently weaves such national themes into the town's social and cultural context, demonstrating how the town's residents were influenced by a wide range of historical phenomena.

McMurry's work is particularly effective in using details gleaned from newspaper articles to connect readers to the lives of Centerville residents. Many individuals appear repeatedly as they participate in community life and then fade from view as one generation gives way to another. For instance, readers will become familiar with banker D. C. Bradley, who paved the first section of sidewalk in front of his mansion, proudly drove one of the community's first automobiles, and was a key investor in interurban railway projects. They will also learn of his death as his family's economic prospects soured after the nation and the town descended into the throes of the Great Depression.

The author's careful review of the local press produces some surprising local connections to well-known national figures and events. Readers learn that silent movie star Norma Talmadge visited Centerville to shoot a movie and former Centerville resident Oscar V. Payne was a crucial contributor to the development of the Thompson machine gun. World War II photographer John Buscemi, who was killed during the battle for control of Eniwetok atoll in 1944, also hailed from this seemingly typical southern Iowa town.

For these and many other reasons, readers will find much to love in *Centerville: A Mid-American Saga*. Nevertheless, some may find limitations in the book. A few topics could have been more fully analyzed or supported. For instance, while discussing the prevalence of coal mine accidents, McMurry gives the impression that the community's coal mines were less dangerous than those in other regions, but provides little supportive data. Additionally, her work would have benefited from a more careful consideration of studies such as John Mack Faragher's *Sugar Creek: Life on the Illinois Prairie* and Thomas Morain's *Prairie Grass Roots: An Iowa Small Town in the Early Twentieth Century*. A deeper consideration of the topic's historiography would have undoubtedly provided a richer interpretive framework for this otherwise deeply engaging book.

Despite such criticisms, anyone seeking a lively and highly readable discussion of a midwestern community will find McMurry's book both useful and pleasurable. A general audience will especially gain a greater appreciation for those "ordinary" places many contemporary Americans can so easily ignore. Many forget that such small communities played a more prominent role in our national life before the exodus from rural and small-town America was so fully felt. McMurry's work is a gift not only to the residents of Centerville but to any midwesterner who chooses to read this delightful study. She convincingly shows us how such fascinating pasts are hidden underneath seemingly ordinary places and realities.