

Many historians have plowed the field of colonial community studies; a number have ventured into the nineteenth century (and Morain draws useful insights from them). Few, however, have carried the story into the twentieth century. *Prairie Grass Roots* provides a useful model and makes an important contribution to the study of the twentieth-century small town, and everyone interested in that subject will learn much from it.

*Rivers, Railways, and Roads: A History of Henderson County, Illinois*, by Robert P. Sutton. Raritan, IL: Henderson County Historical Society, 1988. x, 254 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$40.00 cloth.

REVIEWED BY TIMOTHY R. MAHONEY, UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA-LINCOLN

Driving across Henderson County, Illinois, today, one encounters a flat prairie landscape, almost devoid of trees, covered with "row upon row of beans and corn, no homes, no farm buildings, no livestock, no fences," and few visible remains of the lives of the thousands of people who have lived there in the past century and a half. To Robert P. Sutton, the melancholy silence of the landscape attests to the forgotten history of a place which, except for a few years during initial settlement in the 1820s, has always been on the periphery of the centralizing regional and national processes of urbanization and economic and social development.

How does one write the history of such a place? It is to the credit of the Henderson County Historical Society that it did not deny the community's geographically determined peripheral status by producing the usual mug book intended to enshrine the glorious progress of the county's growth and maturation and stroke the egos of the contributors; rather, they commissioned Sutton to write a narrative history of the county in which he would try to illuminate the interaction between the county and the region and nation beyond its borders, and to analyze how, over time, these interactions changed the character of life there. If the sketchy, imprecise, or descriptive data about what was going on in the county often contradict the general premise—that the "life processes of the entire body politic" were the same as those "of its component cells and vice versa"—the mere act of placing the two together in a local history, and recognizing that local events are influenced by the outside, enriches this history and makes it better than the average county history.

Sutton's theoretical premise imposes a predictable organization. In one chapter each, readers follow the county's development from settlement through pioneer days and the era of the community

growth and maturation up to the Civil War. That is followed by the expected homage to the "Golden Age" of rural life between 1865 and 1890, which ushered in the Complacent era. The Twenties, the Depression, World War II, and the postwar period all follow in progression, each, in their own way, causing deep transformations in the county's social and economic life.

The initial focus of each chapter is a demographic analysis. Thus, Sutton implicitly assumes the importance of population for all other aspects of community life. At first, the buoyancy of in-migration and high birth rates caused steady population gains in the county. After 1870 population increase slowed, then declined, but not fast enough to meet the changes in the market, leaving a tense period of overpopulation (a condition about which Sutton says little). Finally, the steady decline in population in the twentieth century worked as a drag against local development. Sutton thus claims that population played a significant role in spurring on, or dragging down, economic and social development in the county.

The county's population history was intertwined with its location and primary economic use of the land. From one chapter to the next, one follows the evolution (or devolution) of agriculture from intensive, diversified, self-sufficient family farming in the pioneer period, to extensive, but still diversified, small-scale market farming in grain and livestock before and after the Civil War, towards ever more extensive, larger-scale, mechanized, specialized, single cash crop agribusiness in the twentieth century. At each stage of this process, mechanization replaced the need for men and horses, thus reducing the number of households, increasing the number of farms planting one crop, and forcing inefficient land out of production. By the 1930s the human presence on the landscape began to recede, as farms were left vacant, land was left unplanted, and buildings and barns built for smaller farms became obsolete and were left to fall down or be demolished.

Social change and development followed this larger economic dynamic. Early on, society was local and community based. But then, in the face of economic changes and increasing infrastructural contacts with the outside, society dispersed into increasingly isolated household units and individuals. At each stage after 1900, population decline sapped local social energy and eroded the structure of community life. No wonder, then, that Sutton perceives the 1860s through 1890s as a "Golden Age," when population still hung on, communities were coherent, and an abiding sense of locality persisted. Whether Sutton is discussing crime, politics, entertainment and culture, or transportation, the same theme appears: the Missis-

sippi River which transported settlers and goods in the county's early years, the railroad lines built across the county in the nineteenth century, and the state and interstate highways constructed in the twentieth century accelerated the centralization of regional economic life and sapped local vitality from county life—hence the title of the book.

The implications of this theme for local history are diverse and complex and need more development elsewhere, but the fact that this local county history addresses it at all merits the attention of local and regional historians throughout the Midwest. In addition, the large-format book is well produced, with print that is easy to read, many interesting photographs unobtrusively scattered throughout the text, and few of the typographical errors and infelicitous phrases that usually characterize under-edited locally published history.

*The Law of the Land: Two Hundred Years of Farmland Policy*, by John Opie. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987. xxi, 231 pp. Maps, charts, illustrations, notes, index. \$25.95 cloth.

REVIEWED BY MARK FRIEDBERGER, CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

This handsomely produced book is something of a puzzle. Based almost entirely on secondary sources, *The Law of the Land* is essentially a textbook rather than a conventional historical monograph. Yet textbooks usually attempt to provide a balanced viewpoint of the subject matter. Here, however, the author does not hide his biases: Opie is highly critical of the legacy of two hundred years of bungled policy. This is not to say that the history of American land policy from the nation's founding until the 1980s does not merit critical evaluation, but given the situation in which agriculture has found itself in the past few years, it is a pity that Opie simply sought to summarize past research instead of providing a fresh evaluation with some new work of his own. It is as though the author had difficulty placing the book with a publisher in the early 1980s. Then along came the farm crisis, and *The Law of the Land* found an outlet. In an era when rural history is as lively a field as any, Opie has failed to take advantage of an opportunity to provide us with fresh insights or a work of synthesis with which to move ahead.

The first several chapters deal with the effect land laws had on settlement. The author provides us with a potted history of the passage of legislation, and the implementation of those laws. He then discusses policies as they applied to arid lands, and especially as they concerned the delivery of water to western states, such as California. Before discussing the present and future state of agriculture, Opie

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