

eagerly sought to grab this choice piece of federal land; but with the aid of Milwaukee's socialist mayor, Frank Zeidler, and one of the city's businessman-philanthropists, the vacant land was purchased and developed by the Milwaukee Community Development Corporation, which later sold out to a company that also agreed to continue building along the same general lines Elbert Peets had in mind in 1936 and which he had updated in 1948. The result to date is a beautifully planned suburban community that is one of the most sought-after suburbs of Milwaukee.

Sadly, the Resettlement Administration's socioeconomic goal of providing a suburban haven for moderate-income residents was almost totally abandoned after 1955. The houses being built on the last few remaining acres of residential land in the town are selling for two hundred thousand dollars and up. *Main Street Ready-Made* provides a carefully researched, clearly written, and thoughtful analysis of this delightful federal community that has been privately "upscaled" far beyond the reach of those for whom it was originally intended.

Prairie Grass Roots: An Iowa Small Town in the Early Twentieth Century, by Thomas J. Morain. The Henry A. Wallace Series on Agricultural History and Rural Studies. Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1988. xviii, 287 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$24.95 cloth.

Thomas J. Morain earned the 1989 Benjamin Shambaugh Award from the State Historical Society of Iowa. The award recognized *Prairie Grass Roots: An Iowa Small Town in the Early Twentieth Century* as the most important book on Iowa history published in 1988.—Ed.

REVIEWED BY JOHN E. MILLER, SOUTH DAKOTA STATE UNIVERSITY

Everyone interested in Iowa history, midwestern history, small-town history, rural history, social history and twentieth-century American history will want to read *Prairie Grass Roots*. It is about a small town in Iowa which grew to 3,431 residents during the period under discussion (it recorded 4,854 in the 1980 census). The significance of this book is much wider than the locality itself, for Thomas Morain uses Jefferson, Iowa, as a case study to illuminate the fundamental transformation that occurred in similar small towns all over the Midwest during the first three decades of the twentieth century.

Morain admits that "typical" is a slippery term, but nevertheless he is willing to apply it to Jefferson, a county-seat town lying sixty

miles northwest of Des Moines. Though aware of the limitations of the evidence, he never hesitates to draw conclusions and make assertions based on what is available. The result is a rich analysis of the ways the locally oriented, tradition-directed, integrated, rural society and culture of one "typical" small town and its rural environs were transformed into more diverse, change-driven, outward-oriented social and cultural forms fully tied to the national culture. Morain concludes that "perhaps the most significant change over the entire period was the size of the community of which Jefferson residents were a part. Economically and culturally, the Iowa small towns were becoming integrated into national networks in which the centers of power were far beyond the local city limits" (259).

The focus of this study, and its major contribution, is its detailed account of the myriad ways people's daily lives changed in town and on the farm as automobiles, telephones, electricity, movies and radio, farm mechanization, new farming methods, the expansion of education, the rise of clubs and service organizations, and other factors emerged to prominence after 1900. The book's readable style will appeal to scholars and general audience alike, for it makes the everyday activities of people come alive in ways that those who lived through the period will readily recognize and those who want to learn something about it will quickly tune in to.

Like radio humorist Garrison Keillor, whose growing up in and later departure from a small town in Minnesota left him with ambivalent feelings about his fictional "Lake Wobegon," Thomas Morain grew up in and later moved away from Jefferson, Iowa. This connection to and distance from his subject provide him with a double vision—one that allows him to empathize with it but also to analyze it dispassionately, using concepts and techniques from the social sciences and the "new social history."

The *Jefferson Bee*, which Morain's father edited for a number of years, chronicled the stories of people's lives in Jefferson in a way that underscored their unique individual qualities. Morain's interests are different—to extract the typical rather than the unique, to highlight the broad social changes that characterized towns in Illinois, Minnesota, and Nebraska, as well as Iowa. Somewhat apologetically, he explains that because of this, "Jefferson readers may be in for a slight letdown. They may be expecting more of the anecdotal" (xvi). For local observers, the anecdotes themselves are everything, and the individuals who act them out are what is significant. For the social historian, these constitute the raw materials from which generalizations about patterns, developments, causes, and consequences can be extracted.

Morain's organizational structure serves his purposes well. Between an introductory chapter, which sketches late nineteenth-century society in broad strokes, and a concluding chapter, which indicates how much things had changed by the 1930s, he sandwiches four topical chapters (on social identity, gender, technology, and morality) and two chronological chapters (on World War I and the 1920s). Readers get a real sense of social groups and social interactions in all of this, as Morain describes and analyzes religious organizations, school activities, social clubs and organizations, entertainment, and family relationships. Especially insightful are discussions of farm women's discontents, the multiple impacts of the automobile, and men's ambivalent responses to their changing roles within the family and society.

Making his achievement all the more impressive is the way Morain plugs gaps in the evidence, for despite his mining of items and editorial columns in the *Jefferson Bee*, on many questions and episodes the newspaper is silent or provides only scanty information. In some cases Morain resorts to citing information from nearby towns and counties or quoting from novelists or scholars whose attention was focused on other communities. At some points the evidentiary basis for generalizations becomes rather tenuous, as, for example, in the discussion about attitudes toward woman suffrage. What makes the book ultimately persuasive, and indeed what constitutes its special virtue, is the imaginative use Morain makes of more than forty interviews with longtime residents of the community. It is fortunate that he was able to catch these people while their memories of the period were still reliable, for if his thesis is correct—that the first three decades of the twentieth century were the crucial turning point for small towns like Jefferson—it will not be too long before a book like this will be impossible to write. Without the oral histories, the book's strengths would be much diminished.

If the strength of the book lies in the attention given to social institutions and cultural change, the material on the economic foundations of the community is somewhat pedestrian. Not that Morain neglects them. But while we get a picture of changing agricultural technology, the ups and downs of farm prices and income, and the occupational structure of the community, the manner in which Jefferson was integrated into the regional and national economies and the complex interrelationships among farmers, merchants, workers, and professionals in the community remain rather fuzzy. This results partly, I suspect, from the fact that the interview subjects were better able to describe the social and cultural aspects of their lives than they were to sort out economic factors.

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

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