

The River and the Prairie: A History of the Quad-Cities, 1812-1960, by William Roba. Quad-Cities: Hesperian Press, 1986. 157 pp. Illustrations, map, acknowledgments, notes. \$15.00 cloth, \$10.00 paper.

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The River and the Prairie is a labor of love by one who lives in the place of which he writes. William Roba has worked diligently in a variety of primary and secondary sources, mindful that there is a richness in the complex history of the land where the Mississippi River and the prairie meet. Most strikingly, he has winnowed newspapers published over the course of more than a century, gleaning from them the facts it takes to tell a story—facts to be sorted and weighed and woven together into a coherent account of the Quad-Cities' past.

The story Roba promises to tell would have as its theme "thwarted community development." For a century and a half, he writes, "the settlers and citizens of a metropolitan area on either side of the Mississippi River have lacked a common identity." His purpose, he says, is "to provide a narrative account of the area's history from 1812 until 1960" (3). In avoiding "the unfortunate jargon and weak theses of other local historians," Roba writes, "this has been an effort to tell the story of many individuals who have been involved in the growth of an unusual urban area" (5). His focus, he asserts, is on seven types of people who played parts in the story: military men, reporters, scientists, businessmen, educators, poets, and immigrants.

The Quad-Cities region, according to Roba, claims a unique place in the American experience of urban development. The people of the Quad-Cities "chose autonomy and governmental responsibility; they exalted the concept of neighborhoods over the possible advantages of a closer cooperation. Instead of a single 'Davenporttown' or 'Le Claireville,' the many municipalities remained huddled together. To the east, the urban area remained largely ignored after the 1850s as part of 'downstate' Illinois; to the west, the urban area dominated the shape and direction of the 'rural' state of Iowa. The autonomous accomplishments of this fledgling community form the content of . . . this book" (7).

Successively treating periods ending in 1832, 1847, 1861, 1884, 1920, and 1960, Roba takes the reader through important phases of the history of the Quad-Cities, beginning with their settlement under the leadership of George Davenport and concluding with their achievement of maturity in 1960 as the eighty-first largest urban area in the nation. Along the way, he reports on relations between Indians and white settlers, establishment of local governments, commercial and industrial development, social and educational change, and the

transformation of the region from one of disparate parts to a modern, coherent whole.

Although Roba's purposes are praiseworthy and the efforts he expended in pursuing them laudable, *The River and the Prairie* is a disappointing book. It might be called "enumerative history" rather than narrative history, for in chapter after chapter he enumerates events, naming the people participating in them, and then moves on. There is little story to it, and even less analysis or interpretation. Some parts of the book are just plain puzzling. The man from whom the city of Davenport takes its name, for example, plays an important part in Roba's early enumerations, but George Davenport's demise is reported in just three short sentences (accompanied by a woodprint showing three men with daggers and one apparently with his hand on a gun): "On 4 July 1845, Col. Davenport was murdered in his mansion, while his family and all the area's citizens attended the large Independence Day celebration in Rock Island. That fall, a crowd of around 3,000 showed up for the hanging of his convicted murderers: John Long, Aaron Long, and Granville Young. The Green Mountain Boys played appropriate music as the crowd enjoyed the day's activities" (35). Motives and consequences are apparently of no matter.

Roba's writing style is sometimes jarring and generally graceless. I wonder what he means when he says of George Davenport that "his success came from his English accent" (16). Or that "from a review of available documents, it appeared that actual diplomacy occurred: the regular army lost hundreds of soldiers from the cholera outbreak at the fort; the militia had already gone home; the presence of thousands of Sauk and Fox in the area remained a potential threat; Davenport and Le Claire hovered in the background following their own agenda" (23).

Future historians of the Quad-Cities may find in *The River and the Prairie* some facts and themes worth pursuing, and those who live in the region may be able to do the sorting and weighing of the facts that Roba failed to do. The rest of us, though, gain little from Roba's efforts, and that is too bad. His intentions were good and his labors considerable, but the finished product does not deliver on the promise offered in the book's introduction.

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