

An Out-Migrant's Tale

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THE HISTORIAN John D. Hicks, taking note of the midwesterners who had moved to Kansas during the 1880s only to return to Iowa and other Corn Belt states after drought and insects had produced crop failures and indebtedness, dismissed the out-migrants from his classic history of Populism with a few sentences: "Aside from the fact that they may have carried the seeds of agricultural discontent back with them, the later fortunes of those who left . . . are of no interest here. The history of the West was not made by those who moved out but by those who stayed on."¹

I became an out-migrant in 1958 after spending the first 26 years of my life in Iowa. What concerns me here are the Iowa experiences and understandings that I carried into my 44-year career as a college and university professor of history. My own early times – the Great Depression of the 1930s, the World War II years in the 1940s, and the beginning of transforming changes in agriculture and rural Iowa during the postwar decades – all left a large imprint upon my life. My membership in a farming family and the expectation that farm boys would either farm or enter a farm-related career directed my path, first as a vocational agriculture student at Chariton High School and later as a major

1. John D. Hicks, *The Populist Revolt: A History of the Farmers' Alliance and the People's Party* (Minneapolis, 1931), 34–35.

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in agriculture education at Iowa State College. Two agriculture teachers, J. Joe Wright at Chariton High and Professor Clarence E. Bundy at Iowa State, masters of their craft, inspired me by their example to become an agriculture educator. Both men excelled in applying the vocational approach of "learning by doing." Professor Bundy also taught his students to "chase the fox to the woods," his phrase for asking students to supply an explanation for an undeveloped answer to a question.² I followed that example in my teaching by interjecting the word "because" when a student stopped short of explaining an answer. It followed, naturally, that I would engage rural living and farming, as would most agriculture education majors at Iowa State, as an instructor of vocational agriculture. For two years, from 1956 to 1958, I taught vo-ag at Lost Nation (Iowa) Community School.

To my dismay, I discovered that the vocational agriculture program mandated by the Iowa Department of Vocational Education retained the original mission under the Smith-Hughes Act of 1917 to prepare farm boys for a career in farming. Although that program still suited the needs of rural youth going into farming, many vo-ag students of the post-World War II period were headed not for the farm but to the cities for an occupation or profession related to or completely different from agriculture. My solution to the problem of an unchanging vo-ag curriculum and a changing economy was to leave vo-ag teaching forever.

When I closed the door on vocational agriculture in 1958, I did not realize that I was opening another one to a lifelong pursuit of a liberal education keyed to the discipline of history. That commitment came not as the result of one conscious decision but through the influence of several experiences extending back into my youth. I first developed an interest in history by listening to the conversations of my father and his brother about Civil War lore and the history of their own times. Both men were farmers who took Avery Craven's Civil War history course at Simpson during the college's winter sessions for farm youth of the early twentieth century, and they attended the local rallies of Iowa Farmer's Union leader Milo Reno. As it turned

2. Professor Bundy taught hundreds of vocational agriculture instructors and other agriculture educators at Iowa State College during his career there from the 1940s through the 1960s.

out, the indirect influence of historian Craven proved to be stronger upon me than Reno's love of agriculture, but that did not become apparent for several more years. My undergraduate study of history, limited to two courses offered in the University of Maryland's overseas program for army personnel at Verdun, France, during my service there in 1953 and 1954, was more valuable as credits toward my Bachelor of Science degree and subsequent admission to a graduate history program than to a deepening affection for history.

My memorable experience in the humanities at Iowa State came in the English composition and literature course taught by Professor Fred W. Lorch. By both appearance and intellect, Lorch personified the cultured college professor summed up in the much-used phrase, "a gentleman and a scholar." On one occasion Professor Lorch read a student's essay for the teaching example it afforded of uninspired, unedited writing and, without disclosing the name of the essayist, what could be done to turn the piece into effective prose. A polished essay in the course text titled *Of Time and Truth*, edited by Lorch and his colleagues, recounted the economic and academic plight of a struggling student who worked at a café at night and attended class in the day, only to fall asleep when called upon for his one chance to read his term paper, thereby failing the course.³ Fortunately, the outcome for the essayist in Professor Lorch's class—I was the author of the piece he read for the mutual benefit of all, and working my way through college, too—was favorably different for a lasting lesson from the humanities.

With the foundation laid in history courses required for the master of arts degree at the University of Missouri, I headed for a career as a high school American history teacher. I taught U.S. history at Knoxville (Illinois) High School during the 1959–60 school year until a chance meeting with two former history professors at Missouri changed my career objective. "When are you coming back for the Ph.D.?" was the question that returned me to Missouri for graduate studies, culminating in the doctoral degree and a collegiate and university teaching career.

3. George Milburn, "A Student in Economics," in *Of Time and Truth: Ideas and Values for College Students*, ed. Fred W. Lorch, W. Paul Jones, and Keith Huntress (New York, 1946), 167–80.

When I interviewed for a collegiate history teaching position at Washburn University of Topeka as my doctoral studies at the University of Missouri neared completion in 1964, Washburn President Harold Sponberg noted my lack of an undergraduate major in history. Mindful of the jibes I had received from fellow history graduate students familiar with my agriculture studies background, I acknowledged that this anomaly was no advantage. President Sponberg quickly put me at ease by stating that, to the contrary, he believed my understanding of both agriculture and rural life would enhance my teaching of the nation's predominately agrarian past, and he appointed me to the history faculty.

Indeed, one of the first applications of my Iowa agricultural background came in a class discussion with my Washburn students of Walter Webb's classic history, *The Great Plains*. Webb had been reared on a farm in west Texas and thus knew well the arid, treeless, wind-swept region that he described and interpreted in his famous book. The hostile Indian country, lack of wood, and few navigable streams required new approaches and new technologies for Great Plains settlement, recounted in academic language by Webb. He quoted with approval, however, the colloquial phrase of one of his students who identified the plains as the region where "the wind drew the water and the cows cut the wood."⁴ Over the years many of my students could explain that the windmill harnessed the power of the wind to pump the deep-level water to the surface, but no one could explain how a constantly operating, unattended windmill, located miles away from a ranch house, kept the tank full for the cattle without overflowing. That arrangement was accomplished by having a return pipe located below the top of the tank leading back to the well, thus completing the circular movement of water from the well to the tank and back to the well again. A little knowledge of agricultural engineering and common sense solved this mystery.

And cutting of the wood by cows? This statement stumped my students, too, and finds its explanation in the nature of range cattle manure, consisting of digested grass and water that

4. Walter Prescott Webb, "The Historical Seminar: Its Outer Shell and Its Inner Spirit," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 42 (1955), 21.



Windmills were once a prominent feature on most Iowa farms. All photos from State Historical Society of Iowa, Iowa City.

dries in the sun to make a chip of organic material that burns readily as wood for cooking and heating. There is no great intellectual payoff to this example, of course, but pull together the natural history of the plains and the lessons of how the environment and the human responses to it determined culture, as Webb did in *The Great Plains*, and one has a methodology that is applicable to Iowa and every other place on earth. Webb's genius, as that word was once defined, was in "seeing what everyone else has seen but thinking what no one else has thought."

At best, my experiences growing up in Iowa allowed me to speak authoritatively on a number of small things without any grand design, as I did when I explained to my history students how the Public Works Administration (PWA) operated in my home county during the Great Depression. My father and other residents of Lucas County who qualified for relief assistance in the form of PWA employment wielded axes to clear the trees in the future basin for Red Haw Lake near Chariton and pushed wheelbarrows full of dirt for the construction of the lake dam. The Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) provided a job for my brother Jerry in several area conservation and public works proj-



WPA workers construct a dam on the Shell Rock River near Plymouth in Cerro Gordo County during the Great Depression.

ects, with \$25 of his monthly pay of \$30 going directly to our parents. My mother used a portion of the CCC check to buy a new winter coat for my sister Margaret, thus meeting a personal need and, by placing money in circulation, providing indirect relief to a struggling town merchant. These examples shared with my students made these New Deal agencies less abstract and illustrated how they worked at the grassroots level. Other slices of Depression-era life were cited, too, many of them similar to the experiences shared by Mildred Armstrong Kalish in her recent best-selling book, *Little Heathens: Hard Times and High Spirits on an Iowa Farm during the Great Depression*.

My scholarly interest in political history—heightened by the charismatic leadership Franklin D. Roosevelt gave to the New Deal and the modernizing of Republican politics in response to liberalizing policies of the Democratic Party—outstripped my interest in agriculture and rural life and led me in 1965 to invite former Kansas Governor Alf Landon to recount for my students at Washburn University his experiences as the Republican candidate for president in the election of 1936. I worried some when

the old progressive sprinkled his account with salty language and continued his remarks well into the time of the next class, but no one stood on formalities that day, least of all Mr. Landon.

My mentor at the University of Missouri, Richard S. Kirkendall, had earlier provided my grounding in political history. Kirkendall had equally strong interests in agricultural and political history, but he had been appointed to the history faculty at Missouri to lead research and publication based on the newly opened papers of Harry S. Truman at the presidential library in Independence. Kirkendall's seminars focused on modern political history, and he and his students created a body of Truman scholarship known as the "Missouri School." He consented to direct my dissertation on Missouri Democratic politics during the years of Republican ascendancy in the 1920s, published under the title *Embattled Democracy: Missouri Democratic Politics, 1919-1932* (1968), as background to then county supervisor Harry S. Truman's rise to power. While Kirkendall continued to write agricultural and political biography and history, later holding prestigious appointments at Iowa State University and the University of Washington, my focus into the 1990s remained on Truman and his presidency despite the profession's reorientation from political history and the so-called presidential synthesis — U.S. history told in the framework of each presidential administration — to social history and many other genres as well.

My early articles on Truman explored his entry into state politics when he was largely unknown outside of his home county; other articles and papers that came later dealt with his role as commander-in-chief, the women's rights movement during his presidency, and a historiographical treatment of Truman scholarship that charted his reputation from its nadir during the Korean War to its affirmation of him a half-century later as one of the nation's greatest presidents.⁵ I also developed these themes, along with some new ones, especially conservative newspaper opposition to Truman, in my book, *Harry S. Truman and the News*

5. "Who is Judge Truman? The Truman-for-Governor Movement of 1931," *Mid-continent American Studies Journal* 7 (Fall 1966), 3-15; "An Act of Presidential Indiscretion: Harry S. Truman and the Marine Corps Incident of 1950," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 11 (1981), 565-75; "Harry S. Truman and the Verdict of History," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 85 (1986), 261-69.



Harry Truman stopped in Iowa City (pictured here) and several other Iowa towns during his "whistle stop" campaign in 1948.

Media: Contentious Relations, Belated Respect (1997). A referee for the publisher advised me to omit a story attributed to Truman by an anonymous news reporter that brought back into circulation the *Missourian's* occasional mild use of profanity. According to the story, reporters who accompanied Truman on one of his early morning walks asked the former president if he thought it would rain. "Boys," Truman replied, in words that could have come from Alf Landon, "I think it is going to rain like hell." The embellishment of this story, midwestern niceties aside and with the storyteller's exaggerated humor, stated that 14 inches of rain had fallen that day. I published that account in my history.

My firsthand knowledge of the past as I had lived it as a young boy in Iowa during World War II prompted my role as principal investigator, project historian, and associate producer of a documentary film on the American home front during the war. My collaborators, Steven Schechter and Mark Jonathan



Youngsters participate in a scrap metal drive in Hampton during World War II.

Harris, both skilled filmmakers trained in the famed cinema school of the University of Southern California, had been too young in the 1940s to bring their personal experiences and understandings to the film. I had lived the war years between the ages of 9 and 13 on an Iowa farm, and my avid interest in newspaper reports, radio broadcasts, newsreels, and letters received from three older brothers in the service broadened and deepened my knowledge of the war in both small and large ways. The map of the world hanging on the wall of the one-room country school I attended received postings from every pupil of locations cited in the *Des Moines Tribune* and the *Des Moines Register* of battles and conference sites as the war progressed. That ongoing lesson in world geography made visible to us the global nature of the war and familiarized us with faraway places such as Guadalcanal, Tarawa, Casablanca, Stalingrad, Normandy, and Japanese cities. My classmates and I could also look to the skies to see the flights of bombers and fighter planes going from midwestern factories to the overseas theaters of war, making evident to us that a new air age had dawned. Such

personal recollections, along with contemporary film footage and filmed interviews with both civilians and service personnel, told other stories for the documentary, *The Home Front: America During World War II*, televised to a national audience during the 1980s by the Public Broadcasting System. Video copies expanded the film's viewership in schools, colleges, and libraries, extending its life indefinitely, and a companion book of oral histories of the film's interview subjects reached an audience in print format.⁶

Years before, in 1968, I had uprooted myself from Kansas to follow the advice given by the brilliant biologist and environmentalist, Rachel Carson. In her book, *The Edge of the Sea*, Carson wrote that sometime in one's life, one ought to live by the edge of the sea in order to observe the origins of life from their ancient beginnings. That I did by moving to Santa Monica and Venice, California, to reside in those seaside communities for more than 40 years during my tenure on the history faculty of the University of Southern California. When I informed my father, a lifelong resident of Lucas County, Iowa, that I was moving from the Midwest to California, he quipped, "Well, son, you might like California, but I like the good old U.S.A." His neighbors regarded California in the same light, telling me that they liked to visit that state but would not want to live there.

In all the subsequent years, I never quite shook the Iowa dust from my feet, so to speak, as I visited family and friends in Lucas County annually. During one of many visits to my lifelong friend Burdette Smith, a career farmer, he related his observation about the environment that received scientific elaboration by biologist Carson in her celebrated book, *Silent Spring*. Burdette recalled how during his youth he had walked barefoot in freshly turned furrows as his father plowed the fields for corn planting, observing the many earthworms that wiggled for cover to escape the sharp-eyed and hawing red-winged blackbirds that also followed the plow. The use of pesticides and other chemicals to control harmful insects and weeds on farms

6. Mark Jonathan Harris, Franklin D. Mitchell, and Steven Schechter, *The Home-front: America During World War II* (New York, 1984). The University of Southern California holds the copyright and distribution rights for the home-front film.

throughout the Corn Belt, however, killed the beneficial earthworms and other life forms as well. The cycle of death continued when the worms, eaten by the birds, laced the birds' eggshells with poison that caused breakage before the embryo hatched. Smith and other farmers thus learned, firsthand, about the silent spring that Carson wrote about so powerfully. I shared these observations of both farm folk and the biologist with my urban students far removed from the endangered rural environment, adding my own recall of the sounds and sights of once teeming wildlife in the country. Probably every farm boy and girl who ever heard the song of quail and meadowlarks whistled a response to "bob white, bob white" and the multi-note music of the lark, and I demonstrated their calls without embarrassment in my classroom. After years of silence, the species are coming back to Iowa, and the whole world is learning the lessons of environmental protection.

Another related lesson from my Iowa past occurred a half-century ago at one of my evening classes for adult farmers at Lost Nation. The topic for one session, "What's New in Weed Control?" featured Iowa State College plant pathologist E. P. Sylvester. Sylvester stood on the cutting edge of the post-World War II use of herbicides such as 2,4-D. However well he and the farmers in my class understood that they were at the beginning of the chemical and plant technology revolutions that would transform agriculture, I certainly did not foresee that herbicides and plant genetics would replace mechanical cultivation for weed control, sending to museums and scrap heaps the moldboard plows, discs, and harrows that once turned fields into a smooth, loosely textured seedbed for corn and soybeans, kept relatively clean of weeds by cultivators and spike-toothed rotary hoes. In turn, such revolutionary changes made my own knowledge of field crop production obsolete.

Indeed, farming's future belonged to seed and plant science and to the technology of power. These combined technologies made possible no-till and low-till farming performed by huge tractors and matching equipment such as chisel plows, 12- to 48-row planters with air-forced, precision seed placement, trailing tanks of anhydrous ammonia, and mobile 60-foot-wide sprayers that applied pre- and post-emergence weed killers,

pesticides, and liquid fertilizer. Powerful self-propelled harvesters with interchangeable heads for picking and shelling eight rows of corn at a time and harvesting soybeans and small grains in a 25-foot swatch were added to the farmer's machinery lineup, too. None of these revolutionizing seed and power technologies existed 50 years earlier when I made my own revolutionary change from vocational agriculture instructor to historian, and the changes distanced me further from the Iowa of small farms and rural neighborhoods I had known during my youth.

Iowa's agricultural and rural history from the late 1950s onward, made through the lived experiences of permanent residents of the land, lay well beyond my province in much the same way that John Hicks explained the history of the Great Plains. Still, I and other out-migrants who wished to retrace the contours of change in our native state could do so by writing about the "made" history of Iowa. I thus ended the long-marginalization of my Iowa rural and agricultural past and its development over time with my decision in 2002 to write a comprehensive local history of my home county.

Local history has always had a friendly reception in Lucas County, dating formally from 1901 when citizens of the county established the state's first county historical society. Biographical sketches of many residents of Lucas County were published in the subscribed state histories that appeared in 1881 and 1896, and the county itself was the subject of a history published by local lawyer T. S. Stuart in 1913. Nearly 200 family histories fill the shelves of the Lucas County Genealogical Society, and the society itself has edited and compiled family and local history in two well-received books that were published in 1978 and 2000.⁷ Microfilm copies of the Chariton newspapers dating from 1870 (shortly after the town received its charter as a municipality) to the present, housed in the genealogy room of the Chariton Public Library, along with the sources just cited, are the principal print sources I consulted during a break from classes at USC.

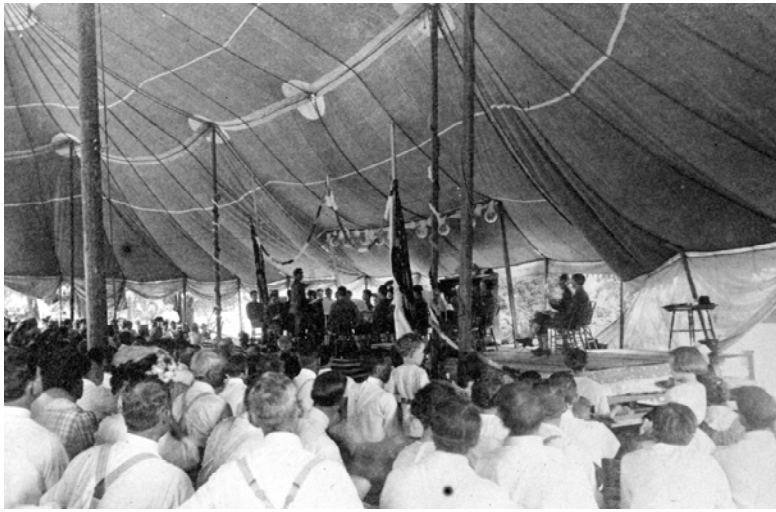
When I returned to Los Angeles in 2004 for my last two years of teaching at the university, I took along extensive re-

7. *The History of Lucas County Iowa* (Marceline, MO, 1978); *Lucas County Heritage 2000* (Chariton, 2001).

search notes and ideas for a local history set in Lucas County from the earliest times of the Woodland culture to the present. Long wanting to make my students more than passive receivers of small pieces of my Iowa past, I could make them active participants in researching and writing about aspects of my home county with the method of the agriculture educators who first introduced me to “learning by doing.” The outcome, I hoped, would make it possible to pull together hitherto fragmented chapters of the Lucas County story as previously recounted, as I have lived it, and as I have observed it from afar and up close, with visits of both short and long duration.

To make the task of my students manageable for their own venture in writing social and cultural history, I chose for them two topics: prohibition and the chautauqua movement. Prohibition’s outlawing of the making, selling, and distribution of alcoholic beverages and the efforts by law enforcement officials and the courts to make prohibition effective gained a reputation as a “big city” problem both in Iowa and the nation, but my students and I learned about rural and small-town non-compliance with prohibition from documents collected in my own research and the local histories of Rose Marie Briggs on the coal-mining communities of Olmitz and Tipperary.⁸ Newspaper accounts of the 1922 federal, state, and local police raid on the stills of Tipperary, termed then and later the largest and best-coordinated effort for prohibition enforcement in rural Iowa, resulted in numerous arrests, destruction of the stills and moonshine, and punishment for the lawbreakers. My students gained a knowledge of the ethnicity of the offenders, otherwise known as coal miners from Italy, France, Croatia, Poland, and other eastern and southern European countries, and their Old World cultural view of wine and beer as a socializing food to be enjoyed rather than an intoxicating beverage to be abused. One lawbreaker, known locally as “Chicago Mike,” who made moonshine in Tipperary and sold it in Chicago, became as familiar to my students as Al Capone. They learned, too, that the standard \$300 fine for making liquor increased to \$1,000 dollars in the late

8. Rose Marie Briggs, *Memories of Olmitz* (Deep River, 1993); and idem, *Tipperary: Gone But Not Forgotten* (Newton, 1990). See also the chapter titled “The North-east Township Coal Mines” in my forthcoming history of Lucas County.



A large crowd gathers for a chautauqua in West Branch in the early years of the twentieth century.

1920s (equivalent to more than \$11,000 today), and that the state legislature added a jail term or prison sentence as a part of the punishment in the closing years of prohibition. The dynamiting of the garage of local prosecuting attorney J. D. Threlkeld of Chariton on an early Sunday morning in 1927 drove home the point that violence and lawlessness associated with defiance of prohibition could reach into a quiet country town.

The morally uplifting lessons of the chautauqua movement offered different insights on ethnicity, race, gender, and class. When I first wrote *chautauqua* on the blackboard (the name taken from the New York lakeside community that inaugurated semireligious and educational sessions for summer visitors), a student completely unfamiliar with the prominent cultural movement of the early twentieth century asked, "How do you pronounce it?" The excitement and interest of the students grew as they researched the chautauqua story from documents that I supplied from my Chariton research and that they found on the internet. Did I know, one student eagerly asked after her visit to the internet, that in 1902 Chariton was one of eight Iowa cities on the circuit managed by Redpath Enterprises, the agency that

contracted with performers and the host towns for 5- to 8-day "chautauquas" each August? They could hardly believe that in a county with a population of 16,166 in 1900, 17,685 people attended a chautauqua in the county seat in 1904 to hear lectures and presentations by prominent Americans. At different chautauquas over the years the crowd pleasers included William Jennings Bryan, Booker T. Washington, Helen Keller, General O. O. Howard of the Freedman's Bureau and the black college in Washington, D.C., the Swedish Bell Ringers of Chicago, and Iowa State's corn seed specialist Professor Perry Holden. One of the speakers advocated woman suffrage in a lecture titled "The Old Man and the New Woman"; other speakers, just by the example of their presence, foreshadowed a more democratic and tolerant society.⁹ The chautauqua, along with the automobile, electric lights, and the movies, introduced modernity to residents of Chariton and Lucas County.

Now, in my retirement from USC and living in Chariton, I write the concluding chapter of the Lucas County history while still sharing stories of my Iowa heritage with students enrolled in a history course I teach at Simpson College. Their questions have identified topics needing further research and clarification. I have learned, too, from old friends and new acquaintances who have lived all or part of their lives in my home county. A non-native, non-resident historian could write an engaging and illuminating history of Lucas County, but only someone like myself, with family links to the county's pioneering generation and their descendants of the past 150-plus years, could write about a people and place with insights and understandings common to many but in other ways unique to a native. My local history, tentatively titled *A People and Place in Time: A History of Lucas County, Iowa*, is a part of my past in ways I realize and do not realize, just as my life experiences as a native Iowan and longtime out-migrant have found conscious and unconscious expression in my career as a historian. This much is clear: For nearly half a century I lived away from Iowa, but during all those years, Iowa never left me.

9. See chapter titled "Modernization of Town and Country, 1896-1919" in my forthcoming history of Lucas County.

And clear, too, are the accounts and assessments of their Iowa heritage provided by each of the other contributors to this issue: the conservative, small-town character of World War II-era Albia described and analyzed by H. Roger Grant; the dominant Catholic culture of Dubuque during the 1940s and 1950s imprinted on the life of John Buenker; the deep, rich meaning of time and place Rebecca Conard gained through her research and publication on the state's once busy railroad depots and quiet parks; and the enduring lessons of education and educators of Ames, Grinnell College, and Columbia University for George McJimsey and the history and biography he has written from an Iowa-conferred "midcult" perspective. History, both as lived experiences and the written record, informs us as fellow Iowans wherever we have lived or whatever we have done, making us all shared inheritors of a proud and storied past.