

Book Reviews

In No Time At All, by Carl Hamilton. Ames: The Iowa State University Press. 1974. pp. xiv, 185. \$4.95.

Nostalgia is very big in these troubled times. Picture books recall "The Return to Normalcy" after World War I. The background music in restaurants and supermarkets restores the distinctive arrangements of Glen Miller to the public air. The decor of *The Great Gatsby*, a filmed recreation of The Gilded Age, wins an Oscar. Railroad buffs can buy a recording which brings back the sounds of locomotives panting at the depot, distant train whistles, and busy switch engines in the Great Days of Steam. These parcels of the past are salable commodities, because they offer the imagination a chance to return to The Good Old Days.

In the foreword to *In No Time At All* Carl Hamilton reveals his belief that

this is not a significant book . . . it all started out in an original so-called "family edition," no more than a series of essays for the benefit of Hamilton children. As I found my children remarkably interested in some of my mother's commentaries of another time, it occurred to me that recording some of these observations might be worthwhile. It was as innocent an effort as that . . . There is no plot. No message. No hidden meaning. It is for browsing. Or Ignoring.

Mr. Hamilton is too modest. He tells the story of rural mid-America as he knew it when he was growing up from 1914 to 1940, and of how it vanished "in no time at all." His book has an unmistakable message: The Good Old Days were not all that good! Indeed, he frankly acknowledges the fact that the Hamilton family lived through hard times. "But," he declares, "hard times were the best thing that ever happened to me. Nothing has ever been difficult since then." This recognition of the benefits which can arise out of hardships permeates the book.

There was privation enough to make hard times "better in retrospect than in actuality." The effects of the great depression are detailed at some length. The family "lost a farm," and the loss left its mark on the Hamiltons. They didn't endure the humiliation of a foreclosure sale. Hamilton writes: "I give my parents

much credit for handling this situation gracefully and with good sense. They signed away their equity in real estate, kept their stock and machinery, and simply started over." It meant the renting of another farm and doing without many of the things to which they had grown accustomed, but, as Hamilton recalls, "no words of complaint were ever spoken." His parents had the resilience to bounce back after being struck by adversity, and the family adapted itself to straitened circumstances with integrity and good humor.

Farming, when Carl Hamilton was growing up, depended on horsepower, and the section of the book in which the author describes the care and handling of horses is especially rewarding. It is obvious that horses were cherished members of the farm family and were given treatment which acknowledged their importance. Mention must be made, here, of the many fine pictures of horses performing their farm chores. They are shown in eight-horse hitches pulling two eight-foot discs in tandem; two abreast cutting hay, or pulling husking wagons with high bangboards; or hitched to booms, plodding endlessly around in a circle, elevating corn or furnishing power for early threshing machines.

The illustrations for the book form a unique album of farm life. They have been carefully chosen from the photo files of *Wallace's Farmer*, the Library of Congress, *Farm Town: A Memoir of the 1930s*, the Iowa State University History Collection, and the Iowa Highway Commission. In addition to the photos, there are reprints from mail-order catalogs showing a tilting bathtub; a Windsor Kitchen Range, "the heart of everything in the house;" an oil lantern; a Majestic Bread Maker; a stoneware butter churn; a Victrola; and assorted styles of Boy's Winter Underwear, an undergarment which was "not an ego builder."

The Hamilton family was tightly knit. Farm work was largely a "hand operation" in which all hands were mobilized to achieve maximum efficiency in getting many jobs done. Corn was planted "when the oak leaves were as big as squirrel's ears." And, when the time of harvest came, corn picking was done by hand, not by a mechanical picker. Even a city dweller reading Hamilton's account of corn picking can feel the aching wrists and the bone weariness of this dawn-to-dark race with winter. "Of all the drudgery," writes Hamilton, "corn picking was the worst."

But there were times of relaxation. A trip to the state fair, with an overnight stop in a borrowed tent, sleeping on a blanket spread over a bale of hay; going to town on Saturday nights; reading the *Glidden Graphic* and the *Des Moines Register*, plus a carefully selected assortment of magazines; and, on Sunday afternoons, playing the Victrola. The Hamilton collection of records included about thirty pieces, such as "Beautiful Ohio," "The Stars and Stripes Forever," and "Yes, She's My Elsie Schultzenheim."

Farm life became mechanized by increasing degrees between the twenties and the end of World War II. The horse was being replaced by the tractor in field work, and the automobile was taking the farmer and his family to town and back with much greater dispatch than the old horse and buggy. The first Hamilton automobile was a Jeffery. This was followed by a Reo, then a Chevrolet Landau. The most delightful story of the transition from horse to auto is the account of "A Standoff: Granddad Versus the Model T." It is a saga of Granddad going into the ditch, right side up, and "without ever changing the rate of acceleration," racing down the ditch for a way, steering back up onto the road, and whizzing on "as though he had planned it that way all the time."

Few aspects of farm life are left out of *In No Time At All*. Sacrifice on the part of the parents, and saving on the part of the children, were articles of faith which kept bills paid without going into debt. Dad Hamilton's credo was: "Present problems would be solved if everyone would work and save and not depend on the government."

By the time Carl Hamilton was ready to go to college he had \$500 in the bank, money earned on 4-H calf projects. Room and board during his first year at Iowa State cost him \$7 per week, and tuition was \$26 per quarter. "Still," says Hamilton, "stretching \$500 over the years 1931-1936 took a little doing."

He went to Washington, D.C. in 1938 to work with Claude Wickard, administer of the revolutionary new AAA, and later Franklin Roosevelt's Secretary of Agriculture. From 1948 to 1962 Carl was editor and publisher of *The Iowa Falls Citizen* newspaper, then headed the journalism department at Iowa State until 1965. Currently he is vice president for Information and Development at ISU.

Regardless of your age or antecedents, *In No Time At All* has something important to say to you about an almost forgotten era in our nation's history. Don't miss it.

—Herbert Hake
Cedar Falls

#

The Legend of John Brown: A Biography and a History, by Richard O. Boyer. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 1973. pp. 627 Bibliography, Index, Notes. \$12.50.

The title of this important work is somewhat misleading. It is less concerned with delineating the legend of John Brown than with placing it in perspective and humanizing it. Boyer treats Brown and his society to 1855, when Brown made his fateful trip to Kansas. A second projected volume will deal with the last four traumatic years of Brown's life.

Boyer does not attempt to establish that Brown was normal or even sane, but instead tries to put his strange actions within the framework of his society as a whole and so provide a plausible explanation for both. Brown reflected many of the values and trends then prevalent in America, and, by seeing him in this light, the man becomes less puzzling. This is Boyer's major contribution, for few historians have attempted to place John Brown's life in a broader context, perhaps because of the magnitude of the task. If Brown ultimately turned to violence, the American people were doing the same thing, as economic differences and especially slavery continued to eat away at the nation's psychological equilibrium. Brown merely became a focal point of a general national crisis. He happened to reach his personal crisis just at the time America did, and that explains, in large part, his historical significance. If he was shaken and angered by the murder of Elijah Lovejoy, the passage of the Fugitive Slave and Kansas-Nebraska

Copyright of Annals of Iowa is the property of State of Iowa, by & through the State Historical Society of Iowa and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.