

## Book Reviews

*American Classic*, by Laurence Lafore. Iowa City: Iowa State Historical Department, Division of the State Historical Society, 1975. Cloth bound \$5.95, paperback \$3.95.

Laurence Lafore's *American Classic* is to the coffee table book what the Basic American house is to the 20th century "medieval" castle. It is an honest book of beautiful design, amazingly low-priced, and true to most of the definitions of its own title.

Lafore, who is professor of history and chairman of the History Department at the University of Iowa, not only knows the architectural style of the houses and public buildings of Iowa City, he knows why their builders borrowed various effects from the past. "Buildings tell stories to those who can read them," he writes, suggesting that "notions of virtue and beauty are recorded in timber, steel and brick, and they can tell us what people have thought and done and what gods they have worshipped."

Buildings communicate with Lafore, and his literate account of what they say is helpful to anyone who wants to learn their stories. Lafore's preface states his hope of entertaining and instructing "by showing and telling something about some buildings in Iowa City." That hope is fulfilled by the book.

Copiously illustrated, *American Classic* shows as it tells, and its readers and lookers may come to value houses and public buildings they have taken for granted because they have seen them all their lives without really "seeing."

Calling American towns "family albums of America's past—and of a past much older than America's," Lafore sees family resemblances in houses and streets, particularly in Iowa City. He draws parallels between Iowa City and Philadelphia, noting that both were located and named before they were "born," and both were laid out in wholesome, straight patterns to serve as the capitals of new provinces. A cosmopolitan diversity of peoples inhabits both.

The Grecian columns of Old Capitol in Iowa City reflect an American respect for the academies of Athens. As the town grew, prosperity demanded its tangible signs. The affluent romantically tried to duplicate the elegances of other lands: Florentine villa's,

medieval chapels, and feudal castles. But their fancies always combined with practicality and the need to adapt to a severe climate. Often the borrowings made no provision for proportion, and the results were bastards—but interesting bastards in many cases.

Lafore guesses that Iowa City is more like Periclean Athens than New York is, with more physicians per capita than any other city in the country and perhaps more culture per square mile. Only three universities as large as the University of Iowa in the nation are situated in towns so small.

Lafore supplies a touch of the gossip that makes history fascinating in his mention of Richard Mentor Johnson, the U.S. vice-president for whom Johnson County is named. If you're curious, buy the book. He suggests that the contrast between the splendor of Old Capitol and the raw town growing around it in the 1840s must have been great, and he reports that Horace Greeley wrote of Iowa City in 1857, "almost everyone who isn't drunk is getting rich." On one hand, there was the noble and the beautiful, and on the other hand, ordinary life. They co-existed without much mingling.

The Greek columns that spoke of classical ideals were raised everywhere in Iowa City, French and southern touches satisfied the need for elegance, and the late 19th century brought a contempt for things American and a whole-sale embracing of Gothic, Italian, French, Swiss, Moorish, and even Egyptian styles.

Lafore discusses high ceilings informatively, noting that hot, Iowa summers were one practical reason for them, but "tallness was liked for its own sake" and artists even drew historic buildings with unnatural height. At first, ceilings rose by inches, then by feet. Interesting tid-bits include the fact that the mansard roof was named for its originator, Francois Mansart, and Americans even adapted the man's name to their own style. The mansard shape, together with other borrowed features, became the Charles Addams emblem, the stock ghost mansion.

Lafore observes the irony of the crenellated battlements on the embattled Presbyterian Church in Iowa City. He praises Iowa City's Summit Street (and portions of others) as a showcase of harmonious Victoriana, embodying "what people of the late nineteenth century thought was the best of all possible worlds." He

notes that rich and poor shared the same culture, the difference of expression being a matter of size and scale.

The transition to modern architecture is traced with clarity, moving from an early insistence upon functionality to a return to simplicity, the white paint rage, new borrowings, the "shoddily bleak," "Alleviated factory," and finally, "Brutality."

The book is filled with interesting bits like the mail order houses of the 1890s, a note that Colonial white was actually pale khaki, and the fact that University Hospital's bell-less bell tower is a recreation of Oxford's Magdalen Tower.

Lafore makes it clear that one's apprehension of the new College of Dentistry as a mass of "gigantic teeth" is not unique, suggesting that it "may be a fancy of the beholder, not of the architect."

*American Classic* is a Rosetta Stone for reading Iowa City, or any other town. Sufficiently meaty for the expert, the book is accessible to the person who doesn't know a pilaster from a pediment.

—Julie McDonald  
Davenport

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*My People The Sioux*, by Luther Standing Bear. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press. 1975. \$3.95.

When *My People the Sioux* was first published in 1928 it was highly praised by such reviewers as Van Wyck Brooks and the *New York Times*. Great numbers of Americans read it with empathy and came away with increased sensitivity to the problems faced by Native Americans. Now republished in a 1975 edition by the University of Nebraska Press, it still deserves an enthusiastic reception by thinking Americans.

It is not, and never claimed to be, a literary masterpiece. Its author, Luther Standing Bear, never purported to be scholar nor a man of letters. He offers his autobiographical memoirs in *My People the Sioux* as "a message to the white race; to bring my people before their eyes in a true and authentic manner." Therefore, questions of style become superfluous. In simple language, full of pride yet free of braggadocio, Standing Bear records a tale

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