

The Iowa Caucuses: First Tests of Presidential Aspiration, 1972–2008, by John C. Skipper. Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, Inc., Publishers, 2010. vii, 212 pp. Illustrations, appendixes, notes, bibliography, index. \$35.00 paper.

Reviewer Norman E. Fry teaches American history and government at South-eastern Community College in Burlington, Iowa. His research and writing have focused on the Mississippi River and small towns in Iowa.

John C. Skipper's book sets out to explain why the Iowa caucuses have become what they are today and why they remain the first testing ground for those men and women who seek the presidency. Skipper focuses on the years since 1972 and the gradual evolution of the Iowa caucuses from a grassroots electoral event to a major political story for the national news media.

The caucuses are work sessions for party regulars who pick county central committee members, delegates to county conventions, and other minor officeholders. But the irresistible attraction of the Iowa caucuses for the national and world news media has been the presence of presidential contenders from both the Republican and Democrat parties who use the caucuses as a platform to launch their presidential ambitions onto the national stage.

Skipper's book is a journalistic narrative of the caucuses that draws on secondary sources, campaign memoirs, statistical results of the caucuses, his own personal experience, and interviews with politicians and political operatives. The book reflects the author's own rich experience as a reporter covering Iowa presidential politics for 25 years. The main source for reporters is the interview, as is evident here. As a result, the book carries plenty of anecdotal evidence, humor, and the sorts of personal insights from both the author and political operatives that give the narrative a lively verve.

The author's main purpose is to explain why the Iowa caucuses became important in the first place. Skipper attributes their importance to the convergence of two movements during the 1960s: African Americans' demand for representation in the political process; and the revolt, inspired by the rowdy Democratic National Convention held in Chicago in 1968, against the political bosses. These protests were the beginning of a movement against all forms of political exclusion. The goal of party reformers was to increase the number of women, minorities, young people, and others who had been denied a role in party politics by the political bosses.

This movement to expand participation in party politics found avid supporters in Iowa, especially among Democrat Party activists, and the efforts of those activists created the Iowa caucuses in the form

they have taken, but practical concerns determined why they became the first presidential electoral contest in the nation. The Iowa political activists who designed the caucus process were left with a basic procedural problem. The caucuses had to be held well before the county, district, and state conventions, which ordinarily took place between March and June. Enough time was needed to complete important clerical duties. The solution was an early caucus held in January or February. Thus was born the Iowa caucuses and all of the unintended consequences of their early venue.

Skipper successfully traces the origins of the caucuses to the demands for reform during the 1960s at both the national level and in Iowa. But he also notes that the original intent evolved into something quite unexpected. An unknown presidential contender, such as Jimmy Carter, can no longer come to Iowa and gain national attention with little or no financial means. The caucuses have become a media event, far more expensive than in the early days, and very often the media interpretation of who won or lost is as important as the actual results. But this evolution explains the continuing importance of the Iowa caucuses; they have become a modern political hybrid composed of one part local politics and the other part national media coverage.

Readers should understand that *The Iowa Caucuses* is not a scholarly work. It is not written for political scientists or political historians, but it does give a readable and up-to-date interpretation of the evolution of the caucuses from local event to national obsession. The book has an index, footnotes, and appendixes of election results and Republican straw polls, which should make it a handy book for teaching about the Iowa caucuses. Generally, it should be read by anyone interested in Iowa history and politics, presidential primary politics, and the role of the national media and the Iowa caucuses as a clearing-house for presidential ambitions.

Purebred & Homegrown: America's County Fairs, by Drake Hokanson and Carol Kratz. Terrace Books. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2009. xii, 182 pp. Illustrations (mostly color), notes, bibliography, index. \$50.00 cloth, \$29.95 paper.

Reviewer Chris Rasmussen is associate professor of history at Fairleigh Dickinson University. He is the author of "'Fairs Here Have Become a Sort of Holiday': Agriculture and Amusements at Iowa's County Fairs, 1838-1925" (*Annals of Iowa*, 1999).

Agricultural fairs, as Drake Hokanson and Carol Kratz note in *Purebred & Homegrown*, have played an enormous role in American history,