

# In Memoriam: Tom Morain (1947–2020), Ambassador for Iowa History

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IOWA HISTORY lost one of its most effective and beloved ambassadors when Tom Morain died on October 10, 2020. *Prairie Grass Roots*, his history of his hometown of Jefferson, Iowa, in the first three decades of the twentieth century, is a model of local history. *Iowa, Past to Present*, the elementary school textbook he coauthored with Dorothy Schwieder and Lynn Nielsen, remains the best book of its kind. But he was so much more than those books represent. For more than 40 years, Tom was the (always smiling) public face of Iowa history. He was beloved for his public presentations in which he delighted audiences with his historical insight and his unique sense of humor. Tom could always be counted on to find the human element in history, often with a humorous twist. His leadership in the community of Iowa history scholars and enthusiasts did much to make Iowa history more accessible—and more fun.

Tom fit in a line of Iowa historians known as much for their humane collegiality as for their scholarship; think especially of Leland Sage, Joseph Frazier Wall, and Dorothy Schwieder. Tom believed that these historians set the tone for an Iowa history community that is more collegial and more supportive of each other than is typical of historians generally. After earning his Ph.D. in American Civilization at the University of Iowa, Tom taught Iowa history for five years at Iowa State University alongside Dorothy Schwieder. Throughout his life, he expressed his

admiration for Dorothy as office mate, mentor, colleague, coauthor, editor, bridge partner, and friend, often calling her “the den mother of Iowa history” or, later, under my influence, “the dean of Iowa historians.”<sup>1</sup> She may have reinforced his own sense of collegiality, but I suspect that it was an integral element of who he was.

Tom left Iowa State to become director of research and interpretation at Living History Farms (LHF). The remainder of his career in history was spent in public history. He often noted the key difference: academic historians had a captive audience who had to pay attention if they wanted to pass the course; public historians had to earn their audience’s attention. One former LHF intern, historian Joe Anderson, recalls Tom’s creativity. “Where I saw at most two or three choices (and sometimes only one way forward), Tom saw ten options. He would be the first to admit that half of those ideas were flaky, but Tom on a bad day was more creative than any group ever assembled at LHF was on its best day.”<sup>2</sup> At LHF, Tom, in the words of State Curator Leo Landis, who was another intern at LHF under Tom’s supervision, “led the effort to create the 1700 Ioway Indian interpretive site, instituted a paid internship program for graduate students and undergraduates, and brought new programs to the Walnut Hill town, including a newspaper office, millinery shop and drug store.” The creation of the millinery shop was especially noteworthy, Landis notes, as “it placed women’s history as a central story of the daily interpretive program.”<sup>3</sup>

Due perhaps in part to the influence of Dorothy Schwieder, attention to women’s history was, in fact, an important element of Tom’s historical interpretation throughout his career. He even served for a while on the Iowa Commission on the Status of Women. He sometimes noted that a woman in her 80s whom he interviewed for *Prairie Grass Roots* was an important mentor in

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1. Tom Morain, “In Memoriam: A Tribute to Dorothy A. Schwieder, 1933–2014,” *Annals of Iowa* 73 (2014), 307–10. For an autobiographical account of Dorothy Schwieder’s career, see “‘It All Started with the Amish’: Reflections on a Career in Iowa History,” *Annals of Iowa* 75 (2016), 47–60.

2. Joe Anderson, in “Memories of Tom Morain,” <https://tinyurl.com/2zhe9y4r>.

3. Leo Landis, email correspondence with author, 5/3/2021.

this regard. She resisted being interviewed at first because she didn't think she knew anything about history or that anything historically important had happened to her.<sup>4</sup> But as she talked about learning to drive in rural Iowa in the 1920s, she became excited while recalling the first time she backed the Model T out of the barn. At first Tom was puzzled about what was so exciting about learning to drive. Eventually, though, he realized that "when she could back the car out of the barn, she could go to town when SHE wanted! She did not have to wait for her husband to take her. The morning she backed out on her own was her Independence Day, her Bastille Day, her 'Get Out of Jail Free' card. It was a freedom her mother and grandmother and great-grandmother and generations of rural women before them had never known."<sup>5</sup>

My first introduction to Tom came via *Prairie Grass Roots*. It came out at a time when "community studies" were quite the rage among academic historians—and shortly after I began editing the *Annals of Iowa*. Upon reading it, I became convinced that it compared well with other studies from around the country—and the world—at the time, and it is almost certainly the best book in the genre to focus on an Iowa community. Even as I was struck by the quality of the scholarship, I also realized that this author had a unique voice. One woman Tom interviewed for the book told him, "Young man, we did the same thing in cars then [the 1920s] that kids do today." (The context makes it clear that she's talking about sexual activity.) When I turned to the footnote, here's what I found: "Did you really think I was going to tell you who said that?"<sup>6</sup>

In 1995 Tom became administrator of the State Historical Society of Iowa (and—full disclosure—my boss). Longtime SHSI staffer Becki Plunkett recalls, "At the first all-staff State Historical

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4. Dorothy Schwieder tells a similar story about empowering an interviewee in "It All Started with the Amish," 55–56, a story Tom retells in his "In Memoriam: A Tribute to Dorothy A. Schwieder."

5. Tom Morain, "Of Canning Jars and God: Reflections," *Iowa Heritage Illustrated* (2009), 3. These reflections were written in response to his reception of the 2008 Petersen/Harlan Award, the highest award given by the State Historical Society of Iowa, for his long-term and continuing contributions to Iowa history.

6. Thomas Morain, *Prairie Grass Roots: An Iowa Small Town in the Early Twentieth Century* (Ames, 1988), 167, 274n42.

Society planning meeting over which Tom presided, he announced to us that he had many ideas for activities, initiatives, and goals the organization could pursue. He continued by saying it was his expectation of staff that we listen to his ideas, then diplomatically added (to the relief of all) that he also expected us to tell him if they were 'bad' ideas. So much about his good nature, enthusiasm, and community spirit was summed up in those introductory statements.<sup>7</sup> Tom did, indeed, bring a wealth of fresh ideas to SHSI, but his ability to implement them was limited by budgetary constraints and, at times, by staff resistance. He did, however, lead the society's contributions to Iowa's sesquicentennial celebration and worked to establish Iowa history as a part of school curricula. Through it all, he maintained a positive, cheerful attitude and, most importantly, was a positive public face for the institution.

One notable sesquicentennial project that Tom undertook on his own yielded the fascinating book *Family Reunion: Essays on Iowa* (1995). Not a history project per se, the book includes essays by 18 authors whom Tom asked to reflect on their experiences of diversity in Iowa. One unlikely product of that project was the bond formed between Tom and Richard, Lord Acton, the English baron who became an Iowa history enthusiast (and researcher and writer) during the time he spent in Iowa as a result of his marriage to a University of Iowa law professor. Richard was an amazing, witty conversationalist himself; I would have loved to have been a fly on the wall during their conversations and, barring that, to have had Richard's reflections on their friendship.<sup>8</sup>

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7. Becki Plunkett, in "Memories of Tom Morain."

8. For examples of Richard, Lord Acton's Iowa history research and writing, see Richard, Lord Acton and Patricia Nassif Acton, *To Go Free: A Treasury of Iowa's Legal Heritage* (Ames, 1996) [co-winner of the 1997 Benjamin F. Shambaugh Award]; Richard Acton, "The Magic of Undiscouraged Effort: The Death Penalty in Early Iowa, 1838-1878," *Annals of Iowa* 50 (1991), 721-50; Richard Acton, "To Go Free," *Palimpsest* 70 (1989), 50-61; Richard Acton, "Hawkeye: What's in a Name?" *Palimpsest* 70 (1989), 114-20; Richard Acton, "An Iowan's Death at Harpers Ferry," *Palimpsest* 70 (1989), 186-97; Richard Acton, "A Remarkable Immigrant: The Story of Hans Reimer Claussen," *Palimpsest* 75 (1994), 87-101; Richard Acton, "Iowans and John Brown's Attack on Harpers Ferry," *Iowa Heritage Illustrated* 90 (2009), 84-85; and, of course, Richard, Lord Acton, "A Brit Among the Hawkeyes" in Thomas J. Morain, ed., *Family Reunion: Essays on Iowa* (Ames, 1995), 43-52.

Even after he left the institutional world of Iowa history in 2001 to return to his alma mater, Graceland University, to serve in a variety of administrative capacities, Tom continued to make significant contributions to Iowa history, many of them behind the scenes. But he continued to offer public programs related to Iowa history, often but not always through Humanities Iowa, and made frequent appearances on Charity Nebbe's Talk of Iowa program on Iowa Public Radio. Nebbe recalls that "his depth and breadth of knowledge always blew me away, but even more, it was his enthusiasm and obvious delight in sharing Iowa's history that I loved."<sup>9</sup> Audiences especially appreciated his popular "Hymns and Herds" programs, in which he combined two of his passions—piano playing and Iowa history—to take audiences through a year in the life of an Iowa pioneer family, employing photographs from the 1850 Farm at Living History Farms. And he collaborated with fellow Graceland historian Bill Juhnke to offer programs in which they took turns taking sides in a debate over whether the Civil War was avoidable. He also initiated an online Iowa history course for Iowa colleges and universities. Finally, he wrote several articles for the State Historical Society of Iowa's popular history magazine, *Iowa Heritage Illustrated*.<sup>10</sup>

Tom never wrote a feature article for the *Annals of Iowa*, but he was a strong supporter of the journal and its mission and made significant contributions to it in other ways. He regularly wrote perceptive and often witty book reviews, and he was also an insightful and helpful reviewer of prospective articles. Not least, he was a favorite correspondent; as editor, I could count on his emails to lift my spirits with an apt insight, anecdote, or joke.

In addition, he served as a reviewer for SHSI Research Grant applications and served on the Shambaugh Award Committee for nearly the entire life of the award; for many of those years he

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9. Charity Nebbe, in "Memories of Tom Morain."

10. "Of Canning Jars and God: Reflections"; "Life Without Automobiles & Rural Electrification in 20th-Century Iowa," *Iowa Heritage Illustrated* 81 (2000), 186–91; "Pardon Me, Governor: Ernest Rathburn, William Harding, and the Politics of Justice," *Iowa Heritage Illustrated* 86 (2005), 150–57; "Reading the Past: Splendid Solutions: Jonas Salk and the Conquest of Polio," *Iowa Heritage Illustrated* 87 (2006), 166; "A History Mystery in Ringgold County," *Iowa Heritage Illustrated* 90 (2009), 60–63.

chaired the committee, which selects the most significant book on Iowa history published each year (though he obviously did not serve on the committee in its second year, 1989, when his own *Prairie Grass Roots* won the award). In both roles, he modeled collegiality; he reveled in hearing the arguments and justifications of others whose judgments differed from his own.

I'm sure that others in the Iowa history community could come up with many other contributions that Tom made to our joint work. But all of us remember him for his wit and humaneness.<sup>11</sup>

A few years ago, Tom sent me a recording of his creative piano arrangements of favorite hymns from the Christian tradition. I hope those hymns are supporting his family, friends, and colleagues as we mourn his loss and celebrate his contributions to life and Iowa history. And may all of us in the Iowa history community continue to emulate his model of collegiality and mutual support, even if we cannot all match his sense of humor.

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11. See the "Iowa History" section of "Memories of Tom Morain."