# To Rattle Dry Bones

THOMAS J. MORAIN

*INTRODUCTION: We're biased, of course, but it's safe to say that Tom Morain was one of the world's leading experts in Iowa history. He would have chuckled at that description, but it's nonetheless true.*

*In the following essay, which was delivered on March 12, 2012, at Des Moines Area Community College, you'll read why Tom thought Iowa history matters, but it's worth noting how he came to that conclusion.*[1] *He grew up in Jefferson, where his family ran the local papers,* the Bee *and* Herald*, and regularly discussed current events around the dining room table. He and his siblings occasionally browsed the back issues that were bound in hefty volumes their father stored in the basement. It was just something to do on a rainy day.*

*But during one of Tom's summer breaks from the University of Iowa, where he was studying American history, he realized how those dusty stories in the basement connected to the broader sweep of national and even global history. Ordinary folks in Jefferson fought in World War I and drove Model Ts and worried about the evils of jazz dancing just like the Important People in the Important Places he was studying at school. He started to spot overlooked context—meanings and relationships—that connected Jefferson's dot on the map to the rest of the world.*

*That "lightbulb moment" illuminated the rest of Tom's career and inspired him to spread the light for the next half century. For if Iowans understood some of the extraordinary things our predecessors accomplished, what else might we achieve?*

*— The Morain family: Vikki, Joel and Michael*

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1. For issues of clarity and concision, this talk has been edited slightly in preparation for publication. Its substance, however, remains unchanged.

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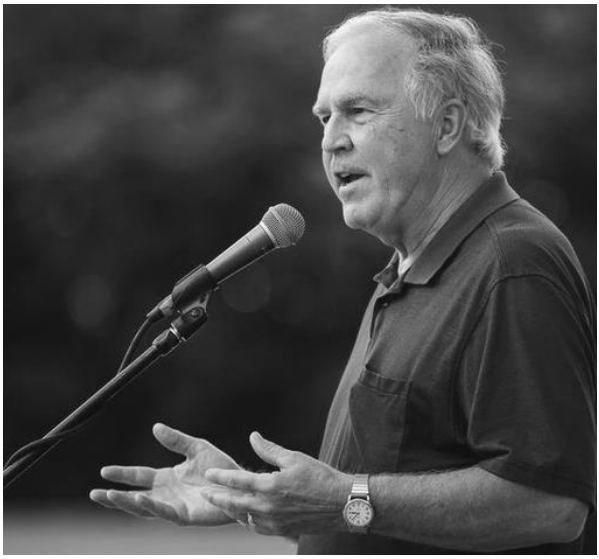

*Tom Morain (photo courtesy of the Morain family)*

THREE WEEKS AGO my wife and I were still sleepy as the announcer on the 6:30 morning news report asked listeners if we had studied Iowa history in 5th grade. Her story was that there was a new textbook out on Iowa history and that she would be interviewing its two main authors, Dorothy Schwieder and Thomas Morain, that morning at 10:00 on Iowa Public Radio. This was something of a wake-up call since at 6:30 and only half awake my brain could recall no memory of any discussion of when, where, or with whom this session would occur that day. For her part, Dorothy Schwieder, a wise woman and retired, probably didn't hear that early morning news since women who are both wise and retired are less likely to have the radio switched on at 6:30.

It turned out, of course, that the program was going to be a rebroadcast of the session we did the previous fall. The occasion then was the release of a fourth version of the Iowa history textbook to bring the story up to date from the year 2000, where the earlier text ended: biodiesel fuels, wind turbines, floods, tornadoes, Shawn Johnson. We had said goodbye to Governor Branstad in Chapter 18, but he's back! We learned a little secret about the

publishing world. The University of Iowa Press chose to call this latest publication the Revised 3rd Edition, rather than the 4th Edition. If it's a new edition, you have to go back and secure new copyright permissions for every photograph in the whole book, but if it's only a revision, you don't.

At the end of the original interview, the host asked Dorothy why she thought it was important to teach children about the history of Iowa when, after all, we live in a global age. It's a question that comes up frequently for state and local historians. Dorothy launched into an impassioned plea to provide children with a sense of place, an understanding of how the community around them came to be, and an appreciation of their own heritage.

Dorothy and I were on the phone a few days after the original interview in a post mortem, and I asked her about those last few moments of the interview. She laughed and said she didn't really remember exactly what she'd said, but she knew it came from the heart. It did, indeed. It was a passion that had surfaced not just in those final minutes of her radio interview, but consistently through four decades when she taught overenrolled undergraduate Iowa history courses, wrote a shelf full of books and articles, lectured across the state, and nurtured a new generation of Iowa historians.

This was her consistent message: history matters, and local history is where we connect most easily and most directly to the people and the culture that have had the greatest impact in shaping who we are.

EVERY YEAR, my town, Lamoni, sponsors Civil War Days: a weekend of reenactments of military battles and camp life. In 2010, a Lutheran minister turned Graceland theatre professor gave the sermon at the outdoor Sunday morning worship service. The congregation sat on hay bales and lawn chairs on the side of yesterday's battlefield. He shared with us a sermon that became popular among Lutherans after the battle of Gettysburg. In that conflict, the Confederate general, Robert E. Lee, set up command headquarters at the local Lutheran seminary. On the third day of the battle, Lee ordered Pickett's Charge—a slaughter of Southern troops that attempted but failed to break through the Union lines (a failure that foretold the doom of the Confederate

cause). Following the battle, the Lutheran seminary president preached a sermon from the Old Testament based on the famous story of the Prophet Ezekiel's dream of watching dead bones come back to life.

Dead bones were more than a metaphor at a battlefield where some 50,000 men, just about the entire population of Ankeny, were killed or wounded in only three days of fighting.[2] Because this year's Civil War Days and that public interview were floating around in my head together, I realized in that marvelous and mysterious process called serendipity that that sermon on the Ezekiel text harmonized beautifully with Dorothy's closing remarks in the radio interview.

The biblical account describes Ezekiel's dream where he is placed in a valley filled with dry bones. The bones become a metaphor for the people of Israel who, in losing touch with their religious roots, have become a people of dry bones who yet could live again if they recover that memory. Therefore, I have chosen Ezekiel 37:1–10 as my own sermon text for this occasion.

> The hand of the LORD was upon me and he brought me out by the spirit of the LORD and set me in the middle of the valley; it was full of bones. He led me back and forth among them, and I saw a great many bones on the floor of the valley, bones that were very dry. He asked me, "Son of man, can these bones live?" I said, "Sovereign LORD, you alone know." Then He said to me, "Prophesy to these bones and say to them, 'Dry bones, hear the word of the LORD. This is what the Sovereign LORD says to these bones: I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life. I will attach tendons to you and make flesh come upon you and cover you with skin; I will put breath in you, and you will come to life. Then you will know that I am the LORD.'" So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I was prophesying, there was a noise, a rattling sound, and the bones came together, bone to bone. I looked, and tendons and flesh appeared upon them and skin covered them, but there was no breath in them. Then [the LORD] said to me, "Prophesy to the breath; prophesy, son of man and say to it, 'This is what

2. The population of Ankeny is based on the 2010 census.

> the Sovereign LORD says: Come breath from the four winds . . . and breathe into these slain, that they may live.'" So I prophesied as he commanded me and breath entered them: they came to life and stood up upon their feet—a vast army. (NIV)

We are surrounded everywhere by evidence of our past—old photographs, street names, antiques, traditions. They are like the bones in Ezekiel's dream: evidence that there has been life before us, but by themselves, they are meaningless. It is history that breathes life into them, history that explains our relationship to them and how they have shaped us. Without history they will remain disconnected from each other and from us. Dry bones, indeed.

I would like to talk about three types of bones today: historical artifacts or things, historical processes, and historical places.

## Historical Artifacts

It was when I worked at Living History Farms that I discovered author Freeman Tilden's marvelous little book *Interpreting Our Heritage* (1957) on teaching history at historic sites. Interpreting, Tilden writes, is "an educational activity that aims to reveal meanings and relationships through the use of original objects, by firsthand experience . . . rather than simply to communicate factual information."[3] *Meanings and relationships.* Historical interpretation should go beyond memorization of facts. Tilden writes that his goal in interpretation is provocation.[4] To provoke the visitor into considering what the significance of the factual information might be.

So, what's important about old things? They are certainly important to museums. Collections are museums' stock and trade, but no one ever asked me during my thirteen years at Living History Farms, "Would you explain the impact of industrialization on agriculture in rural life in the upper Mississippi Valley from 1700–1950?" No one ever asked me that question.

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3. Freeman Tilden, *Interpreting Our Heritage*, 3rd Edition (Chapel Hill, NC, 1977), 8.

4. Tilden, *Interpreting*, 32.

The most common question from visitors is, "What's that?" It came from a second grader pointing to a washboard and a bucket of suds. It came from a teenager spying a powder horn hanging from the wall of a log cabin. It came from an elderly man noticing a breed of hogs he had never seen before. Good museums deliberately position artifacts where they will catch the attention of visitors to pique their interest, to provoke them to ask that simple question, "What's that?"

We know the thing has a story, and we want to hear it. What does it mean? *Meanings and relationships.* The artifact is the bone. History, the story of the thing, is the flesh and muscle that ties it into a bigger picture and gives it breath. It is one thing to look at a khaki WWII uniform on a mannequin; it is quite another to learn that you are looking at a uniform worn by an Iowa farm kid when he hit the beach at Normandy scared spitless that he was about to die.

I want to share a personal experience that my wife Vikki and I had on a four-day whirlwind trip to London. The highlight was lunch in the dining room of the British House of Lords with the late Richard, Lord Acton. Richard's wife, Patricia, was a professor at the University of Iowa Law School, so they spent one half of the year in Cedar Rapids and one half of the year in London when Parliament was in session.

Richard loved Iowa history, and the Morains and Actons became good friends. When Richard heard we were coming to London, he insisted that we be his guests at the House of Lords. "Well," we said, "okay, but just this once." And then we sat through a session in the balcony of the House of Lords, and it was fantastic—the ritual, the tradition, the architecture.

Afterward, Richard had a thirty-minute committee meeting, so he found a babysitter to take care of us, and he recruited an archivist. He told the archivist, "Find something that will interest Americans," as if we hadn't been gawking for the last two and a half hours. So he led us up the Victoria Tower and through hallways and ramps and back alleys as far as we knew into a big storage room that was filled with racks and shelves and cabinets, stuffed to the gills with loose rolls that looked like wrapping paper or wallpaper or something.

The young man handed Vikki a scroll, and it was tied with a red ribbon or red tape. (Did you ever wonder where the phrase "government red tape" comes from? It's that little tape they tie around these scrolls.) Vikki asked if she was supposed to untie the ribbon, and he nodded. And, so she did. She unrolled the Stamp Act of 1765—the original. It had King George III's personal signature in the upper righthand corner. History may remember him as "Mad King George," but he had very neat, concise penmanship.

That stamp act, the document Vikki was holding, was the first direct tax imposed by the British Parliament on its American colonies, and it was in protest of this act that American colonists began to formulate theories of their rights to govern themselves through their elected leaders. Only eleven years after King George III neatly signed his name in the upper corner, the American colonies challenged the belief, thousands of years old, that monarchies and aristocracies were ordained by God to rule. Instead, the colonies dared to declare that all men are created equal. Twenty-three years after the passage of the Stamp Act the American people elected their first president and began the American experiment in self-government. And it was the original copy. The act had started it all off. That's what Vikki was holding.

I have heard about the Stamp Act. I have read about the Stamp Act. I have taught about the Stamp Act. You can call it up on the Internet and read it. But the combination of the authentic thing and its story, holding the act itself and understanding the train of events that this very document put into motion, that was a moving experience I will never forget.

## Historical Processes

What about this category called historical processes? What's that?

At Living History Farms one of the most successful educational programs is the live-in, when school classes come out and spend a day at the 1850 pioneer cabin or the 1900 farmhouse going through the daily routines of the era. Of course, there is cooking. They make their own noon meal. In fact, some members of the group spend much of the morning getting it ready, and most kids love it. They sit around the kitchen table and make their own

noodles, beef stew, rolls, or cookies. They peel apples and cook them down to applesauce.

*Ooo! This is neat, Mrs. Johnson! I wish we got to do this every day.*

At that point in the conversation, the good Farms interpreter might casually drop this little fact (which, by the way, Dorothy Schwieder shared with me when we were officemates): a study in 1895 by the Quaker Oats Company found that at the time of the study the average farm wife was spending five hours a day in meal preparation and clean up. The Farms staff would ask the school kids while they were peeling potatoes, "How would your life be different if you had to spend five hours a day getting meals? What couldn't you do that you now do if you had to spend five hours a day in the kitchen?" Give that one some thought yourselves.

When I was at the State Historical Society and working with Jack Lufkin, we opened an exhibit with one hundred inventions of the twentieth century called "A Few of Our Favorite Things." There were items that everyone would think about: automobiles, radios, TVs, computers. There was a microwave oven and examples of processed foods that helped reduce the time we spend in the kitchen, but the most intriguing items were the ones that had become such a familiar part of our landscape that we take them for granted. But imagine life without them: aspirin tablets (People had headaches before the invention of aspirin. What did they do?); cellophane tape; zippers; Jell-O; standardized tests. How about the polio vaccine?

The purpose of the exhibit was not to focus on these specific one hundred items but to get visitors thinking about the incredible impact that technology has had on the daily lives of Iowa families over the past one hundred years. When you look at the display with these items, often your first response is, "Imagine life without." Imagine life without tennis shoes or t-shirts. Imagine life without Roto-Rooter, invented in Des Moines, Iowa. You might discover you don't want to think too long about life without Roto-Rooter.

It's as though we look back at the past in pity, picturing a family in 1900 sitting around their living room after supper lamenting the fact that *I Love Lucy* won't come on for fifty-four

years. We tend to think of their lives in terms of what we have, but they lacked. Imagine life without.[5]

History illuminates not only our past, but it can help us imagine our future. You take for granted iTunes, GPS, and Bluetooth, but don't get smug and think we're the end of the process. Jump ahead one hundred years. What will your great-grandchildren pity us for living without? What will be commonplace routines in daily life one hundred years from now that we haven't even started to think about? It is good for us to stretch our imaginations occasionally and look back at where we have been to provoke us into thinking a little about where we are going. People, things and routines are some essential components of our past.

**Historical Places**

Historical places, a third factor, are also important. I want to share a personal experience that I had that was directly inspired by the place where it occurred and its story. I know of no better example of the power of the combination of place and story.

On a tour of Northeast Iowa evaluating tourism possibilities, our group found ourselves standing in the farmyard of the birthplace of Norman Borlaug. Borlaug is sometimes called the Father of the Green Revolution for his work in increasing food production in the Third World.

The farm is near Cresco, Iowa, in Howard County, about fifteen miles south of the Minnesota border. I assure you, the Borlaug Homestead is never going to compete with the Grand Canyon or EPCOT Center as a tourist destination. There is nothing unusual about the physical appearance of the farmstead itself. The home is a big, square white farmhouse in a neighborhood of big square white farmhouses built by hardworking Norwegian families. Nearby was the plain white rural schoolhouse that Borlaug attended, and there was nothing special about it either. But as I

5. During the question and answer period following this talk, Morain also encouraged the audience to consider things that previous generations may have enjoyed that are often missing from modern life, including work schedules that coincide with daylight and more-frequent interactions with multiple generations of family.

was standing there, all of the sudden the pieces came together. The bones started to rattle, and I realized three incredible connections that link that spot back into Iowa history. So let me start at the early end of that chain of events and work forward.

CONNECTION #1. The curtain opens shortly after the Civil War on the campus of Iowa State College in Ames in what is now the Farm House Museum. Early Iowa State agriculture professors lived there so they could be close to the farm operation that provided hands-on experience for ag students. One professor, Joseph Budd, lived there with his family, which included a little girl named Etta May.

Etta grew up wanting to study art, but since Iowa State had no art classes, she went east to school and returned to the Midwest to teach at Simpson College in Indianola. There in her painting studio, she made a connection with a young black man who had been born into slavery in Missouri and had walked the thirty miles to Indianola from Winterset on the possibility that the Methodist college might be willing to admit a student of his race. Simpson did, and the young man enrolled in Etta Budd's art courses. He loved to paint, and he especially liked to paint still life studies of plants and flowers. As a matter of fact, he also was a good gardener of those plants and flowers, and Etta Budd helped him support himself doing gardening jobs for Indianola families.

The young man's name was George Washington Carver, and he and Etta Budd became good friends. As his teacher, Budd took Carver aside one day and gave him the tough-love message that he needed to think about something other than art as a career. He was okay, Budd told him, but he was never going to support himself or a family with his paintings. She encouraged him to think about studying plants and offered to go with him to enroll at Iowa State where her father taught. He considered it and agreed.

When Budd returned later to visit him on the Ames campus, she found that he was eating in the school food service, but because his skin was dark, he was eating his meals in the kitchen rather than with other students. This was unacceptable to Etta Budd, so she brought him into the dining room with the white students and ate her meals with him until he became a familiar figure at mealtime and accepted by his classmates.

Carver became a brilliant biology student, went on to graduate work at Iowa State, and upon graduation was offered a position on the faculty—the first black teacher that Iowa State had ever hired. He later took a teaching and research job at the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama where he developed crops and farming practices that greatly improved the lives of impoverished black farmers across the South.

CONNECTION #2. While Carver was a teacher at Iowa State, he took long walks into the surrounding fields studying and gathering plants for research and for his classrooms. On some of these walks, he took along a little friend—a six-year-old boy who was the son of a dairy science professor. Carver shared his love of plants with that boy, and the boy responded enthusiastically. At the age of eleven, that boy began doing his own experiments with different varieties of corn.

That boy's name was Henry A. Wallace. As an adult, Wallace continued his fascination with corn breeding, developed some of the first hybrid varieties, and publicized his findings to farmers in his family's popular journal, *Wallaces' Farmer Magazine*. He founded Pioneer Hi-Bred Seed Corn Company and watched hybrid seed double and then nearly triple per acre yields of midwestern cornfields.

In 1933, in the worst years of the Great Depression, President Franklin D. Roosevelt appointed Henry A. Wallace to be Secretary of Agriculture, a post Wallace held for eight years. In 1940, Roosevelt picked Wallace as Vice President, where Wallace served during World War II.

CONNECTION #3. Following the grueling presidential campaign of 1940, Wallace made a trip to Mexico to study corn production. Corn was the staple in the diet of most Mexican families, but the yields were so much lower than on American farms, especially Iowa farms using hybrid varieties, that most Mexican farm families lived barely above the subsistence level. It was Wallace's idea to create agriculture experiment stations like those operated by Iowa State in order to develop improved corn varieties adapted to local Mexican growing conditions. On his return to the US, he proposed the idea to the Rockefeller Foundation.

Wallace's proposal for a system of experiment stations in developing nations fell on fertile ground.

Let me here tell the tale as it is related in the Wallace biography by former Iowa Senator John Culver and the *Des Moines Register* reporter John Hyde:

> The Rockefeller Foundation "had begun to recognize that its world-wide public health programs, which had contributed effectively to controlling debilitating diseases, such as hookworm, yellow fever, and malaria might be saving people from disease only to subject them to slow starvation resulting from inadequate diets."
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> In short order, [the foundation] appointed a small "survey commission" to explore what might be done in Mexico. The result was the establishment of an agricultural experiment station in Mexico, the first in a worldwide series of research stations established by the Rockefeller and Ford foundations, that led to vast food production increases in Latin America, India, the Philippines and other developing nations across the globe.
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> "By 1948 . . . Mexico, for the first time since the Revolution of 1910, had no need to import food. Twenty years after the beginning of the program corn production in Mexico had tripled and wheat production had increased five-fold. In spite of an unprecedented increase in population, the per capita food supply was greater in 1963 than it had been in 1943."
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> One of the first scientists to join the Rockefeller station in Mexico, a young Iowa agronomist named Norman Borlaug, would win the Nobel Peace Prize in 1970 for his development of high-yielding wheat. The work of Borlaug and others in expanding yields of corn, wheat and rice averted worldwide famine and saved an estimated 1 billion lives over the next half century.[6]

One billion lives! 1970 was the first year the Peace Prize had ever gone to someone in agriculture. There is no Nobel Prize for

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6. John Culver and John Hyde, *American Dreamer: A Life of Henry A. Wallace* (New York, 2000), 251. Quotations cited within excerpt come from Paul Mangelsdorf, "Henry Agard Wallace (1888–1965)," *Year Book of the American Philosophical Society*, 1966, 195.

agriculture or food production as there is in Chemistry, Physics or Literature. Some on the committee were determined to honor Borlaug, but the Peace Prize seemed to be the only way. So, the Nobel Peace Prize it was.

I WAS STANDING in the yard behind the Borlaug house when the three connections came together—Etta Budd to Carver; Carver to Wallace; Wallace to Borlaug. The players were all Iowans! What a surprise! Don't we know that important things happen somewhere else, that what happens locally is not really significant in the grand scheme of things? I became aware again of the power of place to inspire if you know its history—this place where a little boy grew up, went to school, learned to read, and watched how things grow.

No one told Etta Budd that it was her job to feed a billion people, but in acting to end a stupid and demeaning practice that belittled her student and her friend, she helped to set in motion a sequence of events that saved from starvation one out of every five people then on the face of the Earth.

In our own quiet way, Iowa does its own thing. We feed the world.

It is all together appropriate that the World Food Prize is in Iowa. We should have the World Computer Prize—the machine that has revolutionized the world forever. We gave it birth.[7] It belonged to us first. It was not invented somewhere else.

## History Breathes the Breath

It is history that breathes the breath into the relics of our past and makes them live again in us. It is not a unit of social studies on transportation or memorization of our state bird, state tree, and state flower. It is history—the relationship Iowans have to events over time in this place. It is history that provides the flesh to connect people and things and routines and places to each other and

7. From 1937–42, Iowa State physics and mathematics professor John Vincent Atanasoff and physics graduate student Clifford Berry developed the world's first electronic digital computer. For more on Atanasoff and the invention of the computer, see Jane Smiley, *The Man Who Invented the Computer: The Biography of John Vincent Atanasoff, Digital Pioneer* (New York, 2010).

breathes life into them. It is history that makes their accomplishments our heritage and admonishes us that we too play a role in the ongoing story.

I have lived among Iowans, past and present. I have met them on the street and in the classroom, at the State Fair and selling their pies on RAGBRAI. I have observed them in person and from afar in history journals, newspapers, and microfilm. I have watched them buy their first Model Ts, build their one-room schools, and adjust the knobs on their first television sets—their triumphs and tragedies, but most of all, the ordinary routines of their daily lives.

A French philosopher tells us that the goal in life is not to set out to do extraordinary things but to do ordinary things with an awareness of their extraordinary significance.[8] Ordinary Iowans, past and present, if we take the time to listen, will teach us the compassion of community, the significance of civility, and the worth of work. Yes, it is important to tell the stories that breathe breath into the dry bones of our past and make them live again—the stories of ordinary Iowans, ordinary people doing ordinary things of extraordinary significance.

Amen.

8. This references a quotation popularly attributed to French philosopher and Jesuit priest, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. The quotation is most commonly translated: "Do not forget that the value and interest of life is not so much to do conspicuous things . . . as to do ordinary things with the perception of their enormous value."