

# Iowa and the Importance of State and Local History

PAMELA RINEY-KEHRBERG

WHEN HISTORIAN SARA EGGE began to research woman suffrage in the rural Midwest, she discovered an interesting phenomenon. The suffrage campaign in Iowa had relied heavily on pamphlet literature to educate and inspire rural and small town women, but smaller historical societies had archived few of the pamphlets; there were almost none in their collections. There was, however, plenty of evidence that this type of propaganda was important to the suffrage campaign in Iowa. In 1915, Flora Dunlap, president of the Iowa Equal Suffrage Association, had declared her intent that "Iowa should be strewn knee deep with literature." Suffragists in Iowa relied on the printing prowess of the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) as well as its own local resources to obtain a vast array of pamphlet material, ranging from pieces with generic titles, such as "Votes for Women," to much more specific items, such as a pamphlet quoting pro-suffrage remarks by Iowa Catholic Bishop Austin Dowling. Pamphlets in hand, suffragists fanned out across rural Iowa, shedding literature as they went.<sup>1</sup>

Copies of these documents were curiously absent in local historical societies. Suffragists had saved two boxes of the pamphlets, and they resided in the collections of the State Historical Society of Iowa. At local historical societies, however, the pamphlet literature, which rural communities had apparently absorbed in bulk,

---

1. Sara Egge, "'Strewn Knee Deep in Literature': A Material Analysis of Print Propaganda and Woman Suffrage," *Agricultural History* 88 (Fall 2014), 601–02.

was nowhere to be found. This curious situation led Egge to contemplate the meaning of printed propaganda in the rural reaches of the Midwest. In urban communities, the printed word seemed to be the icing on the cake. Suffragists, for the most part, relied on their physical presence to get their message to voters. They went door to door, spoke on street corners, and led marches. These women depended on the spoken word, and pamphlets were an afterthought. In rural communities, however, suffragists were few and far between, and the roads connecting them to potential voters were long and muddy. In order to get their message out, they relied first and foremost on the written word. Only a few people might be able to attend a suffrage rally, but they could pick up literature on their way out the door, and distribute it to friends and family who had been unable to attend. As Egge described it, suffragists "expected propaganda to play a primary, not supplementary, role in campaign strategies." The literature would go where the women could not. At the end of the day, after all of the speeches were over, there was no literature from small, rural campaigns left to save. The suffragists had distributed it all to a public either eager to hear their message or too polite to refuse a flyer.<sup>2</sup>

In her search for sources, Egge had discovered something important. The suffrage story as told from the perspective of Iowa and the Midwest was different. To embark on a study of rural Iowans and suffrage was to discover a story unlike that told at the national level. Women in Iowa were involved in a struggle for suffrage, just as women throughout the United States were, but how that struggle played out was profoundly local. Local conditions shaped strategies, messages, and success, or the lack of it, in ways that few historians had previously acknowledged. In the history of any movement and any moment, there is both the national story and the local story. There was how people experienced and saw events from centers of power, and there was the experience of average, ordinary individuals, living at a distance, both literally and figuratively, from that center. And even among people living a few miles down the road from each other,

---

2. Egge, "Strewn Knee Deep in Literature," 593.

barely across state borders, the story might have been different still. The absence of pamphlet material at local historical societies revealed an important fact: history, as experienced at the local and state levels, could diverge significantly from the national story.<sup>3</sup>

The purpose of this essay is to examine some of the ways in which historians have told the Iowa story, in order to understand the continuing salience of state and local history. It is often easier to look at the history of a nation from the top down, privileging how a conflict or a problem was resolved from above, or experienced by political, social, or economic elites. That perspective smooths out some of the wrinkles and makes it easier to speak in generalities.<sup>4</sup> When writing a lecture, formulating a speech, or developing the script for a documentary, wrinkles create unwanted complications and diversions. They can distract from the ability to reach conclusions. After all, if everyone has their own story, it is more difficult to write *the* story. It is far easier to forget the wrinkles, and focus on a broader, simpler account of the past. Those generalities, however, may distort the view of the way events played out in individual states. And those generalities may say nothing at all about how individuals experienced events in their own hometowns. Iowa's story is not the nation's story, but it is a part of that story, and how events played out in Clay County, or Buxton, or Des Moines, might be quite different, or quite similar, to how they played out elsewhere. Iowa's story

---

3. Of course, I am not the only historian to have discovered that important and different stories can be found at the local level. Lizabeth Cohen, for example, carefully documented the differences in adoption of mass culture between the middle class and the working class in 1920s Chicago, completely rewriting the script about the adoption of popular culture in that era. See Lizabeth Cohen, "Encountering Mass Culture at the Grassroots: The Experience of Chicago Workers in the 1920s," *American Quarterly* 41 (March 1989), 6–33.

4. Although she had 932 pages with which to tell the tale, Jill Lepore's *These Truths: A History of the United States* smoothed out many of the wrinkles provided by state and local history. Along the same lines, Ellen DuBois's 2020 book, *Suffrage: Women's Long Battle for the Vote*, focuses largely on leaders at the national level, which means Iowa's only mentions are in relation to the activities of Carrie Chapman Catt. Her "Additional Reading" section does not cite Sara Egge's work, although it is the most recent work on woman suffrage in the Midwest and the only book to grapple thoroughly with rural women. See Jill Lepore, *These Truths: A History of the United States* (New York, 2018), and Ellen Carol DuBois, *Suffrage: Women's Long Battle for the Vote* (New York, 2020).

reminds its readers of the importance of researching and writing about the local.

IT WAS NOT JUST THE ODD TRAIL of evidence that made the story of the fight over woman suffrage in rural Iowa worth exploring. Examining how the fight over suffrage played out in Iowa allows us to understand the ways in which a national struggle could be waged in very specific ways at the local level. Looking at a movement such as suffrage from the bottom up demonstrates how the concerns of rural Iowans shaped activists' message and their methods, demonstrating that there is no single story of how women achieved the vote. The story told at the state level is both rich and complicated.

Sara Egge examined the movement in Iowa, South Dakota, and Minnesota in her book, *Woman Suffrage and Citizenship in the Midwest, 1870–1920*. In every place, the debate over woman suffrage looked different. Prior to the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, women in every state campaigned for full voting rights—and in every place, suffragists attempted to mold their actions to local conditions. Midwestern organizing on behalf of woman suffrage had its own character. The push for votes for women occurred in small communities as well as large ones, and grew out of the commitments that women made to being active and engaged in the places in which they lived. As Egge noted, “Midwesterners defined themselves primarily as members of local communities, of small towns and villages. In doing so, they established belonging as an essential midwestern value.” Part of belonging was civic engagement and citizenship, but “they never agreed on what citizenship meant or how it should appear.”<sup>5</sup> This left an opening for women to become central figures in community development. Iowa’s small town women participated actively in their churches, supported their schools, and contributed to charitable causes. They engaged in various measures to improve the places in which they lived. They also involved themselves in political causes such as the fight over

---

5. Sara Egge, *Woman Suffrage and Citizenship in the Midwest, 1870–1920* (Iowa City, 2018), 23.

temperance through their participation in the Women's Christian Temperance Union. Over time, some came to believe that this work fitted them for what many at the time considered a more radical role, that of voting citizen of the United States.

During Iowa's 1916 campaign for woman suffrage, Mary Cory, the leader of Clay County's pro suffrage efforts and an active member of the women's club in Spencer, explained what achieving the vote meant to her. She had not embraced the issue immediately, but had become a recruit over time. Supporting woman suffrage had grown from her work as the chair of the Civics and Health Committee of the Spencer Women's Club. As the leader of that committee, a few of her efforts had included the push to register births and to provide sanitary garbage removal. Achieving the right to vote would mean achieving the ability to keep "the home pure, sanitary, and morally clean, a fit place to rear children to become citizens of our great republic."<sup>6</sup> She believed she owed that much to her family and to her community.

The push for suffrage frustrated activists in Iowa. When a 1916 vote on the issue loomed, campaigners in the state moved to educate women in Iowa's rural areas. In order to win, they would have to convince the state's agricultural communities. In Spencer, Mary Cory and her women's club swung into action, taking the suffrage message throughout the county. They spread the word to other women's organizations, the community's churches, and the county's back roads, as they used automobiles to campaign in the rural areas outside of the county seat. While the work paid off in Clay County and the suffrage measure passed, it failed in the state as a whole. It was a bitter defeat. A number of issues complicated the voting. Some conflated voting for woman suffrage with voting for prohibition, which turned them against the measure. Farmers, afraid of the higher taxes that might come with reform, sometimes voted against the issue. German-Americans, who were often conservative on the issue of woman suffrage, also appeared to have cast their votes against the measure. Iowa's women would only get the vote with the Nineteenth Amendment.<sup>7</sup>

---

6. Mary Cory, as quoted in Egge, *Woman Suffrage*, 116.

7. Egge, *Woman Suffrage*, 135–46.

By digging deeply in the record, Egge showed that while suffrage could be a winning issue in Clay County, it could still be a losing proposition in Iowa as a whole. Every place was different, and campaigns of persuasion succeeded and failed based on the ability of suffragists to understand and respond to very particular conditions. As Egge wrote, "Locality played a profound role in the way people experienced the suffrage issue. In the Midwest, settlement patterns created diverse religious, political, and cultural contexts, making community the prism through which people understood and interacted with the cause. It was community that made people citizens, just as it was the community that shaped outcomes of woman suffrage."<sup>8</sup> In an era of deeply rutted roads and poor communications, getting out the message to rural areas could be daunting, and if suffrage was going to win in the state, barriers to communication would have to be overcome. Understanding local values was also essential to the effort, and bridging the gap between long-held traditions and this new suffrage message required careful thought and great persistence. It was an effort that could easily fail. Mary Cory's message about suffrage as "political housekeeping" was common to the women's movement at the national level; it had resonance in many places and among different groups of women. The extra attention Iowa's suffragists paid to farmers' worries about taxation or soothing the concerns of German Catholics was far more local, and rural organizers were relatively unsuccessful in overcoming those particular barriers.

THERE ARE OTHER PLACES in which readers can explore the uniqueness of Iowa history, but this time in the case of a success rather than a failure. The study of Iowa's coal mining industry revealed a remarkable element of the state's past—the contours of life in a company town named Buxton. Buxton's story illustrates yet another strength of state and local history; it can sometimes, in specific cases, illustrate that what happened in the larger society did not have to be. Although these years saw the hardening of Jim Crow and an explosion of lynching, the experiences of African Americans in a small place in rural Monroe County told a different

---

8. Egge, *Woman Suffrage*, 184.

tale. In the early twentieth century, Buxton may have been one of the most unique towns in Iowa, or even in the U.S. What made Buxton unique was the shape of race relations in the town. Authors Dorothy Schwieder, Joseph Hraba, and Elmer Schwieder discovered a place quite unlike others at the time. They wrote:

There blacks and whites worked side by side in local coal mines and lived side by side in company housing with little racial strife. Local public institutions, including schools, were integrated. Former Buxton residents, both black and white, have stated that the Consolidation Coal Company showed no favoritism to white workers in the areas of jobs, wages, or housing. Buxton also contained many black professionals and business people, who occupied important economic and social positions. In short, there was little racial stratification, segregation, or strife in Buxton.<sup>9</sup>

At a time when segregation, discrimination, and Jim Crow dominated the lives of African Americans throughout the United States, there appears to have been harmony in Buxton. This was true upon the community's 1900 creation as a majority African American town, and remained true as the town dwindled and then died, finally expiring around 1920.

The authors of *Buxton: A Black Utopia in the Heartland* sought to discover what made this place so different. Part of the difference was that the owners of the Consolidation Coal Company, led by Ben Buxton, wanted this community to be different. Ben Buxton encouraged anyone with intolerant attitudes, or who engaged in racist behavior, to leave his employ.<sup>10</sup> The town he created was unusual in other ways as well. It was a planned company town, far different and far more comfortable than many company towns. Consolidation assigned housing to miners' families on a first come, first served basis. Company housing consisted of five- and six-room houses, placed on large lots where residents could raise gardens, tend fruit trees, and keep milk cows and chickens. Relative to most dwellings occupied by working-class families,

---

9. Dorothy Schwieder, Joseph Hraba, and Elmer Schwieder, *Buxton: A Black Utopia in the Heartland, an Expanded Edition* (Iowa City, 2003), 6

10. Schwieder, Hraba, and Schwieder, 103.

they were large and comfortable. The company also permitted workers to lease larger plots, from one to twenty acres, and to engage in small scale agriculture. Unlike many coal companies, Consolidation allowed its workers to be somewhat economically independent. Additionally, the company did not force workers to buy from its store, and provided easy credit, whether or not families were making a majority of their purchases there.<sup>11</sup>

African American miners found working conditions that were as good as those provided by any coal company. Consolidation did not discriminate in terms of wages or work assignments. Employees at the mine were able to earn the kind of money "that provided their families with a comfortable standard of living." There was no racial earnings differential, as the company had a policy of providing equal pay for equal work. On the other hand, the superintendent at the mine was always a native-born, white male, as were Consolidation's company personnel, something that would have been common to most large industrial concerns in the U.S. at that time. Nevertheless, the authors commented that "whatever racism or ethnocentrism might have been present in Buxton was not made manifest in discrimination at work."<sup>12</sup>

Nor was discrimination visible in community life. The schools in Buxton proper were integrated racially, with both African American and white students and teachers. There was a plethora of African American churches that "existed in Buxton because black residents wanted them, not because blacks had been shut out of white churches." When the Buxton YMCA showed movies, there was integrated seating, but "occasional voluntary segregation." That same self-imposed separation might be visible at dances and club meetings. Nonetheless, the community's ballpark was much like the community's housing, available on a "first come, first served basis, and no black and white sections existed in the stands."<sup>13</sup> The authors commented that there was no publicly drawn color line in Buxton, but there could be a privately drawn line: "racial segregation was a private matter, done in private life,

---

11. Schwieder, Hraba, and Schwieder, 42, 45, 102, 176-77.

12. Schwieder, Hraba, and Schwieder, 76, 102, 169, 171-72.

13. Schwieder, Hraba, and Schwieder, 179-81.

more by some than others." Nevertheless, children played across the color line, friendships existed across it, and the occasional interracial marriage occurred.<sup>14</sup> For those whites who wanted to live in a less integrated environment, a large contingent of Swedish miners also worked for Consolidation, and they segregated themselves into two "Swede towns" at the edges of Buxton.<sup>15</sup> The situation in Buxton proper was unusual enough that throughout the community's existence, the *Bystander*, Iowa's most important African American newspaper, regularly and approvingly reported on life in the community and its benefits for the African American families lucky enough to find employment with Consolidation.

What made Buxton a "utopia" was steady, well-paying jobs in the mine, the presence of an African American professional class, schools that did not segregate their students, decent and equal housing, and vibrant community life. In other words, what made Buxton a "virtual oasis in the midst of an otherwise hostile world" was access to a way of life that would have been unremarkable for large numbers of white, native born citizens.<sup>16</sup> That African American residents enjoyed this level of comfort was remarkable indeed, yet what happened in Buxton should not be mistaken for the experiences of African Americans in other locations in Iowa. At the same time African Americans were taking part in the full range of community life in Buxton, restaurants in Albia, just ten miles down the road, were denying service to them. In oral histories collected in the 1980s, Buxton's former residents revealed that when the mine closed and families moved to towns such as Cedar Rapids, Waterloo, Des Moines, or Chicago, there was little of the kind of equality and comfort that they had previously experienced.<sup>17</sup> While in the nineteen-teens whites and African Americans were sitting side by side at the movies and the ballpark in Buxton, in the post-World War II era African Americans were having to sit in at drugstore fountains in Des Moines,

---

14. Schwieder, Hraba, and Schwieder, 181–82.

15. Schwieder, Hraba, and Schwieder, 162.

16. Schwieder, Hraba, and Schwieder, viii.

17. Schwieder, Hraba, and Schwieder, viii–ix, 180.

in hopes of someday being served.<sup>18</sup> While children in Buxton's schools in 1910 partook of an integrated education, those in Waterloo in the late 1960s still looked for educational equality regardless of race.<sup>19</sup> Had more of the United States, and more of Iowa, been like Buxton, the lives of the nation's and the state's African Americans would have been far less daunting. The story of Buxton is a story of what could have been, and what should have been.

CIVIL RIGHTS STORIES are important to state and local history because these struggles are so deeply influenced by conditions at the grassroots. Because Consolidation cultivated those grassroots in Buxton, that community's story about civil rights was far different than the story in the rest of Iowa, or in the nation, for that matter. Other types of civil rights issues have also led to idiosyncratic stories, such as that surrounding marriage equality. The story of marriage equality in Iowa illustrates yet another great strength of state and local history; it has the capacity to surprise readers with stories that seem unlikely—or even shocking—to those looking in from the outside. The battle over marriage equality had to be fought close to home, because until the enactment of the federal Defense of Marriage Act in 1996, family law was entirely state law: "Marriage and its dissolution, support and inheritance rights, legitimation, adoption and custody are all matters of state law."<sup>20</sup> State power over family law meant that there were vast differences between how citizens of various U.S. states achieved the right to enter into same-sex unions before the U.S. Supreme Court took up the issue. On June 26, 2015, the U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Obergefell v. Hodges* took matters out of the hands of the states and declared state bans on same-sex marriages to be unconstitutional. Prior to the decision, however, thirty-six states already allowed some sort of marriage equality,

---

18. See Noah Lawrence, "'Since it is my right, I would like to have it': Edna Griffin and the Katz Drugstore Desegregation Movement," *Annals of Iowa* 67 (2008), 298–330.

19. See Kathryn A. Schumaker, "The Politics of Youth: Civil Rights Reform in the Waterloo Public Schools," *Annals of Iowa* 72 (2013), 353–85.

20. Peter Hay, "Recognition of Same-Sex Legal Relationships in the United States," *American Journal of Comparative Law* 54 (Fall 2006), 258.

achieved through state court decisions, federal court decisions, and legislative action. Residents of each of those thirty-six states walked a different path to those results.

Iowa, of course, had its own history with marriage equality, and to the surprise of many, “became just the third state—after Massachusetts and Connecticut—to recognize that all men and women were equal and thus could marry whomever they chose.”<sup>21</sup> Tom Witosky and Marc Hansen, the authors of *Equal Before the Law: How Iowa Led Americans to Marriage Equality*, described the many ways in which Iowans participated in the agitation for change in the state’s marriage laws. The Iowa legislature passed its own version of the Defense of Marriage Act in 1998, but this legislative decision to define marriage as a relationship existing between one man and one woman did not mean that all Iowans agreed. In 2003, for example, a district court judge in Iowa granted a divorce to a lesbian couple, even though the state did not recognize their union, which had been formalized in Vermont.<sup>22</sup> Still, gay and lesbian couples faced difficult questions about whether or not they would be able to both act as their children’s parents, or whether or not authorities would allow them to speak and act as next-of-kin for their partners. They faced concerns about insurance benefits and wills unknown to those in traditional heterosexual unions.

In November and December of 2005, six same-sex couples went to the Polk County Recorder’s office and applied for marriage licenses, knowing that they would be unsuccessful, but also knowing that they needed to be rejected in order to take legal action against state law.<sup>23</sup> The challenges and the questioning resulted in the legal case *Varnum v. Brien*, filed on behalf of six same-sex couples, three of whom were raising children. The individuals bringing the case represented “a carefully chosen ensemble of productive citizens with everyday lives and dreams who wanted only what society offered heterosexual couples.”<sup>24</sup> *Varnum*

---

21. Michael Gartner, “Foreword,” in Tom Witosky and Marc Hansen, *Equal Before the Law: How Iowa Led Americans to Marriage Equality* (Iowa City, 2015), xi.

22. Witosky and Hansen, 15, 38–42.

23. Witosky and Hansen, 65.

24. Witosky and Hansen, 91–92.

*v. Brien* began its long path through the Iowa court system, ultimately coming before the state's supreme court.

In 2009, the Iowa Supreme Court ruled in favor of couples wishing to enter into same-sex unions. The court ruled unanimously that sexual orientation did not deprive individuals of equal protection under the law; that a ban on same-sex unions did not forward any vital government objective; and that the ruling "wasn't about anyone's religious views as much as it was about preventing government from endorsing a religious belief and about protecting the freedom of religious organizations to define marriage as they choose."<sup>25</sup> Although the lawyers for the couples were convinced that they had a strong case, maybe even a "slam dunk," their success could not help but surprise people looking in from the outside. The case was also surprising to those who did not have a longer view of Iowa's Supreme Court. In the nineteenth century, the court had rejected arguments of "separate but equal" both in education and public accommodations that had become common and accepted in other legal circles in the U.S. Taking a progressive view of civil rights was not unusual in the context of Iowa's judicial history.<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, Witosky and Hansen described the "shock waves" emanating from the *Varnum* decision. People across the U.S. reacted with surprise that this could happen in Iowa, in the heart of the country. The case also inspired action. Within the first five years of the decision, approximately six thousand same-sex marriages occurred in the state.<sup>27</sup> Couples wanting to marry, but unable to do so in their home states, travelled to Iowa to be wed. This raised questions in other states about whether or not marriages made in Iowa would be recognized elsewhere and resulted in further court cases. When other states' courts addressed the issue prior to the *Obergefell* decision, the vast majority would cite *Varnum*. The case also initially inspired some anger and calls for impeachment of Iowa Supreme Court justices. Some of the justices involved lost retention elections, while Mark Cady, who wrote the decision, retained his seat

---

25. Witosky and Hansen, 3.

26. See Chapter 3, "Near the Truth," in Witosky and Hansen, 18–37.

27. "Near the Truth," in Witosky and Hansen, 18–37.

and became Chief Justice, a post he held until his death in 2019. He handily won a retention election in 2016.<sup>28</sup> In the years between the decision and that vote, the majority of Iowans had evidently come to accept his role in the case, even if some remained in staunch opposition to the idea of marriage equality. Iowa had written a chapter in U.S. civil rights history that few could have anticipated and that left many across the country wondering just how well they knew the state. Iowa's history, in this case, had the capacity to surprise.

ONLY VERY RARELY does the way in which Iowa experienced a national event become a dominant part of the national understanding of that moment, but that has been the case with the Farm Crisis of the 1980s. Although the Farm Crisis was national in scope, the story of the economic disaster in Iowa has become the way in which people tend to perceive those years. In a somewhat problematic way, state history has become a stand-in for a larger and more nuanced picture. The development of this vision of the 1980s is relatively easy to track. The Iowa narrative made its way into the public consciousness in many different forms. Hollywood perpetuated the story of the Farm Crisis as peculiarly Iowan by way of the movie, "Country." Although a photograph taken in Ohio inspired actor and producer Jessica Lange to make a film about troubles on the farm, she decided to place her movie in Iowa. She gathered the stories that informed the picture from families, and particularly women, in rural Iowa, and asked the Iowa-based staff of Rural America to provide necessary context. Lange filmed "Country" in the state, near Dunkerton. Released in 1984, the movie provided the Iowa story of the Farm Crisis to a national audience. The movie struck a chord with Iowans as well. Educational and advocacy groups would use the movie regularly as a way to start conversations about hard times on the farm.<sup>29</sup>

---

28. "Notable Rulings and Moments for Mark Cady," *Des Moines Register*, 11/17/2019.

29. Robert Lindsey, "For Jessica Lange, 'Country' was an exercise in perseverance," *New York Times*, 9/16/1984; Sara Wyant-McNutt, "'Hollywood' listens to farm women," *Wallaces' Farmer*, 4/9/1983, 56; David Ostendorf, interview with Pamela Riney-Kehrberg, 10/9/2019; News release, "Country," n.d., 1983, PrairieFire Collection, MS 313, Publications and news releases 1983, Special

“Country” was not the only media portrayal of Iowa’s struggling farmers that earned a national audience. Photographer David Peterson from the *Des Moines Register* won the Pulitzer Prize for his pictures of distressed Iowa farmers. For many, those pictures came to represent the crisis. One of the worst moments of the Farm Crisis came when Dale Burr, a distressed farmer from Lone Tree, walked into the Hills Bank and Trust and shot banker John Hughes. Burr also killed his wife, a neighbor, and himself. The story became national, covered not just in local papers, but also the *Chicago Tribune* and the *New York Times*. Writer Bruce Brown wrote a true crime book about the event, titled *Lone Tree*. When outlets as diverse as *Ladies’ Home Journal* and PBS’s MacNeil-Lehrer News-hour decided to cover farmer suicides, they turned to an Iowa family, that of Kenneth Meisgeier, who had killed himself after declaring bankruptcy.<sup>30</sup> Pictures and stories of Iowa informed the nation’s understanding of the pain engendered by the Farm Crisis.

A number of the faces of activism and agitation were Iowan as well, from Governor Terry Branstad to the leader of PrairieFire, Dixon Terry. Understandably, Branstad regularly appeared in news outlets such as the *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal* for his ongoing advocacy for Iowa’s farmers. Other attention to Iowa came in 1984, as *Esquire Magazine* featured farmers Dixon and Linda Terry as part of “The Best of the New Generation: men and women under 40 who are changing America.” When a bolt of lightning killed Dixon Terry in 1989, his obituary appeared in the *New York Times*, and political leaders such as Congressman Richard Gephardt and the Reverend Jesse Jackson attended the funeral. The troubles in Iowa had come to represent more than the

---

Collections, Iowa State University, Ames, IA; Mindy McClintock, “Three-phase program initiated; support group formed at WHS,” *Viking Voice*, 11/29/1985, PrairieFire Collection, MS 313, Correspondence and Articles 1986, Special Collections, Iowa State University, Ames, IA.

30. “Winners of Pulitzer Prizes in Journalism, Letters and the Arts,” *New York Times*, 4/17/1987; Ann Marie Lipinski, “A Farming Legacy Wiped Out,” *Chicago Tribune*, 12/11/1985, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-1985-12-11>, accessed 11/21/2019; “4 Dead in Rampage in an Iowa Town,” *New York Times*, 12/10/1985; Bruce Brown, *Lone Tree: A True Story of Murder in America’s Heartland* (New York, 1989); Deborah Bahe, correspondence with the author, 11/15/2019 and 11/17/2019; Joyce Egginton, “Harvest of Tears,” *Ladies’ Home Journal* (August 1985), 50.

heartaches of local farmers; through a multitude of spokespeople, quoted and pictured in a variety of outlets, Iowans appeared to be leading the charge against inaction in the nation's capital.<sup>31</sup>

Several decades of scholarship have tended to tell the same story. The first book about the Farm Crisis appeared as the situation was ongoing, Mark Friedberger's *Shake-Out: Iowa Farm Families in the 1980s*. Other scholarship has been Iowa, or at least Midwest, centered, such as that of sociologists Glen Elder and Rand Conger, who wrote *Children of the Land* and *Families in Troubled Times*, based on research conducted with Iowa farm families. Iowa State University rural sociologist Paul Lasley, along with a team of scholars, wrote *Beyond the Amber Waves of Grain*, a compilation of economic and sociological research about the Farm Crisis in the Midwest, in which Iowa and its experience featured heavily. Minnesota has gotten a bit of its due, as anthropologist Kathryn Marie Dudley authored *Debt and Dispossession: Farm Loss in America's Heartland*, which examined the burden of shame and embarrassment that debt and farm loss imposed on farm families in one Minnesota county. Another book about Iowa in the Farm Crisis is due out in the next few years; however, a couple of young scholars are working on research that is either national in scope or examines the crisis from outside of Iowa.<sup>32</sup>

That Iowa has figured so heavily in Farm Crisis study is not necessarily a bad thing or incorrect; it was a significant era in the state's history. The number of farms in the state declined by nearly a quarter over the course of the downturn. Rural communities lost population, as did the state as a whole. The shape of the state's agricultural economy changed. The proportion of older farmers

---

31. Stephen Wright, "Digging In: Iowa Farmers Linda and Dixon Terry Fight for the Good Earth," *Esquire* (December 1984); Dirk Johnson, "Death is as capricious as life for farm leader," *New York Times*, 6/2/1989.

32. Mark Friedberger, *Shake-Out: Iowa Farm Families in the 1980s* (Lexington, KY, 1989); Glen H. Elder and Rand Conger, *Children of the Land: Adversity and Success in Rural America* (Chicago, 2000); Paul Lasley, F. Larry Leistritz, Linda M. Lobao, and Katherine Meyer, *Beyond the Amber Waves of Grain: An Examination of Social and Economic Restructuring in the Heartland* (Boulder, CO, 1995); Kathryn Marie Dudley, *Debt and Dispossession: Farm Loss in America's Heartland* (Chicago, 2000). The new book, hopefully to be published in 2022 at the latest, is my own scholarship. Keep an eye out for the scholarship of younger scholars, including Rebecca Stoil and Cory Haala.

surged, while the number of beginning farmers fell dramatically. Young farmers were economically vulnerable because of high levels of debt, and many failed. The situation also encouraged young people who might have chosen to be farmers to do something else with their lives. Watching parents struggle and fail discouraged many from continuing in agriculture. As small and medium-sized farming operations collapsed and operators of larger farms bought them out, the size of farms grew, and farmers changed the way they made a living. Men and women on small farms went out to find jobs to supplement their incomes. Farmers with many acres changed their strategies as well. Nearly everyone abandoned the mixed agriculture that had predominated in Iowa at the beginning of the crisis. Prior to the 1980s, most of Iowa's agricultural concerns raised both crops and livestock. By the time the crisis ended, farmers usually raised corn and soybeans, or animals, but not both. What happened in Iowa was an agricultural earthquake.<sup>33</sup>

But the tribulations of Iowa in these crisis years should not become a proxy for the experiences of all of the nation's farmers. There are many more stories to tell. Minnesota is one example. The Minnesota experience with the crisis actually influenced much of what happened in Iowa. The use of penny auctions by farm protest groups appears to have spread from Minnesota southward. Additionally, Minnesota led with various types of legislation on behalf of farmers. Minnesota Governor Rudy Perpich was in regular communication with Governor Branstad, and was pushing legislative action well beyond Branstad's comfort

---

33. Iowa Cooperative Extension, Iowa Community Indicators Program, Average Farm Size in Acres, <https://www.icip.iastate.edu/tables/agriculture/avg-farm-size>, accessed 3/27/2020; F. Larry Leistritz and Katherine Meyer, "Farm Crisis in the Midwest: Trends and Implications," in *Beyond the Amber Waves of Grain*, 216; Linda M. Lobao and Paul Lasley, "Farm Restructuring and Crisis in the Heartland: An Introduction," in *Beyond the Amber Waves of Grain*; U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *1978 Census of Agriculture*, Vol. 1, Pt. 15, Iowa (Washington, D.C., 1981), 3; U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *1982 Census of Agriculture*, Vol. 1, Pt. 15, Iowa (Washington, D.C., 1984), 192; U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *1992 Census of Agriculture*, Vol. 1, Pt. 15, Iowa (Washington, D.C., 1994), 330; U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *1992 Census of Agriculture*, Vol. 1, Pt. 15, Iowa (Washington, D.C., 1994), 8.

zone.<sup>34</sup> Minnesota's farm legislation in response to the troubles of the decade is well worth studying, as it influenced and preceded many similar actions taken in other states, such as Iowa.

Additionally, much of the early activism surrounding the Farm Crisis came from beyond Iowa's borders. The American Agriculture Movement first organized in Colorado in the 1970s, and when organizers came to Iowa, the response was tepid at best. The strong participation of Iowa farmers in the activism of the moment came with time and with the dramatic increase in interest rates in 1979. It is also well worth remembering that Dale Burr's actions were not the only moments of violence during the crisis. A distressed farmer and his son shot bank officials in Minnesota, and in Nebraska, farmer Arthur Kirk died in a shoot-out with a SWAT team at his farm. Individuals from considerably farther afield, such as agricultural radical Tommy Kersey from Georgia, riled up farmers throughout the Midwest and worried sheriffs in Iowa. The anxiety and turmoil surrounding the farm economy in 1980s Iowa reverberated throughout the United States.<sup>35</sup>

Agricultural economists often used a discussion of land values as a way of explaining the depths to which farmers sank in this hard decade. Between the early and mid-1980s, land values fell to disastrous lows. A booming land market pushed values up during the 1970s, and many farmers borrowed against their equity in order to make improvements. Some bought new equipment or new houses, while others used their newfound wealth to buy yet more land. By the end of the decade, the level of agricultural debt throughout the U.S. reached new highs. As long as land prices remained strong, this debt did not have to be a problem. In 1979,

---

34. William C. Pratt, "Using History to Make History? Progressive Farm Organizing During the Farm Revolt of the 1980s," *Annals of Iowa* 55 (1996), 31–33; Paul Klauda, "Advocates Lend Advice, Sympathy to Troubled Farmers," *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, 4/29/1984.

35. Michael Stewart Foley, "Everyone was Pounding on Us': Front Porch Politics and the American Farm Crisis of the 1970s and 1980s," *Journal of Historical Sociology* 28 (March 2015); "Farm Leader Finds Little Strike Support," *Des Moines Register*, 12/7/1977; Andrew Malcolm, "Murder on the Family Farm," *New York Times Magazine*, 3/23/1986, Sec. 6, 40; "Cairo Farmer Dies in Shootout," *Grand Island Daily Independent*, 10/24/1984; William E. Schmidt, "Armed Men Delay Eviction of a Georgia Farmer," *New York Times*, 11/16/1985.

however, the Federal Reserve changed the situation by radically increasing interest rates in order to control inflation. As a result, certificates of deposit, and even savings accounts, provided a higher rate of return than investments in land, and its value plummeted.<sup>36</sup>

Farmers saw the worth of their primary asset dwindle, leaving them unable to qualify for loans. Even worse, many of them found themselves owing more to creditors than their land was worth, making them vulnerable to foreclosure. In Iowa, the situation was dire. In a few short years, farmland lost more than 60 percent of its value. But while the situation was particularly grim for those in Iowa, farmers in other locations, and particularly the Midwest, also suffered significant losses. Farmland in Wisconsin lost 45 percent of its value. Land values in Kansas fell by 45 percent and in Nebraska by 49 percent. Farmers in Illinois, Indiana, and Minnesota saw their land lose more than half its value.<sup>37</sup> As land lost value, the number of farms fell. Between 1978 and 1992, the number of farms in Iowa would shrink by 24 percent. But Iowa was not alone; Minnesota lost 27 percent of its farms, Wisconsin, 24 percent, and Illinois, 29 percent.<sup>38</sup> The hurt of hard times was extensive. Iowa's experience with plummeting land values was about the worst in the U.S., while the state shared high levels of farm loss with many other states. The 1980s were tough years to make a living from the land, and families did not have to live in Iowa in order to suffer the pain of agricultural depression and farm loss. There is much yet to be learned about the history of this difficult decade.

THE TAKE-AWAY from this set of historical movements and moments is that researching and writing the history of a nation

---

36. See Barry J. Barnett, "The U.S. Farm Financial Crisis of the 1980s," *Agricultural History* 74 (Spring 2000), 366–80, and Peter H. Lindert, "Long-Run Trends in American Farmland Values," *Agricultural History* 62 (1988), 45–85.

37. Selected Data on Farm Real Estate, 1950–95, by State, United States Department of Agriculture/Economic Research Service (website), <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/farm-economy/land-use-land-value-tenure/farmland-value/>, accessed 3/19/2021.

38. U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *1992 Census of Agriculture*, Vol. 1, Pt. 15, Iowa (Washington, D.C., 1994), 8–9; Pt. 23, Minnesota, 8–9; Pt. 49, Wisconsin, 8–9; Pt. 13, Illinois, 8–9.

as large and complex as the United States requires careful attention to a plethora of places and issues. The story of one state is not the story of the whole, but equally, a synthetic treatment of the whole leaves many local stories untold. All of this is not to argue against a “national narrative” or against synthesis. While no big picture can be entirely complete, history teachers still need that picture in order to provide their students the scaffolding upon which to hang both the commonalities, and diversions, of state and local histories. Periodization, as imperfect as it may be, still provides historians a framework within which to place their narratives and analysis.

Both the general and the particular remain important. No story of woman suffrage would be complete without acknowledging that rural women experienced the fight for the vote differently than those in urban areas. Geography, culture, and economics made Iowa’s story unique. The state story provides a varied and nuanced picture that can be lost when historians try to find the national narrative. And Buxton’s history can reshape a reader’s understanding of the first twenty years of the twentieth century when they discover that there were places that illustrate that the terrible story of segregation and Jim Crow could, in fact, have been different. The national story that played out in most communities did not have to be. That account, however, alerts its readers to the fact that even within Iowa, there was no single story of race relations. While Buxton was a location where Iowans, both black and white, could live in relative harmony, there were other towns where people lived radically different experiences. The story of the *Varnum* case demonstrates that Iowa could surprise the nation, and take a leading role in a civil rights struggle that many associated with the coasts, rather than the heartland. These moments in Iowa’s history help us to understand that this place is multi-faceted and that viewing it from only one angle provides a distorted or incomplete view.

The Farm Crisis of the 1980s provides yet another lens through which to view Iowa’s history. In this case, the Iowa experience can be incorrectly made a proxy for the national experience of those years. Instead, the Iowa story illustrates that scholars must do more work in other states in order to provide a more complete history of the trials faced by farmers throughout

the Midwest and the United States. Although Iowa's Farm Crisis history, with its intense pain and dramatic moments, does much to illuminate the larger story, it should not be mistaken for representing the whole. The Farm Crisis was a critical decade in Iowa's history—nothing would ever be the same again—but the Iowa story should not be the only narrative of those difficult days. State and local history is made vibrant, and far more interesting, because of the intersections and diversions it provides as the reader explores its relationship to national and international events.

Sociologist Robert Wuthnow is the author of many works, including *Small-Town America: Finding Community, Shaping the Future*. The book includes a very instructive discussion of how local traditions, habits, and sensibilities can make it difficult for outsiders, and even neighbors, to know what small town residents really think. A desire to preserve community cohesion may lead people to hold what they perceive to be unpopular thoughts in private. He writes "when one side implicitly appears to be in the majority, residents whose views are in the minority are less likely to state their opinions publicly. This is why church votes about gay ordination or local school board elections sometimes produce surprises. What was popularly assumed to be the majority view, turns out not to be when secret ballots are counted."<sup>39</sup> Reductive thinking and making assumptions about what others believe, without bothering to dig deeper, can lead to an incomplete picture of what people think and believe, and why they act in the ways that they do. The further a scholar or reader digs down, the more complicated the story of human action tends to become. So much of what people think they know about U.S. history is formulated from 30,000 feet up. It is formulated from overarching narratives and synthetic treatments that may—or may not—have anything to do with what people in smaller geographic spaces were thinking or feeling or doing. It remains important to be grounded in state and local history, if only to keep the big picture from obscuring the other ways in which we can see our past.

---

39. Robert Wuthnow, *Small-Town America: Finding Community, Shaping the Future* (Princeton, 2013), 288.