

Toward an Appreciation of Iowa Local History: A Personal Essay

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STATE AND LOCAL HISTORY will offer historians some of their most exciting and challenging opportunities during the coming decade. Local history in particular, once about as appealing to academic historians as store-bought cookies at a Baptist bake sale, should benefit substantially from trends both within and without the historical profession. Since the summer of 1978, I have participated in numerous local history projects. Through them, I have come to appreciate the opportunity for serious scholarship and public outreach which they provide.

I never planned to pursue local history as a career, although I never seemed to get too far from it. I grew up with a century of Iowa history in my basement. My father edited the newspaper in Jefferson, and the office stored bound volumes of back issues in our home. *The Jefferson Bee* began publication in 1866, and while there are a few years missing from the collection, the set is nearly complete. It was fun to pull down a volume, spread it out on the ping-pong table, and laugh at the pictures, the patent medicine ads, and the prices. In 1966, *The Bee* celebrated its centennial and published a special edition. My job was to produce enough historical features to fill six eight-page sections. For three months, I returned to those old volumes and copied out

articles which helped to tell the story of the town. Flowery obituaries, draft calls, automobile records, famous visitors—day after day, I transcribed items from those faded sheets.

In the fall, I left those old volumes and returned to college as a sophomore history major. Through the next seven years as a history student, I never took a course on Iowa or local history. I never even wrote a paper on any topic related to those centennial articles. In fact, I do not remember ever referring to any of them in footnotes. I studied how World War II affected the labor market in Detroit and Los Angeles but not in a typical Iowa small town. I eagerly read Hamlin Garland's "realistic" fiction about midwestern life but never considered comparing it with the lives of actual early residents in my hometown. It simply never occurred to me that local history was an area for serious scholarly pursuit.

My first formal encounter with Iowa history came nearly a decade later. In the summer of 1975, I was executive director of Common Cause citizens' lobby for the state. One day, Dr. Louis Geiger, chairman of Iowa State University's history department, asked me to contact him about a part-time position in the fall teaching Iowa history. Demand for the course had been so heavy in pre-registration that the department needed to add two sections in the fall and two in the winter. During the interview, I knew I wanted the job. In spite of myself, however, I blurted out to Dr. Geiger that I had never taken a course in Iowa history and was not sure I knew enough about it to teach. My confession did not phase him. "None of us ever took Iowa history," he replied. "Besides if you've lived here all your life, you must know something about it." Oh great, I thought, I can be red-hot from 1947 on.

As it turned out, however, the source of the difficulty turned out to be a part of the solution. I was assigned to share an office with the godmother of Iowa historians, Dr. Dorothy Schwieder. Dorothy had originated the Iowa history course a few years before, and her excellent classroom teaching had helped to create the "problem" with the registration overload. What started as a one-quarter course had rapidly grown into a two-quarter, multi-section sequence with by far the largest enrollment in the department outside the introductory American survey and

Western Civilization. With Dorothy's syllabus, her reading list, her anthology as a class text, and her unwavering moral support, I survived my first year.

The student demand for the course continued, and I taught Iowa history full-time the following year. I was able to read extensively in the field my second year, and I discovered what a fascinating subject I had been teaching.

IN THE SUMMER of 1978, I stumbled into my first local history project since the newspaper centennial. I was hired by the Iowa Department of Transportation to study how the advent of automobiles affected life in Iowa small towns. For six weeks, I was again back in Jefferson, this time with a tape recorder interviewing longtime residents about their experiences with early cars.

Six weeks was not long enough to explore the many possibilities which the interviews suggested, but it was an ample time to reveal the enormous significance of the subject. With the Model-T Ford in 1909 and the introduction of cheap, dependable transportation for the middle-class, countless aspects of daily life began to change. At the turn of the century, many farm students attending high schools had to board in town through the week since it took too long to commute, and the percentage of town children attending high schools was much higher than that of farm children. By 1920 with access to auto transportation, rural schools were consolidating to form their own high schools, rural children were driving cars into school and back home in the evening, and the numbers of rural children in secondary classes were rapidly increasing. Shopping patterns changed, and with them, the marketing strategies of local merchants. Where once they had advertised quality goods and tried to serve all the needs of their steady customers, they now began advertising special sale items, hoping to attract the bargain hunter, who was driving into town more often. Township governments declined in importance as counties began to assume responsibility for road maintenance, once the townships' major function. There was certainly no shortage of possibilities for research.

I wanted to expand my study of Jefferson; the DOT project

had hardly scratched the surface. My major problem was securing the necessary funding to support the research. In December, I set up an interview with officers of the Home State Bank in Jefferson and asked them to sponsor me in a local history project. The bank had a record of support for community projects. They agreed to provide some funds, and with their promise of assistance, I applied for the remainder in a grant proposal to the Iowa Humanities Board. In March, the Humanities Board approved a grant to support me for six months full-time.

The project was deliberately designed to involve the community as much as possible as partners in the research and interpretation. One of the shortcomings of traditional academic research is that historians go into the community, mine it for information, and then write their findings for an academic journal which will never be read by those who provided the information. There is rarely any feedback to those most directly concerned. The goal of the Jefferson project was to combine an historian and a community in a joint endeavor. The project was entitled "The Autobiography of Jefferson, 1900-1930," a deliberate emphasis to involve those who had lived through the events of that era.

The time period was important for two reasons. The first is its relevance. The real transition from the Victorian to the modern era occurred in the early years of the twentieth century. The perspective of those who came of age before World War I is often significantly different than those who grew up after. Though it drew less attention, the "generation gap" which emerged in the 1920s made the more noisy and notorious "gap" of the 1960s seem like a mere family spat.

A second reason for choosing that period was that the resources for community involvement were abundant. Though most of the residents I interviewed insisted that they were certain that they could tell me nothing of any historical value, I knew better. Those born before World War I have a marvelous perspective on the transition from the days of buggy travel and intense denominational rivalries to automobiles, radio, and "the new morality." What was especially exciting was that I was working familiar terrain. It was my home town. I knew who my resources were.

The Jefferson Public Library was the community sponsor of the project and will provide a permanent home for the forty tapes collected through the interviews. A windfall for the project was the identification of the forty-two-year farm diary of Tom Terrill, a Greene County farmer whose daily entries about prices, farm chores, and family life chronicle the years from 1871 to 1912. To edit the entire diary was beyond our means, but with some special assistance, we managed to transcribe the 1880, 1902, and 1910 records. These will be available through the library as part of a permanent local history collection.

In the fall, we sponsored a free Chautauqua series to present back to the community some of the information we had collected. Each of three programs combined some entertainments typical of the period—some 1900 ballads, a woman suffrage debate, a dramatic reading, all staged in costume—and a lecture on some aspect of community history. The first evening combined two slide shows, one from a set of stereoscope photos of Jefferson taken in 1875 and the other a slide-tape presentation entitled "Machines Come to Main Street: The Impact of Technology on a Small Iowa Town, 1900-1940." The second evening featured a lecture on the changes in acceptable public behavior through the era, including the new attitudes toward Sunday activities, the use of liquor, and the role of the churches. The final lecture discussed the changing roles of rural women.

One of the real strengths of the project was that it established an on-going exchange between the historian and the community. The community was both the source of the information and the primary audience for which it was intended. From background readings and early oral interviews, I formulated certain questions about topics I wished to explore in more detail. I began my research and outlined my initial findings in newspaper articles. Local residents reading the articles reacted to them from their own perspectives, and as the oral histories progressed through the summer, their focus became sharper and the information more precise. The community began to understand how the process of writing history works and began participating in the on-going process of criticism and revision. "Yes, that's the way it was" or "No, I don't remember people feeling that way at all." The richness and diversity of com-

munity life appeared as local residents began to examine their own experiences critically.

The community was not the only beneficiary of the process. Instant feedback from one's subjects is a rare luxury for an historian. I often returned to my sources with questions I had never thought to ask during early interviews. Residents also suggested topics and source materials. I had the historical training and the interpretive context; they had the details. When we got together, the results were exciting.

MY NEXT major local history project was again in an unusual format. I had remained on a temporary teaching assignment at Iowa State for five years, until the summer of 1980 when the university's budget crunch eliminated funds for my position. I learned in July that I would not have an assignment in September. Fortunately, by this time I had discovered that there is life for an Iowa historian outside the university system. The best career advice I had ever heard was: "Decide what you really want to do and then find someone willing to pay you to do it." That sounded suspiciously impractical when I first heard it, but in July of that summer, I was willing to try anything. Since I knew of no jobs in Iowa history for which I could apply, I had to create my own.

In early August, I arranged an interview in Des Moines with Mr. Jay Black, vice president for marketing for United Federal Savings which was conducting a highly successful advertising campaign around its "We Love Iowa" slogan. My proposal was that UFS sponsor local history programs similar to the Jefferson project in towns in which it has offices. I offered to make an oral history collection for the library and to write a newspaper series. I would be available for programs to local clubs and perhaps supplement school classes on Iowa history. Local history was a way of strengthening the local and statewide image of UFS and would be a natural complement to its "We Love Iowa" slogan. Black said he was interested but needed some time to think about it. His "think time" stretched on for a couple of weeks but at the end of the month, he called me in again. UFS

would sponsor a six-week project in Clarion, he told me, and if that worked well, we could discuss another.

For the next six weeks, I commuted to Clarion where I began the project with a free ice cream social in the UFS office. I put together a collection of tapes for the library and wrote a series for the Clarion newspaper. I taught a three-session course in Clarion, Belmond, and Eagle Grove on how to research family history and spoke to several local clubs. The *Des Moines Register* ran a long feature on the project which gave it a special boost.

There are several excellent tapes in the Clarion collection. One records a woman's recollections of Ku Klux Klan meetings she had attended in the 1920s, a rare historical resource. Back through the trees guided by masked horsemen holding torches, couples drove to a clearing to hear speakers warn against Catholic plots and foreign intrigues to overthrow the government. The audience was discouraged from being too curious about who else was present. Another interview recorded some hilarious experiences a longtime undertaker had embalming bodies by kerosene lanterns in Clarion residences.

I did a second community project for UFS, this time in Sioux Center. Driving up from Ames on Monday and back at the end of the week, I spent six weeks in one of the cleanest little towns in Iowa. Proud of their Dutch heritage, Sioux Center residents provided an excellent opportunity to study how one closely-knit community has maintained its ethnic identity. There were some new problems, however. While the newspaper had a nearly complete set of its old editions, they were all in Dutch until 1930. Furthermore, one way that Dutch heritage expressed itself was in a certain reluctance to open up to a stranger with a tape recorder. To turn that ethnic pride to the advantage of the project, we offered to help residents preserve a part of that heritage for their children in a unique Christmas present. I would interview parents or grandparents about their early experiences and then present them with the tape to give to their families at Christmas.

A delightful observation about the Dutch is their love of food. At the turn of the century, they were eating five times a day. After a big breakfast, they had a mid-morning lunch of sandwiches or cookies. One woman could not remember a time

when her mother's fruit cake pan was ever empty. Their big meal of the day was dinner at noon. In the afternoon, they had another lunch, and later, supper. Furthermore, many of the elderly women were still equating a little plumpness with health and beauty. Being thin was a correctable defect in their eyes, and they itched to host their granddaughters for a summer to expand their waistlines into something more ample and attractive.

In addition to the UFS projects, I participated in two other local history programs. The Iowa Humanities Board sponsored an oral history program in Rolfe through the public library entitled "Getting Around in Rolfe: Past, Present, and Future." The goal was to study how transportation changes affected the life of small town residents and to explore what changes might occur if gasoline continues to become more expensive. I conducted a three-evening course in how to do oral histories. I expected an audience of five or six at the first session. Forty people came to the first evening, thirty-five to the second, and twenty to the third. Of those twenty at the last evening, most agreed to do some interviewing, and among them, they divided a list of seventy-five names. By the end of the project, 115 residents had been interviewed. The grant provided funds to have transcripts made for a permanent historical collection in the Rolfe library. Of all the projects in which I have participated, none has come close to matching Rolfe in local support or community enthusiasm.

Last February, I began another project in Jefferson. The manager of the Greene County Rural Electric Co-op told me he was interested in having someone write the history of the co-op but did not really know how he wanted it done. He was not planning a publication to co-op members but wanted to have the records collected and put in order before they were lost. I outlined a project to him which would combine oral histories with company records. The final account relates the national context to the details of the local company and what electricity has meant to the families receiving service.

The impact of rural electrification is one of the major factors in rural life in this century. Jefferson residents living in town had electricity fifty years before farm families. This difference

was a factor not only in the standard of living, but it created a sharp social distinction between the modern town homes and the farm homes with their kerosene lamps, water pumps, and outhouses. In interview after interview with residents who had grown up on the farms before the Second World War, they told me how defensive and socially inferior they had felt when they came in from their country schools to classes in town. Electricity did much to eliminate the urban-rural tension which had existed through the first half of the century.

In April, I accepted the position of director of research and interpretation with Living History Farms in Des Moines. The Farms operate an 1849 pioneer farm, a 1900 farm, and an 1870 small town. My job is to keep the Farms as historically accurate as possible, to assist the staff in the interpretations of their sites, and to provide the research for site developments. This season, around ninety thousand people will visit the Farms and will leave with immediate, sensory impressions of what the past looked like, sounded like, and sometimes even smelled like. Without the classroom lecture or the journal article, history by demonstration is an exciting way to present the past to the public, but it requires historical imagination in both content and method.

MY PERSPECTIVE on the potential of local history as a research field has grown directly from these experiences. From them, I am willing to predict that several factors will increase the visibility and importance of local history studies within the next decade.

For one thing, new research interests among historians are encouraging scholars to pursue local history. Historians have traditionally concerned themselves with positions of power and those who occupied them. Kings, wars, explorations, empires—this was the stuff of history, and those who did not figure materially in political or military events were not considered historically significant. Within the past three decades, however, there has been a remarkable “democratizing” impulse in response to changing political and social developments. Black

history emerged within the history profession with the growth of the civil rights movement. Blacks were no longer significant only in their relation to white plantation owners or southern elites; blacks and their experiences became important in their own right. Women's history developed along similar lines. As a group systematically excluded from positions of power, women had been largely ignored until the women's movement directed attention to a re-evaluation of gender distinctions.

Beginning in the 1960s, these and similar groups began to attract historical interest. However, since they had been ignored for so long, historians discovered that the traditional sources of data, primarily written materials, often did not exist. Few slaves left diaries or letters. Female authors were far more likely to represent the middle or upper class than the working class. Oral history, interviewing people who directly experienced events, became popular with the technological improvements in recording equipment and the new interests in previously neglected sources. Furthermore, as the focus expanded beyond the exercise of political or economic power to include daily experiences and social life, the historical setting often shifted from the national and international to the state and local, to the communities of which these people were a part.

However, there has been an irony in this new fascination of the history profession with those who were once lumped together simply as "the people." While "the people" have become more attractive as subjects of research, they have been increasingly neglected as an audience for the results of the research. Many historians unfortunately seem more comfortable writing *about* the people than *to* them. In fact, among academic historians a kiss of death from a book critic is the assertion that the work "will appeal to the general public." Obviously, such a work could hardly be serious scholarship. Even historians at state universities whose paychecks come from the public coffers often regard the public only as a funding source for scholarly research, not as an audience for the research it is supporting.

One of the greatest strengths of local history as a research field is that, at least so far, it has retained an intimate tie with the public. The popular appeal of local history provides a

forum for historians to present the central message of what history is all about: that the present is a product of the decisions of the past and that the future will be the product of the decisions of the present. To understand the grand sweep of human experience, one needs a larger focus than a particular city or town, but the history of a single community is an excellent lens through which to show how the process works.

For a less ethereal reason as well, local history shows promise of attracting attention in the coming decade. With cutbacks in government operations, the historical profession is finding itself hard pressed for research support. The Reagan administration has recommended a 50 percent cut-back in the budget of the National Endowment for the Humanities, a major source of assistance for historical research. Foundation and university research budgets are very tight. As public support diminishes, historians must increasingly turn to private sources, and like it or not, they will discover that private sources are far more likely to support research which relates to their particular locales. In my experience, I have worked with three private firms which have recognized the potential of local history for both its immediate public relations value and for its long range ability to promote a stronger sense of community. I am not comfortable with a society which permits its past to become the possession of those who are willing to pay for it. Yet, such a state of affairs should come as no surprise when one considers how little effort the history profession has recently been making to convince the public that an understanding of the past is important.

Finally, I am willing to predict that Iowa history will become increasingly popular through the next decade because of a changing public attitude toward the state. There seems to be emerging, especially among the young, a new image of Iowa which indirectly encourages the study of its history. When I went through high school and college in the 1960s, my classmates (and I) dreamed of success in New York or Chicago or Washington. The big city was where you said you were headed, even if you secretly hoped it was not true. Iowa was a good place to be *from*, not a place to be. Students today still joke about their home towns ("MacGregor is not the end of the world

but you can see it from there"), but a growing number are no longer embarrassed to admit that they would prefer to remain in Iowa if they could find good jobs in their fields. From 1960 to 1970, Iowa's rural counties lost 28,000 people. In the following decade, this trend was reversed, with particularly significant increases reported in the 19 to 35 age group. Iowa is not unique in this trend. In both the U.S. and Europe, small towns are growing at the expense of metropolitan areas.¹

Nor is this new appreciation limited to the young. Iowa Supreme Court Justice David Harris served as project director for the "Jefferson Autobiography" venture and wrote this in his final evaluation:

My own guess is that future historians will be astonished by the passion that my contemporaries and I hold for our recent past. Of course, an interest in history is not peculiar to our own generation or culture, but the extent and growth of our fascination during my lifetime strikes me as phenomenal.

Perhaps in this respect, Iowa is following a pattern typical of the immigrant family migrating to America. The first generation try hard to preserve traditional ways, but their children, anxious to achieve and win acceptance in their new environment, reject old-world customs and languages as a handicap. The third and fourth generations, having grown up secure in the mainstream their parents struggled so hard to enter, have the self-confidence to explore and appreciate their family's ethnic heritage. In a similar way, Iowans who have for so long accepted eastern standards in fashion, ideas, and culture seem more willing to appreciate the distinctiveness of the Midwest and its strong sense of community.

Dr. Sidney Mead, professor emeritus of American religious history at the University of Iowa, drew from his own field to explain the function of the historian. Writing history is doing what God did in creation, he told his classes. You must create order out of chaos. You organize into understandable patterns facts and events which occurred in the very disorderly process

¹See Joseph Wall, *Iowa: A Bicentennial History* (Nashville: American Association of State and Local History, W. W. Norton & Company, 1978), p. 152.

of living. Historical accounts which smooth out the chaos into neat patterns are distortions of what really happened, necessary distortions, but distortions nevertheless.

Rarely does one confront chaos more directly than in local history. This I have learned very well in the past five years. "[Local] museums tend to be the attics of communities," Dorothy Weyer Creigh recently wrote in a guide to local historical societies; they tend to be dumping grounds for items people think are too important to throw away but take up too much space at home. Memories are much the same. They are like cluttered attics, as anyone who has worked with oral history can testify. The trivial, the personal, and the public spill out onto tapes and transcripts in odd mixes.

Nevertheless, the chaos of local history is fresh chaos. It has not been picked over by previous historians. It is for the most part an uncharted wilderness. As such, it promises a tremendous potential to those who will develop it.

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