

An Iowa Soldier in World War I, by Joe Romedahl, edited by Mildred Romedahl Steele. Boone: JRS/MRS Enterprises, 1993. 136 pp. Illustrations, map, appendix, index. \$8.50 paper.

REVIEWED BY KEVIN B. BYRNE, GUSTAVUS ADOLPHUS COLLEGE

Joe Romedahl was a farm boy in Boone County, Iowa, in 1918 when he answered Uncle Sam's summons to make the world safe for democracy. At Camp Dodge and then at Camp Logan in Texas he learned how to be a soldier, including how to cope with the petty annoyances of service life. By mid-June, Romedahl embarked for France, where the war continued for five months and he would spend almost the next year of his life. He saw action at the front, although not heavy combat. Most of his narrative concerns more stationary actions, such as guarding bridges or outposts or waiting for a German advance. But he was shot at, shelled, gassed, subjected to aircraft fire, and wounded. He surely saw more of the actual war than did most American soldiers in the Great War.

Yet Romedahl's recollections are largely benign, which may be a function of his Swedish heritage and certainly is consistent with the collective memory of American soldiers in the Great War. As historian David Kennedy has noted, the brevity of American participation in that conflict did little to displace a romantic view of war. For instance, although Romedahl was gassed, he does not relive the experience in these pages. Rather, we hear of the amusing and quirky behavior he saw — or participated in — while hospitalized. His memories form an engaging narrative, written by a likable man with a sharp eye for humorous anecdotes, human foibles and peculiarities. It is not necessarily the "real war," but it is a wonderful example of the perspective that lived on in the folklore of many doughboys.

Some pictures, a map, and a chronology provide welcome additions to the text. In all, this slim volume, edited with care by the author's daughter, makes for pleasurable and informative reading.

Threads of Memory: A Memoir of the 1920s, by Margaret Ott Onerheim. Iowa Heritage Collection. Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1993. 138 pp. Illustrations. \$14.95 paper.

REVIEWED BY PAMELA RINEY-KEHRBERG, ILLINOIS STATE UNIVERSITY

In *Threads of Memory*, Margaret Ott Onerheim relates the story of her Iowa childhood. Beginning with a tour of the architecture and furnishings of the family's modest farmhouse in Floyd County, Onerheim then recalls her parents and brothers and the community that

surrounded them. The book is full of rich details, such as her mother's delight in her new Hoosier cabinet, her own wonder at the family christening dress, and the work and pride that went into preparing meals for the men who came each year to thresh. Some vignettes, such as the one detailing the local reaction to a neighbor's house fire, beautifully illustrate the sense of community Onerheim experienced in her childhood. The book also captures the tension between farm and town children, and the emotional and physical distance separating rural and urban locales.

Threads of Memory is a pleasant read. For those interested in the history of rural Iowa and the United States in the 1920s, it will provide an intimate portrait of farm life in that era. Family photographs enrich the text. Although the quality of the narrative is somewhat uneven, it is consistently enjoyable and obviously written from the heart. Onerheim has written a book that should prove interesting to the professional and lay historian alike.

Dillinger: The Untold Story, by G. Russell Girardin with William J. Helmer. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994. xix, 345 pp. Illustrations, notes, chronology, index. \$27.50 cloth.

REVIEWED BY DOUGLAS WERTSCH, ATHENS STATE COLLEGE

As is commonly true of books blaring this one's subtitle, Girardin and Helmer's book is short on "untold" and long on "story." *Dillinger* is not a history; it is a true-crime biography of an infamous midwestern criminal. Still, it is not without interest. Written by a Dillinger enthusiast shortly after the gangster's FBI-sponsored death in 1934, the narrative is highly individualistic yet readable in a quirky sort of way. Helmer's periodic contributions are useful in placing Girardin's account in historical context.

In writing about events set almost entirely in the Middle West, the authors remind readers of that region's often desperate struggle during the Great Depression. Dillinger's fame rested as much on the sympathies of beleaguered midwesterners as on J. Edgar Hoover's self-aggrandizing public relations campaign. Of particular interest to readers of the *Annals of Iowa* is the book's description of the March 1934 robbery of the First National Bank of Mason City, Iowa. Bank President Willis G. C. Bagley's eyewitness account of the holdup is riveting and will prove of equal interest to the book's revelations about the events surrounding the bank robber's demise in Chicago four months later. Anyone interested in midwestern history presented in a light vein will not be disappointed in *Dillinger: The Untold Story*.

Copyright of Annals of Iowa is the property of State of Iowa, by & through the State Historical Society of Iowa and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.