

In for the Long Haul: The Life of John Ruan, by William B. Friedrichs. Ames: Iowa State University Press, 2003. xix, 293 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$34.99 cloth.

Reviewer Richard Broadie is a lecturer in history at the University of Northern Iowa with a special interest in the history of Iowa politics since World War II.

William Friedrichs has produced an interesting and important book about the long and productive life of Des Moines businessman and philanthropist John Ruan. It is not just good Iowa history; it's good business history. Ruan was extremely successful in many endeavors—trucking, banking, and real estate—that did not require the setting of the rural Midwest. He could have succeeded anywhere. What put Ruan on top was intelligence, good judgment, outstanding salesmanship, and a love of what he was doing. Well into his eighties he was beating most of his younger employees into the office and outworking his competitors just as he had done for more than 60 years.

Friedrichs had access to a wide range of sources for his biography but relied heavily on oral history. Not only Ruan himself, but family members and many longtime colleagues sat for interviews covering both personal and professional matters. The Ruan family provided most of the photographs covering two dozen pages in the volume. Another important source on Ruan's career was Iowa's largest and most influential newspaper, the *Des Moines Register*. Not only did the paper cover Ruan's career, it was often part of the story. As he began to expand into areas other than trucking—particularly economic development—often requiring access to public as well as private funds, the *Register* sometimes favored but often opposed Ruan's initiatives.

The book shows that Ruan was politically active and well connected to Presidents Nixon, Reagan, and George H. W. Bush and raised money for their campaigns. He also had close ties to two Republican governors, Robert Ray and Terry Branstad, who served 30 years between them at the peak of Ruan's career. Was Ruan able to influence legislation as a powerful leader of an important industry? There is no doubt that he did. But it is also true that he lost as often as he won. In one case, when a tax break supported by Senator Charles Grassley became controversial, even the *Register* concluded that Ruan and Grassley had "played by the rules."

Finally, Friedrichs looks at what might be called the public side of the private man, which often manifested itself in his considerable philanthropic work. After his wife and daughter contracted multiple sclerosis, Ruan became a champion of trying to find a cure. He is a major contributor to Iowa State University and a sponsor of the World Food Prize. As his career wound down, he began to honor many of his long-

time friends and colleagues in touching and sentimental ways. He was and remains a strong promoter of Iowa, the Des Moines area in particular. Like many wealthy Americans, once he had made his fortune, he looked around to find ways to give back to his community and his nation.

This suggests my one criticism of the book, although it should not discourage anyone from reading it. I wish the author had drawn broader implications from the life of his subject. Politics is full of demagogues, most of whom couldn't succeed in the real world with a road map, who expend considerable energy vilifying corporations and successful entrepreneurs such as Ruan. Surely, some of Ruan's run-ins with the *Des Moines Register* reflected a bit of that attitude on its part.

Any fair reading of the evidence surely suggests that Ruan succeeded for the right reasons. The bottom line is: he provided a better product at a more reasonable price than his competitors. Like Andrew Carnegie many years before, Ruan realized that if he kept costs down through higher productivity, profits would take care of themselves. He regularly replaced his trucks as better and more reliable equipment came along. He found innovative ways to serve his customers, and those innovations helped make life a little better for the rest of us as consumers. He was a leader in promoting safety and courtesy on the highways, an effort that was both profitable and the right thing to do. At the end of the day, he and his family have done more for their community than the most sanctimonious do-gooder.

Not everything John Ruan touched turned to gold. There were a few failures, particularly as he diversified beyond his original trucking business. But he accomplished much and represents what is positive about American capitalism. About that, the author should have left no doubt.

Minnesota Eats Out: An Illustrated History, by Kathryn Strand Koutsky and Linda Koutsky with recipes by Eleanor Ostman. St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2003. ix, 213 pp. Illustrations, recipes, indexes. \$34.95 cloth.

Reviewer Keith A. Sculle is head of Research and Education for the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency. He is coauthor (with John Jakle) of *Fast Food: Roadside Restaurants in the Automobile Age* (1999), *The Motel in America* (1996), *The Gas Station in America* (1995), and, most recently, *Signs in America's Auto Age: Signatures of Landscape and Place* (2004).

Effervescent, colorful, evocative, delicious in its own ways—a jubilant celebration of many of Minnesota's places to dine out in the days before

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