

While not related to each other in the sense of dealing with a specific theme or topic, the essays are bound together by their focus on the concerns and experiences of Norwegian-Americans during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The essays are carefully researched and documented. Four of them are based on doctoral dissertations or papers. All of them indicate involvement with primary sources related to their topics.

The essays provide insights into some of the concerns and methodologies of scholars studying Norwegian-American history. The variety offered in the volume enables persons with a background or interest in the field to gain further understanding. Other interested persons, especially students of other ethnic groups, should find materials illustrating themes common to all such groups, as well as features distinctive of the group under consideration. While the essays on Veblen, Rølvaag, and methodology would seem to have the broadest appeal, those dealing with educational, religious, and linguistic topics are also of interest and value.

Was This Heaven? A Self-Portrait of Iowa on Early Postcards, by Lyell D. Henry Jr. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1995. ix, 256 pp. Illustrations, references, index. \$29.95 cloth.

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The golden age of the photographic postcard was brief but glorious. Between 1905 and 1916, several factors conspired to touch off a national mania for mailing pictures of train wrecks, local businesses, backyard picnics, ears of corn bigger than wagons, or dusty classrooms at the local school to one's relatives and acquaintances. First of all, the camera was adapted for amateur use. Manufacturers then supplied preprinted postcard blanks, encouraging shutterbugs to immortalize any legible shot as instant stationery. Postal regulations were eased, too: after years of draconian restrictions, cards were finally permitted to circulate like letters but at a far cheaper rate. And finally, rural free delivery brought daily mail—including a flood of picture postcards—to the hinterlands. In the decade before World War I, the photocard was the equivalent of today's quick phone call to a friend. On the front was the news of the day in pictorial form, from ordinary doings to big, once-in-a-lifetime events. On the back was a personal commentary about it from the sender.

Was This Heaven? reproduces several hundred of these delightful postcard images, all made in Iowa. In his commentary on the pictures, Lyell Henry makes an honest effort to relate the imagery of the cards

to standard historical interpretations of the period. Far from boosting Iowa, as the more Babbittical of the postcards do, Lyell is, I think, almost too willing to submit to scholarly authority. His reading told him that life in the Midwest before the war was insular and complacent, so he finds those qualities in the postcards. There is, says Lyell, "self-satisfaction" in the expressions of a family of four from Stratford out for a spin in their automobile (11). A charming postcard ad for the Clayton County Fair showing five toddlers astride a patient old horse "bears evidence of a parochial outlook" (10).

Well, maybe. Or maybe not. Perhaps the family is pleased and excited by the prospect of a fresh adventure. Perhaps the kids are simply adorable and redolent of the home values that always adhere to the county fair. Perhaps what the standard histories of the Midwest need is a dose of fresh evidence of the sort that only pictures can supply. Maybe the Iowans on the postcards were neither as smug nor as parochial as we have been led to believe.

They were, as the cards themselves show, extraordinarily interested in a great range of subjects. Fashion, for instance: hats and shirt-waists for women, natty bowlers and suits for gents—all as up-to-the-minute as anything to be found in New York or Paris. Both studio portraits of Iowans emblazoned on postcards and postcard ads featuring businesses and their employees at work display a keen, unprovincial concern with style: Akron's telephone operators (102), the New Sharon lady who sat for a portrait with her dog (17), and the women gathered in the overdecorated precincts of the millinery department of the Leader Store in Gowrie (129) all knew a great deal about the tastes and social conventions of the wide world outside Iowa.

Commerce is another major theme of the postcards. Iowans were clearly charmed by novelty, technology (like the camera and the photograph), machinery, and the world's goods lined up for their delectation—and purchase—in picture after picture. Main Streets boom and change before our eyes. Horses disappear. Autos are suddenly everywhere. Visitors arrive: orators and preachers and presidents bearing new ideas. Trains leave for points unknown. It snows mightily, but progress prevails in a place more engaged with change and movement than with the parochialism pilloried by Sinclair Lewis and his sneering brethren.

A reevaluation of daily life as it was lived along Main Street is long overdue, a study firmly grounded in fresh material and pictorial evidence. *Was This Heaven?* provides terrific raw material for that project in the form of Christmas trees and too-big pigs, sewer pipe and parades, new cars, new babies—and hats, of course.

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