

Book Reviews

Michael D. Gibson, book review editor

Time Like a Furrow: Essays by James Hearst. Iowa City: Iowa State Historical Department, Division of the State Historical Society, 1981. pp. xi, 289. \$12.95 cloth, \$7.95 paper.

At the termination of the so-called Black Hawk War, the fertile prairies of Iowa lay temptingly before the oncoming hordes of emigrants from the eastern United States and Europe. Even before the establishment of federal land offices in 1838, settlers were streaming through the river ports of Burlington, Fort Madison, Davenport, Clinton, and Dubuque to take up choice parcels of land. Within the lifetimes of many of these first-generation Iowa pioneers, the "rolling frontier" had passed beyond the western borders of Iowa. The state's ninety-nine counties and their townships were in place, as were the roads and railroads. Villages, towns, and cities were established, and a thriving system of rural and town schools and colleges and universities assured the high percentage of literate citizens on which Iowa has always prided itself.

That pioneer period has been well recorded by two prairie historians and a twentieth-century scholar. Herbert Quick, who was born on the central Iowa prairie in 1861, translated the experiences of his parents, neighbors, and himself into fiction in *Vandemark's Folly* (1922) and *The Hawkeye* (1923) so ably that he has been quoted by later scholars and historians. Hamlin Garland, who came to the north central Iowa prairie in 1869 (he was nine), recreated his and his family's and neighbors' experiences in *Boy Life on the Prairie* (1899), *Main-Travelled Roads* (1891), and *A Son of the Middle Border* (1914, 1917) so aesthetically that his work has since caught the fancies of teachers of American literature. Allan G. Bogue, who was born in London, Ontario in this century, produced his *From Prairie to Cornbelt: Farming on the Illinois and Iowa Prairies* (1963) after ransacking the archives of libraries and museums, and farm attics, for first-hand records of the prairie experience — diaries, letters, books of account,

THE ANNALS OF IOWA

newspaper and magazine stories. His work has been labeled "a model [of] interpretive insight" on the people who settled the prairies.

From 1890 on, the prairie farm experience was built on those pioneer beginnings. From dependence on tools, the farmer moved to dependence on machines. Horses and (largely) humans, who drew their energy sources from the land they worked, were replaced by machines which drew their energy from fossil fuels. From mere subsistence, Iowa farmers became suppliers of food to a hungry world, and their harvests became an important factor in world politics and economics. The pioneer farm of forty to eighty acres has been enlarged to hundreds, even thousands, of acres. The family farm seems to be disappearing from the scene.

James Hearst was born on a farm outside of Cedar Falls which his grandfather had settled in 1900, and although he since has become a poet, a teacher, and a city-dweller, he has rarely strayed far from that farm. Much of his poetry and prose has been about the farm experience, an experience in which he has often taken part, from seed-time to harvest, from birthing to butchering, from the torrid humidity of August's "dog-days" to the skull-cracking cold of mid-January. He has surveyed the farm from the interior of a hog house, from a tractor seat, from the window of a hay mow in a high barn. His view of all this has been tempered by a poet's imagination which sees farmers, their land, their buildings, their machines, their crops, and their animals as operating in an animistic universe which besieges the farmers with forces and problems sometimes beyond their abilities to cope.

In *Time Like a Furrow* Hearst records the first forty years of this century on the family farm with occasional excursions into town and beyond. Following an introductory section entitled "Balance Sheet" in which Hearst translates a farm record book into metaphorical and philosophical musings (the poet's mind at work), the balance of the book is divided into four sections: "People," "Rural Childhood," "Chores," and "Horses and Men." Although the book is subtitled "essays," the last three units of "Horses and Men" seem more like short stories, written in the third person about a person named "Jim." Like Hamlin Garland's *Boy Life on the Prairie*, this book is interleaved with poems, all ten by Hearst.

Although the book's sections (except as noted) are related in the first person, and there are personal anecdotes, Hearst keeps his focus on the farm and the family — his grandfathers, his father and mother, his aunts and uncles, his brothers and sister, his cousins — and on the hired hands who drifted in and out of the Hearst world. But always

Book Reviews

through the book the neighboring cities of Waterloo—where the circus came annually—and Cedar Falls—with its college, its Danish population, its high school, and its Congregational church—are nearby.

Hearst's father, Charles, was active in the development of the Farm Bureau, becoming president of the Iowa Farm Bureau (1923-1936) and vice-president of the American Farm Bureau (1932-1936); this activity allows Hearst the opportunity to relate from first-hand experience the role of the Farm Bureau and the county extension people in improving the farmers' lot.

Hearst's first section, "Two Traditions—Hearst and Schell," does much to explain the kind of man James Hearst is. From his Grandfather Hearst, a New Hampshire "meeting house man with no give to his morals," Hearst acquired a sense of Nature, a feeling for personal principle, and an awareness of Duty. "Once a task became ours to complete, come hell or high water, it became our responsibility." "Our lives," says Hearst, "centered on principles of decency, good sense, high-minded thinking, and hard work." From his Catholic Grandfather Schell, who came from Bavaria to Montezuma, Iowa, Hearst acquired a feeling for the value of education—Hearst's Aunt Ida Schell was a very early woman doctor, for craftsmanship—his Grandfather Schell was a cabinet-maker, and for literature—his Grandfather Schell often sang German folksongs and related tales of his Black Forest in Bavaria.

Time Like a Furrow is a detailed account of the Iowa farm experience from 1900 to 1940—the years leading up to World War I; the "boom-and-bust" days of the war and its aftermath; the halcyon days of the 1920s; and the grim Depression years of the 1930s, in one of which the Hearsts, like other Iowa farmers, faced a visit from the county sheriff. "It was a day burned in our memories," says Hearst. "To lose part of the farm would be more than the family should have to bear. The farm was home. It was part of our life, like our own flesh and blood."

With the publication of this book, James Hearst joins the limited circle of those who have placed the Iowa farm experience securely and adequately on the record—Hamlin Garland, Herbert Quick, and Allan Bogue. His reputation as a poet of the rural experience—his second to none—is now enhanced by his skills as an historian of the Iowa farm experience in this century.

THE UNIVERSITY OF IOWA

CLARENCE A. ANDREWS

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.