



Your Guide to Iowa Films

Want to have your very own Iowa film festival in your own living room? Use this guide to identify six decades of Iowa films.

Iowa and Iowans have appeared as setting and characters in more than three dozen popular films (that is, feature-length films made for movie theaters or television that attempt to reach a wide audience). For each of those films, this chronological filmography lists the director, studio, year of release, principal actors, Academy Awards and nominations, literary source, and a brief synopsis of the plot and pertinent Iowa themes. ("See article" means that the film's synopsis already appears in the preceding article.) Unless noted, all films are currently in a videocassette format, though not all are widely available.

By our criteria, films listed here must be at least partially set in Iowa (or in a setting that strongly hints at Iowa), or must have at least one Iowan as a significant character (in some cases, the Iowan is transported to a setting beyond Iowa). However, this list does not include films made in Iowa but not about Iowa (such as *Children of the Corn*), or films in which the Iowa setting is both incidental and insignificant (such as *Noises Off*).

Happy viewing!

—Marty S. Knepper and John S. Lawrence

State Fair. Dir: Henry King. A Fox Production, 1933. Principals: Lew Ayres, Frank Craven, Louise Dresser, Janet Gaynor, Victor Jory, Will Rogers. Academy Award Nominations: Picture, Writing. Literary Source: Phil Stong, *State Fair* (1932). See previous article for plot synopsis.

The Farmer in the Dell. Dir: Ben Holmes. RKO-Radio, 1936. Literary Source: Phil Stong, *The Farmer in the Dell* (1935). Not in video.

In this satire about an Iowa farm family that moves to Hollywood, the father improbably becomes a movie actor. The confrontation between Iowa character and Hollywood values is the focus of the plot.

One Foot in Heaven. Dir: Irving Rapper. Warner Brothers, 1941. Principals: Beulah Bondi, Elisabeth Fraser, Frederic March, Martha Scott, Frankie Thomas. Academy Award Nomination: Picture. Literary Source: Hartzell Spence, *One Foot in Heaven: The Life of a Practical Parson* (1940). Not in video. See article.

Cheers for Miss Bishop. Dir: Tay Garnett. United Artists, 1941. Principals: Mary Anderson, Sidney Blackmer, Donald Douglas, William Gargan, Edmund Gwenn, Martha Scott, Pierre Watkin. Academy Award Nomination: Music. Literary Source: Bess Streeter Aldrich, *Miss Bishop* (1933). See article.

The Major and the Minor. Dir: Billy Wilder. Paramount, 1942. Principals: Robert Benchley, Rita Johnson, Diana Lynn, Ginger Rogers, Ray

Milland. Literary Source: Edward Childs Carpenter's play *Connie Goes Home* (1934) and Fannie Kilbourne's *Saturday Evening Post* story "Sunny Goes Home" (1921).

Susan Applegate leaves Manhattan by train, posing as a child, to return home to Iowa. Comic confusion ensues when she meets a handsome, befuddled major.

Happy Land. Dir: Irving Pichel. Twentieth Century-Fox, 1943. Principals: Don Ameche, Harry Carey, Frances Dee, Ann Rutherford, Cara Williams. Literary Source: MacKinlay Kantor, *Happy Land* (1943). Not in video.

A small-town father grieves over his son's death in World War II. The ghost of his own father helps the man recall happier times in his son's life.

The Fighting Sullivans [also titled **The Sullivans**]. Dir: Lloyd Bacon. Realart, 1944. Principals: Anne Baxter, Ward Bond, Bobby Driscoll, Thomas Mitchell, Addison Richards, Selena Royle. Academy Award Nomination: Writing (Original Story). See article.



COURTESY THE AUTHORS

State Fair. Dir: Walter Lang. Twentieth Century-Fox, 1945. Principals: Dana Andrews, Fay Bainter, Vivian Blaine, Jeanne Crain, Dick

Haymes, Donald Meek, Charles Winninger. Academy Award: Song ("It Might As Well Be Spring"). Nomination: Scoring. Literary Source: Phil Stong, *State Fair* (1932). See article.

The Best Years of Our Lives. Dir: William Wyler. Goldwyn Productions, 1946. Principals: Dana Andrews, Hoagy Carmichael, Gladys George, Myrna Loy, Frederic March, Virginia Mayo, Harold Russell, Teresa Wright. Academy Awards: Picture, Director, Actor, Supporting Actor, Screenplay, Editing, Musical Score. Literary Source: MacKinlay Kantor, *Glory for Me* (1945). (Both film and book hint at Des Moines as the setting.) See article.

A Foreign Affair. Dir: Billy Wilder. Paramount, 1948. Principals: Jean Arthur, Marlene Dietrich, John Lund, Millard Mitchell. Academy Award Nominations: Screenplay, Cinematography. Not in video.

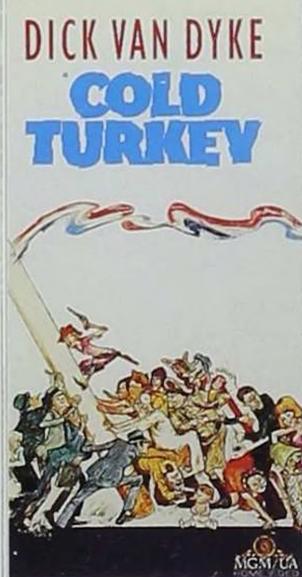
This film explores moral customs in post-World War II Germany. Congresswoman Phoebe Frost from Iowa investigates the lives of U.S. occupation forces and is shocked by the practices she finds. Her sexual conservatism is juxtaposed against the overt eroticism of Erika von Schluetow, played by Marlene Dietrich. In the end, Phoebe learns the limits of her own impulse control.

The Pajama Game. Dir: George Abbott and Stanley Donen. Warner Brothers, 1957. Principals: Doris Day, Ralph Dunn, Eddie Foy, Jr., Franklin Fox, Carol Haney, John Raitt, Reta Shaw, Jack Straw. Literary Source: Richard P. Bissell, *7 1/2 Cents* (1953). See article.

The Tarnished Angels. Dir: Douglas Sirk. Universal, 1957. Principals: Jack Carson, Rock Hudson, Dorothy Malone, Robert Middleton, Robert Stack. Literary Source: William Faulkner, *Pylon* (1935).

A restless Iowa teen in the 1920s, attractive LaVerne runs off with a World War I flying ace turned carnival stunt man. During the Depression, LaVerne discovers that doing parachute stunts, rearing a son, constantly traveling, and living with a self-destructive pilot is no picnic. A paternalistic reporter insists she and her son return to Iowa, where they can have a more normal life.

The Music Man. Dir: Morton Da Costa. Warner Brothers, 1962. Principals: Paul Ford, Hermione Gingold, Buddy Hackett, Ronny Howard, Shirley Jones, Robert Preston. Academy Award: Music. Nominations: Picture, Artistic Direction, Costume Design, Film Editing. Literary Source: Meredith Willson, *The Music Man* (1958). See article.



Cold Turkey. Dir: Norman Lear. Tandem-DFI, 1971. Principals: Bob and Ray, Dick Van Dyke, Edward Everett Horton, Bob Newhart, Pippa Scott, Tom Poston. Literary Source: Mac Hammond, *Cold Turkey* (1969). See article.

Ice Castles. Dir: Donald Wrye. Columbia, 1978. Principals: Robby Benson, Colleen Dewhurst, Lynn-Holly Johnson, Tom Skerritt. Academy Award Nomination: Best Song ("Theme from *Ice Castles*: 'Through the Eyes of Love'").

An earnest teen couple from Waverly, Iowa, Lexie and Nick share skating ambitions, but her figure skating brings more success than his ice hockey, leading to estrangement. When Lexie becomes blind, Nick helps her skate again. This tear-jerker affirms "Iowa values" of courage, hard work, and family, but it also shows that it is too easy to drop out, stop trying, and live depressed in a small Iowa town. Waverly residents won't recognize this tiny, desolate place as their town.

Friendly Fire. Dir: David Greene. Marble Arch Productions, 1979. Principals: Ned Beatty, Carol Burnett, Timothy Hutton, Sam Waterston. Literary Source: C. D. B. Bryan, *Friendly Fire* (1976).

An Iowa farm couple loses their son in a "friendly fire" incident in Vietnam. Angry at the Pentagon's treatment of them, they become a national symbol of ordinary citizens in a crusade for the truth. Their quest creates family conflict as well as a window to the world outside Iowa. The film is based on the experiences of Gene and Peg Mullen of La Porte City.

Take This Job and Shove It. Dir: Gus Trikonis. Cinema Group, 1981. Principals: Eddie Albert, Art Carney, Robert Hays, Barbara Hershey, David Keith, Martin Mull, Tim Thomerson.

Set in the working-class culture of Dubuque, Iowa, the film shows successful young preppe Frank Macklin returning to his hometown to run a brewery for his corporate boss. He is torn between urban prosperity and corporate politics, and his hard-drinking, good-hearted former friends and brewery employees who enjoy football, mudwrestling, big wheel truck competitions, and other good ol' boy pursuits.

Heat and Dust. Dir: James Ivory. Universal,

1983. Principals: Christopher Cazenove, Julie Christie, Nikolas Grace, Zakir Hussain, Shashi Kapoor, Charles McCaughan, Greta Scacchi. Literary Source: Ruth Praver Jhabvala, *Heat and Dust* (1975).

Anne travels to India to investigate the fate of a great aunt who left her husband for a local Indian prince in 1923. She encounters Chid, a spiritual seeker with roots in Iowa who has abandoned his name and all previous identity. Pathetically ridiculous, he tries to be more Indian than native Indians and to seduce Anne. Chid eventually must return to his aunt's clean house in Washington, Iowa, because Indian food has destroyed his health. (A comment on Iowa's bland food?) Clean, green Iowa seems to be set up as the antithesis of dusty, exotic India.

Terms of Endearment. Dir: James L. Brooks. Paramount, 1983. Principals: Jeff Daniels, John Lithgow, Jack Nicholson, Shirley MacLaine, Debra Winger. Academy Awards: Picture, Director, Actress, Supporting Actor, Screenplay from Another Medium. Nominations: Actress, Supporting Actor, Art Director, Sound, Editing, Musical Score. Literary Source: Larry McMurtry, *Terms of Endearment* (1975).

The middle of this two-hankie mother-daughter film is set in Des Moines, where Texan Emma Horton moves with her children and husband, who can't get a teaching job elsewhere. Free-spirited earth mother Emma has a tender affair with a kindly, grateful banker. The film contrasts an emotionally inhibited but wholesome Midwest with a wilder Texas and a coldly uncivil Manhattan.

Country. Dir: Richard Pearce. Touchstone, 1984. Principals: Wilford Brimley, Levi L. Knebel, Jessica Lange, Sam Shepard. Academy Award Nomination: Actress. See article.

Fraternity Vacation. Dir: James Frawley. New World Pictures, 1985. Principals: Cameron Dye, Stephen Geoffreys, Leigh McCloskey, Tim Robbins, Sheree J. Wilson. See article.

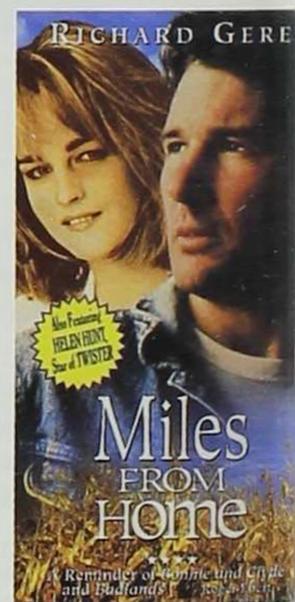
Out of Bounds. Dir: Richard Tuggle. RCA/Columbia Pictures, 1986. Principals: Raymond J. Barry, Anthony Michael Hall, Jeff Kober, Meatloaf, Glynn Turman, Jenny Wright.

This film contrasts rural De Witt, Iowa, and central Los Angeles. A depressed Daryl Cage leaves his parents, who are separating because of farm stress, to visit his successful brother in L.A. A bag mixup at the airport leaves Daryl holding a supply of heroin. After his brother's murder, he links up with a street-smart waitress to thwart both hostile police and drug dealers. Initially calling him

"Iowa" and "Farm Boy," the waitress transforms Daryl's look, which seems to give him lethal urban survival skills. Iowa niceness wins romance in L.A., and toughness and integrity allow the farm boy to triumph.

Miles from Home. Dir: Gary Sinise. Cinecom Entertainment, 1988. Principals: Kevin Anderson, Brian Dennehy, Richard Gere, Moira Harris, Helen Hunt, Judith Ivey, John Malkovich, Laurie Metcalf, Penelope Ann Miller.

Though they are sons of an award-winning farmer, two brothers lose the family farm to the local bank. They burn the farmstead, hit the road, and become outlaw celebrities. The film shows the frustrations of those trying to keep farms economically viable.



Zadar! Cow From Hell. Dir: Robert C. Hughes. Stone Peach Films, 1988. Principals: Bill Allard, Dan Coffey, Merle Kessler, Leon Martell, Jim Turner. Not in video. See article.

Field of Dreams. Dir: Phil Alden Robinson. Universal, 1989. Principals: Kevin Costner, James Earl Jones, Burt Lancaster, Ray Liotta, Amy Madigan. Academy Award Nominations: Picture, Adapted Screenplay, Musical Score. Literary Source: W. P. Kinsella, *Shoeless Joe Jackson Comes to Iowa* (1980). See article.

Sleeping With the Enemy. Dir: Joseph Ruben. Fox, 1991. Principals: Kevin Anderson, Patrick Bergin, Julia Roberts. Literary Source: Nancy Price, *Sleeping With the Enemy* (1987). See article.

Taking Back My Life: The Nancy Ziegenmeyer Story. Dir: Harry Winer. Lyttle-Heshty Production, 1992. Principals: Eileen Brennan, Ellen Burstyn, Joanna Cassidy, Shelley Hack, Stephen Lang, Patricia Wettig. Not in video.

The true story of a Grinnell woman, this film is based on a series of articles in the *Des Moines Register*. After she is raped in a Des Moines parking lot, Nancy decides to go public with her story, a decision that complicates her life by making her a celebrity but ultimately helps her work through the trauma of rape. A realistic film about courage and contemporary problems in Iowa.

Crash Landing: The Rescue of Flight 232.

Released as videocassette in 1994 as **A**

Thousand Heroes. Dir. Lamont Johnson.

1992. Helios Productions. Principals: James Coburn, Charlton Heston, Richard Thomas.

Dedicated, well-prepared citizens of Sioux City, Iowa, work together in a crisis to save survivors of the United 232 plane crash.

Married to It. Dir. Arthur Hiller. Orion,

1993. Principals: Beau Bridges, Stockard Channing, Robert Sean Leonard, Mary Stuart Masterson, Cybill Shepherd, Ron Silver.

Two graduates from Iowa State University attempt to shed their wholesome Iowa background and become successful and sophisticated professionals in New York City. Their Iowa roots make them vulnerable to manipulative New Yorkers and make it hard for them to talk over their problems. Two New York City couples befriend them and provide a cultural contrast.

What's Eating Gilbert Grape. Dir. Lasse

Hallstrom. Paramount, 1993. Principals: Darlene Cates, Johnny Depp, Leonardo DiCaprio, Juliette Lewis, Mary Steenburgen. Academy Award Nomination: Supporting Actor. Literary Source: Peter Hedges, *What's Eating Gilbert Grape* (1991). See article.

The Puppet Masters. Dir. Stuart Orme.

Hollywood Pictures, released by Buena Vista Pictures, 1994. Principals: Richard Belzer, Keith David, Yaphet Kotto, Will Patton, Eric Thal, Julie Warner. Literary Source: Robert Heinlein, *The Puppet Masters* (1951).

In a plot resembling *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, an alien craft lands in fictional Ambrose, Iowa, and releases a vicious super-parasite that rapidly converts the entire population into obedient zombies. The action culminates in Des Moines's City Hall. Slick urban outsiders from Washington, D.C., kill dozens of parasite-infested Iowans before finally conquering the aliens that threaten America's heartland.

Sioux City. Dir. Lou Diamond Phillips. IRS

Releasing, 1994. Principals: Bill Allen, Apesanahkwat, Lise Cutter, Gary Farmer, Leah Goldman, Lou Diamond Phillips, Salli Richardson, Adam Roarke, Ralph Waite.

This geographically mistitled film has only one scene in Sioux City, Iowa. Born on a reservation south of South Sioux City, Nebraska, physician Jesse Goldman, a Lakota Sioux, was adopted and raised by an affluent Los Angeles Jewish family. He returns to investigate his roots, his mother's murder, and his true parentage. The film reveals that hidden under the myth of midwestern

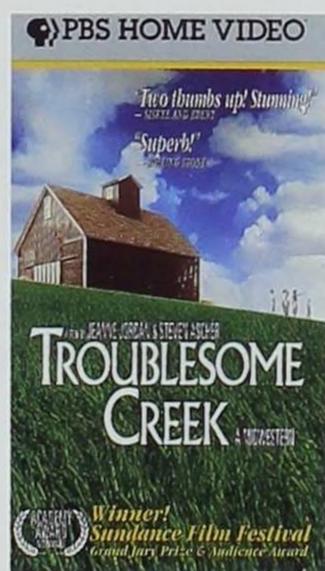
neighborliness lies the reality of racism that can poison romance and family life.

The Bridges of Madison County. Dir. Clint

Eastwood. Time Warner, 1995. Principals: Clint Eastwood, Meryl Streep. Academy Award Nominations: Actor, Actress. Literary Source: Robert James Waller, *The Bridges of Madison County* (1992). See article.

The Last Supper. Dir. Stacy Title. The Vault,

1995. Principals: Cameron Diaz, Ron Eldard, Annabeth Gish, Jonathan Penner, Ron Perlman, Courtney B. Vance. See article.



Troublesome Creek: A Midwestern.

Dir. Jeanne Jordan and Steve Ascher. West City Films, 1995. Academy Award Nomination: Documentary.

This documentary about Russel and Mary Jane Jordan of Wiota, Iowa, was lovingly made by

a daughter and son-in-law. The film narrates with poignancy and humor the crisis that develops when bankers become aggressive about forcing payback of delinquent loans. The family teeters on the brink of disaster but pulls through with luck, timing, and family cooperation. The film is a "midwestern," a contrast to the westerns that Russel loves.

Joe's Apartment. Dir. John Payson. Geffen

Pictures & MTV/Warner Brothers, 1996. Principals: Don Ho, Jerry O'Connell, Robert Vaughn, Megan Ward. See article.

Michael. Dir. Nora Ephron. Turner Pictures,

1996. Principals: Teri Garr, Bob Hoskins, William Hurt, Andie MacDowell, Robert Pastorelli, Jean Stapleton, John Travolta.

A grubby angel named Michael appears in mythical Stubbs, Iowa, to help Pansy Milbanke save her Milk Bottle Motel. On a road trip to Chicago, Michael teaches cynical tabloid journalists how to enjoy simple pleasures. As they reach Chicago, Michael sheds his feathers and dies, suggesting that the prairie is heaven, and the city is not.

A Thousand Acres. Dir. Jocelyn Moorhouse. Propaganda Films/Buena Vista Pictures, 1997.

Principals: Kevin Anderson, Keith Carradine, Colin Firth, Pat Hingle, Jennifer Jason Leigh, Jessica Lange, Michelle Pfeiffer, Jason Robards. Literary Source: Jane Smiley, *A Thousand Acres* (1991). See article.

The Big One. Dir. Michael Moore. Miramax,

1998. Principals: Garrison Keillor, Phil Knight, Michael Moore, Rick Nielsen, Studs Terkel.

This humorous, heart-breaking documentary chronicles a cross-country book promotion tour by corporation foe Michael Moore. He interviews an Iowa woman who must work two jobs to provide food for her family—in a state that produces food. He attends a secret meeting of West Des Moines Borders Bookstore employees who eventually unionize because they are forced to pay for health care they can't get in the Des Moines area. Moore shows that Iowans, like other Americans, suffer from the effects of U.S. corporate greed.

Saving Private Ryan. Dir. Steven Spielberg.

Dreamworks Pictures and Paramount Pictures, 1998. Principals: Edward Burns, Matt Damon, Adam Goldberg, Tom Hanks, Tom Sizemore. Academy Awards: Director, Cinematography, Film Editing, Sound, Sound Effects Editing. Nominations: Picture, Actor, Original Screenplay, Original Dramatic Score, Makeup, Art Direction. See article.

Alkali, Iowa. Dir. Mark Christopher. Principals:

J. D. Cerna, Marybeth Hurt. Master's thesis project at Columbia University (1995). Distributed by Strand Releasing, 1998, as segment of *Boys Life 2*.

A young farmer, Jack Gudmanson, gradually deduces that his father had hidden his gay identity from his children. Jack's mother and grandfather fiercely attempt to re-bury the secret. As Jack explores his father's past, he begins to acknowledge his own attraction to men. A coming-out story with an Iowa setting and glimpses of a rural gay culture.

Yidl in the Middle. Dir. Marlene Booth.

Principals: Marlene Booth and family members. New Day Films, 1999. Not on video.

Currently residing in Cambridge, Massachusetts, filmmaker Marlene Booth found herself constantly explaining to skeptics that—no kidding—she was a Jewish Iowan. So she compiled snapshots, home movies, and interviews to chronicle her family's history in Iowa and her happy childhood in Des Moines in the 1950s and 1960s. The documentary reveals what it means to be both native Iowan and cultural outsider.