

# VISIONS OF IOWA IN HOLLYWOOD FILM

by Marty S. Knepper and John S. Lawrence

Over the past sixty years Hollywood has made more than three dozen feature films showing Iowa as a distinctive place, way of life, or state of mind. Two dozen of them have been made in the 1980s and 1990s alone. *The Bridges of Madison County* (released in 1995) and *Field of Dreams* (1989) are the most famous of these recent films. Steven Spielberg's 1998 blockbuster, *Saving Private Ryan*, will remind older film viewers of a cluster of World War II-era films about self-sacrificing Iowa heroes. A far more cheerful strain runs through the earlier, well-known Iowa musicals *State Fair* (1945) and *The Music Man* (1962).

Considered as a group, films about Iowa raise questions about their meaning as portrayals of our state and its residents. Why has Hollywood made so many? Are there consistent images, positive and negative, that Hollywood uses when it depicts Iowa culture? Should Iowans feel demeaned, flattered, or both, by the attention? Do these films have implications for our ability to attract and maintain our economic and population base? And, finally, what might the success or failure of an individual film tell us about what version of Iowa Hollywood can sell?

The films discussed here, and those listed in the concluding "filmography," all have Iowa settings or Iowans as characters. Although they represent several cinematic genres—comedies, romances, dramas, satires, musicals, thrillers, and documentaries—what these movies have in common, almost without exception, is their representation of Iowa as an "old-fashioned" state full of farms and small towns. Thus, even

though film is an art and technology developed in the 20th century, Hollywood filmmakers have drawn upon an artistic and cultural convention that dates back to antiquity—pastoralism.

Pastoralism reveres a rustic rural life characterized by nature's abundance, innocent pleasures, and social harmony. It often emerges in literature, art, music, or popular culture as society's reaction to the stresses and corruption of urban life.

This idealization of rural life first developed in the Western world during the classical era. Writing poems and prose for other urbanites who were beginning to feel civilization's discontents, Virgil, Longus, Theocritus, and other sophisticated city writers established pastoralism's narrative conventions and imagery (for instance, an image of a shepherd piping sweetly on his flute). Over the centuries, variations on the pastoral theme have emerged, highlighting various cultural tensions: innocence versus worldliness, nature versus culture, freedom versus restriction, and safety versus danger—tensions that in this century weave themselves through Hollywood films about Iowa.

In the United States, American pastoralism evolved from several strands in the nation's cultural history: New England Puritanism's righteousness, work ethic, and utopian dreams; Thomas Jefferson's concept of American democracy rooted in agrarian life; the transformation of the frontier from wilderness to settlement; 19th-century romantic writers' ecstasies about the freedom, beauty, and fertility of the prairies; and the Midwest's emergence as a great cultivated "garden of Eden" capable of feeding the nation. As a

result of these influences, American pastoralism is more austere than classical pastoralism and often implies that rural life builds moral character.

Pastoralism looms large in Americans' perceptions of the Midwest, argues cultural geographer James Shortridge, who has explored shifts in how and why the nation perceives the Midwest in certain ways. Despite the region's urban and industrial development, the national mind associates the Midwest almost exclusively with agriculture, a basic element of pastoralism, and consistently identifies Iowa as the most representative midwestern state. Admiration for the Midwest reached its highest between 1912 and 1920, Shortridge says, when it was viewed as superior to both the decaying East and the untamed West. But since the 1920s, he says, the Midwest tends to be ignored or portrayed as a cultural backwater—unless Americans are disenchanted with urban life or are facing some great external challenge such as war. Then Iowa and the Midwest are nostalgically idealized as a rural paradise or America's patriotic heartland.

Hollywood films tend to reflect and refuel these national perceptions about Iowa and the Midwest. Through standard settings, characters, and plots, filmmakers nearly always use Iowa and Iowans as a sort of metaphor or shorthand to convey an idyllic, pastoral view of rural and small-town life. Cinematic settings, for instance, often resemble Grant Wood's landscapes of fertile, orderly fields and tidy, scattered farmsteads, showing Iowa as a peaceful land of plenty. To depict Iowa's small towns, Hollywood filmmakers invariably use old-fashioned white houses with porch swings, shady streets, water towers, aging courthouses with flags flying, and pickup trucks parked diagonally in front of mom-and-pop cafés and grocery stores. Almost never does Hollywood show an Iowa with interstate highways, computer technology, cities, suburbs, malls, and modern architecture.

The film *Sleeping with the Enemy* (1991) illustrates the surprising durability of idyllic rural and small-town Iowa as it establishes its setting of contemporary Cedar Falls. Laura (played by Julia Roberts) has left her abusive husband and seeks refuge in Iowa. As she approaches Cedar Falls on a Greyhound bus, she sees a welcome sign decorated with an ear of corn. She bursts into a smile when she sees the center of town bustling with small local businesses, children splashing happily in a public fountain, a dog chasing a boy on a bike, and a man in overalls and straw hat watch-

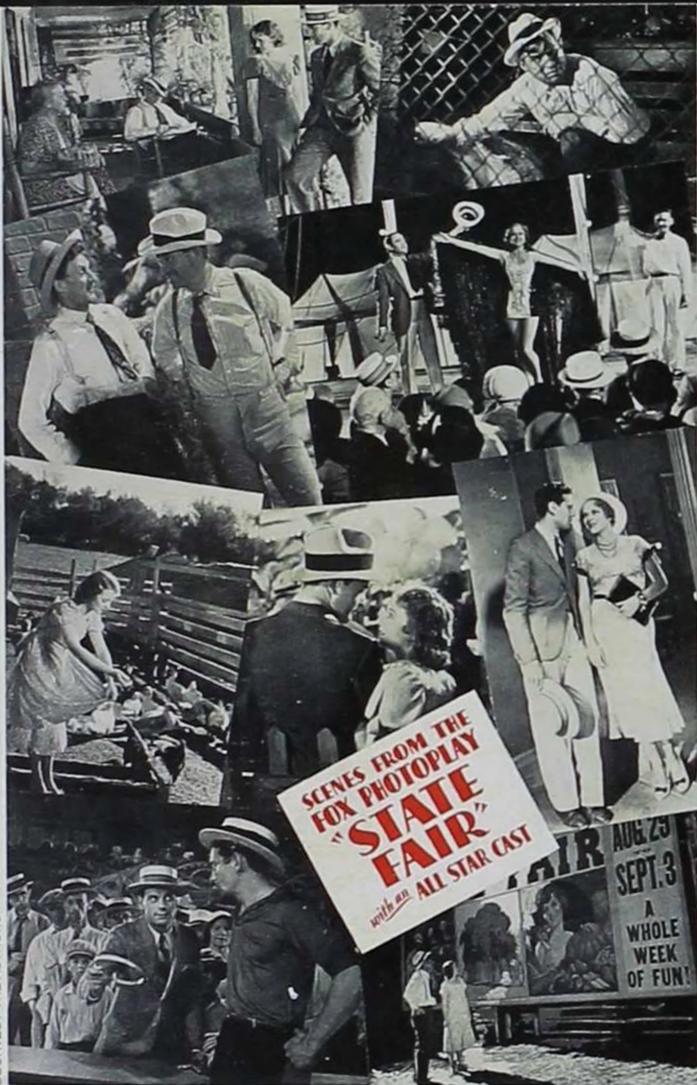
ing a police officer raise a flag. Some Cedar Falls residents have found this scene laughably inaccurate, but such visual images, or icons, reinforce the film's key idea that Iowa is a pastoral haven for tormented outsiders like Laura.

Just as Hollywood filmmakers often rely on stock pastoral settings of Iowa—prosperous farms and pristine small towns—they often rely on these stock characterizations of Iowans: the farm family, the unsung prairie hero, and the naive but good-hearted innocent abroad.

The 1933 *State Fair* popularized, and the 1945 Rodgers and Hammerstein musical reinforced, the image of the Iowa farm family. As the movie begins, farmer Abel Frake is obsessed with his hog "Blue Boy." His wife, Melissa, works in the kitchen to prepare for the family's upcoming trip to the Iowa State Fair. Margy, 19, and Wayne, 18, are dissatisfied and restless. Pretty, lively Margy, bored with her hometown fiancé, craves romance. Handsome, earnest Wayne seeks adventure. After an eventful week at the fair, the Frakes return to their rural home and roles. Abel and Melissa are elated by prizes won for pigs and mincemeat and by a welcome escape from daily drudgery. The teens are sadder but wiser after exciting but troubling romances at the fair. All except Margy, who will marry the newspaper reporter she met at the fair and move away, will carry on as before. The implication is strong that Wayne will settle down with his hometown girl and raise his own Blue Boys in the future.

Several World War II-era films set in Iowa employ another stock character, the unsung hero who sacrifices comfort and dreams, and sometimes life and limb, to uphold the ideals of democracy, family, and moral living. Strong, personal values of the unsung heroes, these films suggest, are shaped by their upbringing in the character-building pastoral setting of rural and small-town Iowa.

One of these unsung hero films is *Cheers for Miss Bishop* (1941), adapted from Bess Streeter Aldrich's novel *Miss Bishop*. The film celebrates the life of an unmarried teacher at Midwestern College, based on Iowa State Teachers College (now the University of Northern Iowa). As a young woman in the late 19th century, Ella Bishop is a sprightly, idealistic college graduate who dreams of romance and travel. Instead, she devotes her life to educating immigrant settlers and setting them off in pursuit of the American Dream. Ironically, her own dedication to family, students, community, and conventional morality keeps her from accepting opportunities for love and adventure. Her whole life is spent in one small midwestern



COURTESY THE AUTHORS



SHS (IOWA CITY)

In two films titled *State Fair*, Hollywood popularized the image of the Iowa farm family. The first was released in 1933, as America faced the Depression; the second, in 1945, as World War II ended.

Above: Stills from the 1933 film were splashed on the back of the book jacket of Phil Stong's novel *State Fair* (the basis of the film). And in a scene from the 1945 Rodgers and Hammerstein musical *State Fair*, Dick Haymes, Fay Bainter, Jeanne Crain, and Charles Winninger, as the Frake family, beam proudly at their prize-winning Hampshire boar "Blue Boy."



PHOTOS ABOVE AND BELOW: FOX MOVIE TONE NEWS, INC.

Left and below: Twentieth Century-Fox produced a six-minute "Movietone News" feature on *State Fair's* world premiere in Des Moines, August 29, 1945. In two scenes from this rare nitrate film, Iowa governor Robert D. Blue presents a porker to *State Fair's* songster Dick Haymes; and 20,000 Iowans flood downtown Des Moines for the festivities. Beauty queens, WACs, Shriners, and 4-H clubs paraded before dignitaries, and George Jessel, Carole Landis, Faye Marlow, and other Hollywood stars added to the hoopla.



Former war correspondent Ted Malone covered the premiere on the radio, reminding his war-weary listeners that state fairs are "part of America." "Next year they'll be back again," he said. "Let's not take it for granted."

The film was shown that evening in both the Paramount and the Des Moines Theaters, and then in other theaters around the state (see back cover). "Twentieth Century-Fox has taken the Iowa state fair, trimmed it down to 99 minutes, pepped it up with delightful music, dolled it out in dazzling color and in the entire process overlooked but one thing," the *Des Moines Register* noted. "There's not a drop of rain in the picture."

town. Like George Bailey in *It's a Wonderful Life*, she sometimes fumes bitterly at the personal cost of her commitment to serving her community. At the end of this sentimental film, however, as family, loyal friends, and grateful students cheer her dedication and self-sacrifice, she seems to accept her role.

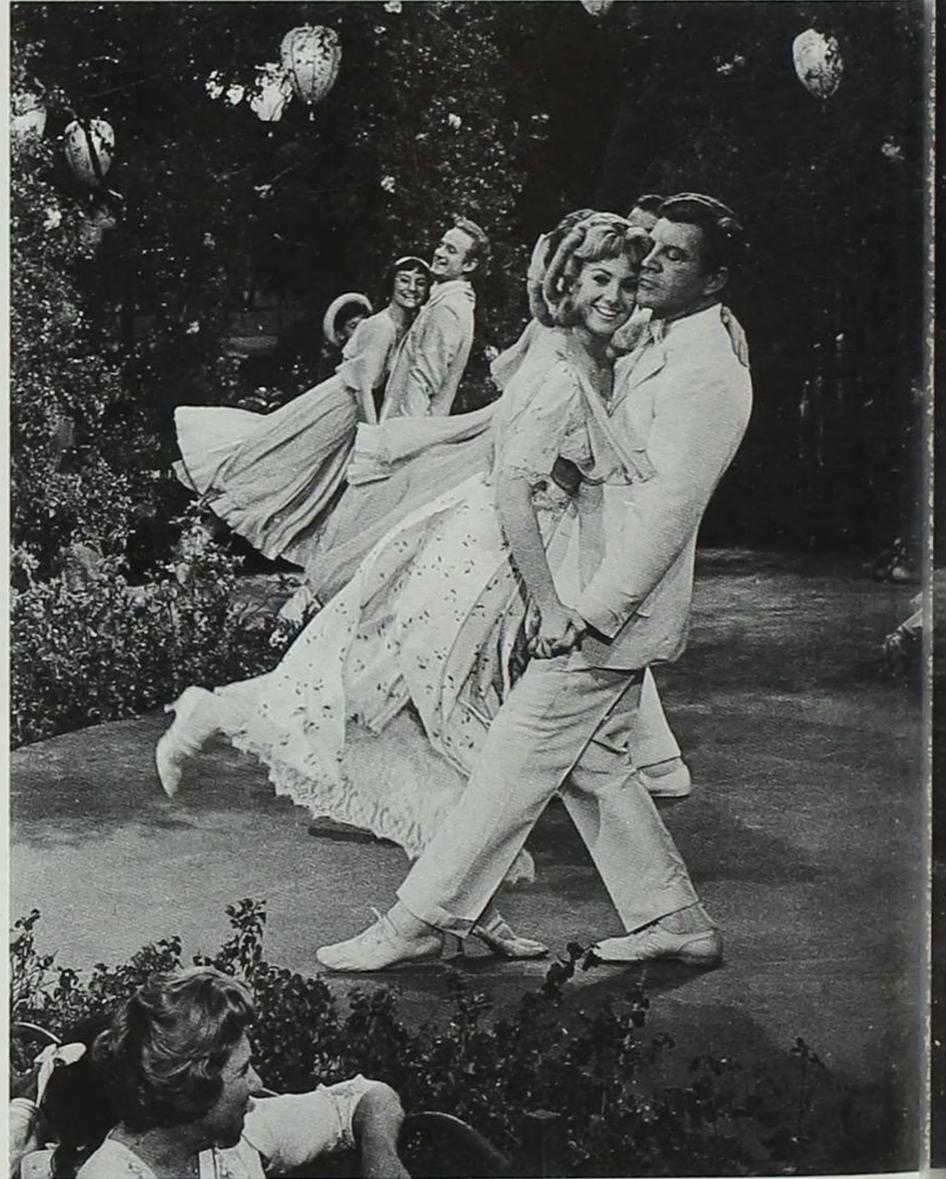
The unsung hero also appears in other 1940s Hollywood films about Iowa. *One Foot in Heaven* (1941) is based on Iowan Hartzell Spence's autobiographical book about his self-sacrificing father, who gave up medical studies and became, instead, a poorly paid Methodist minister. *The Fighting Sullivans* (1944) is based on the true story of five rowdy, fiercely loyal Irish Catholic brothers from Waterloo, Iowa, who died when their ship, the USS *Juneau*, sank in the Solomon Islands in 1943. Sacrifice is also the central theme in *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946), which traces the homecoming of three veterans who return to once-pastoral Boone City, now swept up in postwar materialism, secularism, and Cold War paranoia.

The self-sacrificing, idealistic unsung hero reappears in the 1998 World War II film *Saving Private Ryan*. The film is built around a young Iowa soldier's refusal to leave his unit and go home, even when he learns that his three brothers have all been killed. The United States War Department wants to avoid another Sullivan brothers' tragedy in Iowa, but Private Ryan believes that even his heartbroken Iowa mother will understand why he must stay and help his comrades defend a strategic bridge.

A third stock character, also arising from the pastoral tradition, is the innocent abroad. Several Iowa films, mostly comedies, show naive, good-hearted Iowans, often from rural backgrounds, triumphing in sophisticated places because of their "Iowa qualities." In *Joe's Apartment* (1996), Joe's farm background—specifically, his knowledge of manure—improbably leads to his romantic success. In *Fraternity Vacation* (1995), Wendell, the son of a hog farmer (and described as "Iowa's #1 Nerd" in the movie's promotional material), wins a California beauty thanks to his Iowa niceness.

Pastoral literature celebrates love, and so do the many Iowa films that pair an Iowan and a non-Iowan as romantic partners. In these cinematic plots, the Iowan is usually a woman—principled and tied to her community and family but wistful and bored. The outsider is usually a man—an attractive, worldly loner, cynical and a little dangerous. For instance, in *The Bridges of Madison County*,

SHSI (IOWA CITY)



Iowa farm wife Francesca Johnson (Meryl Streep) and *National Geographic* photographer Robert Kincaid (Clint Eastwood) are swept up in a four-day affair. Ultimately, however, Francesca denies Kincaid's pleas to leave her family and Iowa.

Another insider/outsider romance film is *The Pajama Game* (1957), which has an unusual setting, a factory. (The original source is the novel *7½ Cents* by Iowan Richard Bissell, whose family operated a Dubuque factory that manufactured shirts, sportswear, and pajamas.) But the film is completely conventional in pairing an insider, Iowa tomboy and head of the Grievance Committee Babe Williams, with an outsider, Chicagoan Sid Sorokin, the new factory superintendent.

In *The Music Man* (1962), the outsider is traveling salesman and phony bandleader Harold Hill, a wanderer, con artist, and charmer. The insider is River City's librarian and music teacher, Marian Paroo, a young, unmarried woman impatient with the town's low cultural level, but loyal to her widowed mother and her sad little brother, Winthrop. She dreams of a



SHSI (IOWA CITY); WARNER BROS., COURTESY PYRAMID BOOKS



SHSI (IOWA CITY)

In *The Music Man*, traveling salesman Harold Hill steps off the train in River City, Iowa (above), sweeps the librarian off her feet in an insider/outsider romance (left), and dupes the citizens, despite the mayor's best efforts (right) to expose him as a con man.

white knight with whom she can settle down "somewhere in the state of Iowa." As they fall in love, Harold helps Marian see the joy and beauty in her surroundings (she sings, "There were bells on the hill but I never heard them ringing"), and, in turn, Marian opens his heart to true love. Despite her high principles, when the townspeople discover his scam, Marian reminds them that he has also brought camaraderie, pride, and much-needed fun to River City. Marian's public defense of Harold, though she knows he's a fraud, inspires him to abandon his profitable scam and, it is implied, stay with her in River City. The lovers' remaining together in small-town Iowa is an unusual ending for an insider/outsider romance, since typically one or both of the pair leaves.

*The Music Man* is based on Iowan Meredith Willson's memories of his Mason City childhood, and it gently satirizes an Iowa small town of 1912 and its characteristic Iowa blending of pastoralism, Puritanism, and patriotism. The overwhelming popularity and success of both the film (1962) and the earlier Broadway musical (1957) hearken back to the appeal of pastoralism as an escape from the increasingly complex and frustrating problems of urban life. James Shortridge explains how America's nostalgia in the 1950s and 1960s for the pastoral Midwest led to the success of *The Music Man*. "Being behind the times was

gradually transformed from a negative into a somewhat regional positive," he writes. "*The Music Man* was the most obvious sign of this movement around 1960. Author Meredith Willson drew inspiration from what he called the 'innocent Iowa' of his youth, and this quality was seen as the key to the play's success by most reviewers." Shortridge quotes the *Time* reviewer who remarked in 1958, "In a fat Broadway season whose successes deal so clinically with such subjects as marital frustration, alcoholism, dope addiction, juvenile delinquency and abortion, *The Music Man* is a monument to golden unpretentiousness and wholesome fun." If not quite utopian, life in pastoral River City, Iowa, must have seemed better than life in New York City.

Fans of *The Music Man* will remember the songs "Pick-A-Little, Talk-A-Little" and "Iowa Stubborn," in which River City citizens reveal tendencies toward gossip and stubbornness. The major production number "All I Owe Ioway," from Rodgers and Hammerstein's musical *State Fair*, suggests that ambitious people, though fond of Iowa's "ham and her beef and her lamb and her strawberry

jam—and her pie,” nevertheless leave the state. Both films handle with light humor a theme that appears in several Hollywood films about Iowa—the decidedly anti-pastoral notion that Iowans are narrow-minded and intolerant of new ideas or opposing values. Other films present this notion more darkly. In *Field of Dreams*, for example, citizens at a mean-spirited school board meeting demand a book banning. In *The Bridges of Madison County*, Italian-born Francesca chafes at her local community’s cultural indifference and moral rigidity. Norman Lear’s wickedly satiric film *Cold Turkey* (1971) points a finger at the laziness and hypocrisy of the city’s leaders, including the minister and his wife, as it tells the story of a dying Iowa town that takes a hefty bribe to stop smoking. In *The Last Supper* (1997), an ironic parable set in Iowa, conservatives are graciously invited to dinner by a group of liberal graduate students, and then calmly murdered. All of these examples remind filmgoers that not every scene

in an “Iowa film,” and not every Hollywood filmmaker, presents a pastoral view of Iowa and Iowans, or its conventional stereotypes.

A far different critical approach to Hollywood pastoralism is suggested by the satirical *Zadar! Cow from Hell* (1988). Created by Duck’s Breath Mystery Theatre (originally an Iowa City comedy group that moved to San Francisco), *Zadar!* directly addresses the issue of Iowa’s image. In the movie a Hollywood director returns to his tiny hometown of Howdy, Iowa, to create a film about a monster cow. He brings along a group of Hollywood professionals who repeatedly impose on the locals and ask stupid questions, like “Do they have lawyers in Iowa?” and “Do they have divorce in Iowa?” Outraged over their assigned roles, the locals boot out the Hollywood team and take charge of the filmmaking. Through humor and parody, the film exaggerates and ridicules the conventional stereotypes of Iowa and Iowans in film. Unfortunately, *Zadar!* was

COURTESY THE AUTHORS



**An Iowa farm kitchen created for *The Bridges of Madison County* is the setting in which character Francesca Johnson searches her soul. Here, safe from the gaze of a judgmental community, she weighs romance and adventure in exotic locales against commitment and responsibility in rural Iowa.**

doomed to be an insider joke; *Duck's Breath* could never get national distribution for the film.

Some Hollywood films completely puncture the idea of a pastoral, idyllic Iowa, immersing their audiences in the grim, complex problems of contemporary rural life. In recent years, three anti-pastoral films set in Iowa show us individuals who are overwhelmed in their struggles to maintain a decent existence in Iowa. Each film starred actors with great drawing power: Johnny Depp in *What's Eating Gilbert Grape*; Jessica Lange in *Country*; and Jessica Lange, Michelle Pfeiffer, and Jason Robards in *A Thousand Acres*. But even these big-name stars could not rescue the films from miserable fates at the box office.

*What's Eating Gilbert Grape* (1993) is an elegy for Iowa's dying small towns. Here, the pastoral image of heartland prosperity and fulfillment has soured. The film is set in a small Iowa town named "Endora" (perhaps a sly twist of Eldora, in Hardin County), where the franchised "Burger Barn" and "Foodland" are killing the local mom-and-pop café and grocery store. Gilbert Grape's mother, once spirited and attractive, has become after her farmer-husband's suicide an obese recluse. In the early days of prairie settlement, fat farmers symbolized an abundant heartland. In this film, Gilbert's mother's mammoth size symbolizes the burden of struggling for the viability of rural and small-town Iowa.

The central character, young Gilbert Grape (Johnny Depp), is forced into the paternal role for a very needy family. Everyone relies on him—his mom, whose obesity severely restricts her mobility; his brother, Arnie, who has a mental disability; his two restless sisters; his boss at the failing grocery store; and even a bored, lusty housewife to whom he delivers groceries. Arnie (Leonardo DiCaprio) especially warrants Gilbert's help. Arnie frequently escapes Gilbert's watchful eye and climbs the town's water tower to peer toward the horizon. Coaxing him down to safety, Gilbert gently reminds him, "We're not going anywhere." In the tradition of Iowa insider/outsider romances, Gilbert meets Becky, a stranger who has come through town in an Airstream trailer with her grandmother. She represents the temptation and promise of moving away from Endora.

The film treats all these characters lovingly and with dignity. The most touching scene occurs when Gilbert starts to flee Endora but returns, in the best self-sacrificial unsung hero tradition. Recognizing what it cost him to return, his mother calls him her

"knight in shining armor." That night she exerts herself to climb the stairs to her bedroom, where she dies, perhaps in a self-sacrificial act to free her children from the burden of caring for her. The next year when the Airstream trailers come past, Gilbert and Arnie leave with Becky. Gilbert's sisters have already moved on with their lives. The Grapes have all left Endora, Iowa.

*Country* (1984) had a timely release during the Iowa farm debt crisis in the 1980s. The film had a ripped-from-the-headlines quality that gave it a journalistic feel and led to actress Jessica Lange's congressional testimony on the farm crisis. The incidents in *Country* turn principally on farm foreclosures and focus on the Ivy family, with some attention to a neighboring farmer who commits suicide. The audience sees the realities of life on a family farm circa 1984: murderous storms, long hours, credit negotiations with bankers and merchants, heavy investment in equipment, and endless worry. The pressures and stress take their toll: in a once tight-knit family, Gil Ivy (Sam Shepard) has begun drinking heavily and fights with his son. His wife, Jewell Ivy (Jessica Lange), finally conks him on the head with a 2x4 and tells him to get out. He leaves in disgrace.

Jewell becomes a leader in the family and community, pressing for due process against foreclosure, heading off the bank's demand for a farm sale, and rallying her neighbors. Eventually the sale takes place, but because the neighbors refuse to bid on the equipment, the sale is stopped, to the bankers' chagrin. Gil returns at the moment of the sale, reconciles with his son, and admits, "I need this family." The happy ending here is that the family is reunited. The grinding demands of farm economics have not changed a bit.

The darkest of the anti-pastoral Iowa films is a tragedy adapted from Jane Smiley's Pulitzer prize-winning novel, *A Thousand Acres*, notable for reworking Shakespeare's *King Lear* plot. The central Lear-like figure in the film (1997) is successful farmer Larry Cook, a powerful, proud, and demanding man played by Jason Robards. His impulsive decision to divide his land among his daughters leads to quarrels, irreconcilable differences, and even death for angry son-in-law Pete. Measured against the pastoral tradition, Larry Cook has violated the sacred obligations of a farmer-patriarch: duty to family and duty to the land. His oldest daughters, Rose and Ginny (Michelle Pfeiffer and Jessica Lange), were victims of Larry's incest in earlier years. In recent years, Ginny has had a series of miscarriages, and Rose, two radical mastectomies, the implied result of living in a contemporary farm environ-

ment of toxic fertilizers and pesticides. The film has no happy ending, no reconciliation, and the truth is never fully told or believed.

*A Thousand Acres* did poorly at the box office, even in Iowa, where state pride or curiosity might have drawn large audiences. Critics had great difficulty with its grimly realistic message of wide-ranging moral sickness in the heartland. Others saw it as a male-bashing, feminist film, unfairly portraying men as predators. Still others condemned it as mere "soap opera," dubbing the film "As the Farm Turns" because of the illnesses, sins, deaths, and disasters. (One wonders whether an urban setting like Los Angeles would have provoked such accusations of excess.) Taking such complaints together, it appears that the brutal anti-pastoralism of *A Thousand Acres* defied too many popular expectations about Iowa to score at the box office.

The message here appears to be this: Hollywood filmmakers who want to picture Iowa accurately, who dare to challenge the pastoral myth of innocence and safety, who question traditional social roles and the sacredness of the family, or who choose to move beyond the more popular genres of comedy, romance, and sentimental drama should be prepared for small or often ungrateful audiences.

Pastoral treatments, on the other hand, promise to bring in the bucks.

Consider for a moment the hugely successful *Field of Dreams* (1989). Like *A Thousand Acres*, this film dealt with a farm family facing major debt and the loss of the farm, and it used sibling tensions and father-son alienation as minor themes. In *Field of Dreams* Ray Kinsella (Kevin Costner) finds himself far from his urban roots in New York City, his conservative, estranged father (now dead), and his radical undergraduate years at the University of California at Berkeley. He and his wife, a native Iowan, now own an Iowa farm.

One day, in response to voices only he hears, Ray begins to behave strangely. On good Iowa farm land, he plows up his corn crop and builds a baseball diamond. There, a group of ball players appear, among them long-dead "Shoeless Joe" Jackson and his White Sox teammates, before the Black Sox scandal ruined their lives. Driven by more voices, Ray heads out on a road trip and brings back two other baseball fans—Sixties writer Terrence Mann (James Earl Jones) and small-town physician Archie Graham (Burt Lancaster). All these men, and Ray's dead father, who

now appears as a young man, "ease their pain" by gathering at Ray's ball field. In magical Iowa, they recapture the joy they experienced as young men playing baseball. Ray makes peace with his father; the other men, with unfulfilled dreams.

The film ends as streams of cars head for Ray's farm, each car filled with unhappy people who will pay admission to watch baseball, "just like when they were kids," Mann says, "a long time ago." The implication is that this income will help ease the financial crisis Ray and Annie are facing with their farm, and that coming to the baseball field—returning to the innocence and safety of their youth—will heal the pilgrims.

Ironically, ever since *Field of Dreams* opened in 1989, streams of tourists have been coming to the Lansing family farm near Dyersville where the movie was shot—just as they come to Francesca's farmhouse and Roseman Bridge near Winterset, settings for *The Bridges of Madison County*. These tourism dollars have helped ease the financial crisis of Iowa's farms and small towns. Film fans seem to be looking to the film image of Iowa for the same reason humans have always looked to pastoral images—to seek refuge in beautiful, safe, seemingly uncomplicated places. In these film settings, they can enact their own fantasies of romance, reconciliation, lost youth, and a world without problems.

So does it really matter—either to Iowans or to the rest of the nation—how Iowans are portrayed in popular films? After all, much of the rest of Middle America gets similar treatment, as can be seen in *Fargo's* version of Minnesota and *In and Out's* version of small-town Indiana. At least the serene, magical scenes in *Field of Dreams* and *The Bridges of Madison County* have had a positive impact on tourism. Some newcomers confess that the pastoral imagery in films actually motivated their move to Iowa, and that they have since found enough truth to this image of the state to justify staying. Perhaps thoughtful Iowans will say to Hollywood, "Your pictures are not exactly our reality, but keep on making Iowa films!"

Stefanie Fuller, formerly of the Winterset Chamber of Commerce, comments that the fans of *The Bridges of Madison County* who come to Winterset from around the world expect "Hicksville, USA" and find instead "Hometown, USA." They admire Winterset's beauty, anticipate a simpler life in rural surroundings, and sense safety and moral character.

Ironically, Iowa's population growth is occurring in Iowa's cities and suburbs, not in the small towns and rural areas idealized by Hollywood's popular



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In the serene, magical Iowa countryside, *Field of Dreams* character Ray Kinsella makes peace with his past, saves the farm from foreclosure, and transforms a corner of his land into a mecca for modern-day pilgrims seeking to “ease the pain” of contemporary life. The pastoral qualities of the film paint rural Iowa as a land of simplicity, safety, innocence, and beauty. The site of the 1989 film, the Lansing family farm near Dyersville (above), continues to attract tourists.

pastoral films. This suggests that Hollywood’s dream-  
scape caters to audience desires for only a temporary  
journey. As scholar Renato Poggioli explains, the tra-  
ditional motivation for pastoral fantasies “is a double  
longing after innocence and happiness, to be recov-  
ered not through conversion or regeneration but  
merely through retreat.”

Interestingly, even though Iowans know that these  
pastoral portrayals romanticize and idealize Iowa’s  
landscape, people, and culture, sometimes beyond  
recognition, movie ticket sales suggest that Iowans,  
too, prefer their films about Iowa to be in the pastoral  
mode. The state’s recent sesquicentennial produced a  
wealth of products (books, films, and exhibits) that  
mostly portray the traditional image of Iowa as a state

of farms and small towns, and that reflect the senti-  
ments of the bumper sticker spouting the famous ex-  
change from *Field of Dreams*:

“Is this Heaven?”

“No, it’s Iowa.”

Like all states, Iowa has produced its share of  
unsung heroes like Private Ryan and Ella  
Bishop. Like all states, it has been the back-  
drop for insider/outsider romances, and has  
sent its share of naive, unsophisticated individu-  
als into the larger world. And certainly, farm families,  
small towns, and lush, well-ordered countryside are  
intrinsic to states like Iowa with a strong agricultural

base and a soft, rolling terrain. But Hollywood's pastoral treatment of Iowa hardly does justice to the rich complexities of Iowa and its people, yesterday or today.

Films about contemporary Iowa and historical Iowa could dramatize far more diverse experiences, but the nation does not seem to want to hear those stories. Iowa's public image seems trapped in a cinematic time capsule. Perhaps there is a danger that even we Iowans will cling to the popular pastoral myth, romanticizing our past, denying our problems, and disregarding our options. Perhaps we Iowans should use these Hollywood films as a spark for our own thoughtful discussions about Iowa's identity on the silver screen. ❖

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#### NOTE ON SOURCES

The following books on Iowa and midwestern cultural history proved essential: Clarence Andrews, *A Literary History of Iowa* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1972); Emanuel Levy, *Small Town America in Film: The Decline and Fall of a Community* (New York: Continuum, 1991); Thomas Morain, ed., *Family Reunion: Essays on Iowa* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1995); Dorothy Schwieder, *Iowa: The Middle Land* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1996); and James R. Shortridge, *The Middle West: Its Meaning in American Culture* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1989). Shortridge is also essential reading on midwestern pastoralism. For a broader discussion of pastoralism, see Renato Poggioli, *The Oaten Flute: Essays on Pastoral Poetry and the Pastoral Ideal* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975). Marty Knepper interviewed Stefanie Fuller, formerly of the Winterset Chamber of Commerce, on June 2, 1998.

#### MAKING FILMS IN IOWA

- Iowa Film Office, Iowa Department of Economic Development, Box 4784, Des Moines, Iowa 50309 OR [www.state.ia.us/film](http://www.state.ia.us/film) (serves filmmakers' needs on projects ranging from local commercials to feature films).
- Iowa Motion Picture Association (IMPA), Box 4784, Des Moines, IA 50306 OR [www.netins.net/showcase/imp](http://www.netins.net/showcase/imp) (nonprofit group involved in financing, distributing, and promoting films and video productions).
- Iowa Scriptwriters Alliance (ISA), 3812 Ingersoll Avenue, #201, Des Moines, IA 50312 (develops regional talent for screenplay ideas, treatments, and scripts).
- Donna Reed Foundation for the Performing Arts, PO Box 122, Denison, IA 51442 OR [www.frii.com/donna\\_reed/](http://www.frii.com/donna_reed/) (summer workshops on acting, screenwriting, scriptwriting, film critique, and more).

#### PRESERVING FILMS IN IOWA

The American Archives of the Factual Film (Special Collections, Iowa State University) is a research center for the preservation and study of 16mm non-theatrical film (business, educational, and documentary). Write: Special Collections Dept., 403 Parks Library, ISU, Ames, Iowa 50011-2140 or call 515-294-6672. Special Collections of the State Historical Society of Iowa, in its Iowa City center, has a small collection of historical film and video related to Iowa, and serves as a clearinghouse for researchers who are trying to locate films. SHSI, 402 Iowa Avenue, Iowa City, IA 52240 or call 319-335-3916.

## If Iowans made movies about Iowa...

Ever wish that you could be a film critic, a director, or a voting member of the Motion Picture Academy? Here's your chance to participate in a state-wide conversation about films and Iowa. Please enter our "If Iowans made movies about Iowa" survey.

—Marty S. Knepper and John S. Lawrence

1. In your opinion, what images are the most common and the least common in movies with an Iowa setting? To get you started, here are a few examples. What would you add to these lists?

#### Frequently seen images:

Hogs and cattle  
John Deere tractors  
Carnivals, parades, or fairs  
Small-town or working-class bars  
Men in seed corn hats  
Women in aprons  
Covered dishes and pies  
Flowered wallpaper, wooden floors, and white lace curtains  
Water towers

#### Seldom seen images:

Skyscrapers and traffic  
Malls  
National franchises  
Computers  
Casinos  
Research universities  
Art centers and artists  
Shelves lined with books  
Cutting-edge fashion  
Suburbs

2. Of these films (*State Fair*, *The Music Man*, *Country*, *Field of Dreams*, *The Bridges of Madison County*, *A Thousand Acres*, or name your own), which gives the best portrayal of Iowa or Iowans, and why? Which do you like least?

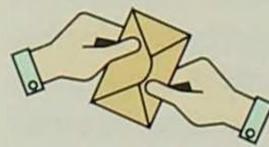


3. Now you're in the director's chair! Suppose you're a filmmaker with a huge budget and top-name stars. What would

your film portray about Iowa or Iowans? What actors would you choose? Or, if you had a chance to make a documentary, what would the topic be?

4. How does your experience with films about Iowa or Iowans affect your assessment of Hollywood's treatment of other regions of America (for example, New York, California, or Texas) or of historical events in America's past?

5. Do film images of Iowa really make a difference? Or, as they would say in Hollywood, is it just entertainment?



### May I have the envelope, please?

For your convenience, these survey questions also appear on the ivory-colored mailing cover that accompanied this issue. Send your responses to any or all of the questions (along with your name, address, and daytime phone) to:

"If Iowans made movies about Iowa" survey  
Attn: Editor, *Iowa Heritage Illustrated*  
State Historical Society of Iowa  
402 Iowa Avenue, Iowa City, Iowa 52240-1806

or by email to: [gswaim@blue.weeg.uiowa.edu](mailto:gswaim@blue.weeg.uiowa.edu)

Watch for survey responses in an upcoming issue. —The Editor