



# OUR READERS TALK ABOUT IOWA IN HOLLYWOOD FILM

Four issues ago, we invited readers to participate in our special survey, "If Iowans made movies about Iowa." (You'll remember that this was connected to the article "Visions of Iowa in Hollywood Film," by Marty S. Knepper and John S. Lawrence.) Several readers responded to our five survey questions, and we're delighted to reprint portions of their replies.

—The Editor

❶ In your opinion, what images are the most common and the least common in movies with an Iowa setting?

For "most common" images, our respondents added these to the authors' list: cornfields, men in overalls, old barns, windmills, State Fair animal barns, white houses with picket fences, farmers in pick-ups, gravel roads, grain elevators, and people waving to each other.

Among the least common images, they suggested: highways, schools, the state capitol, architecture, Iowa's mining industry, "sophisticated" businesses, the Des Moines Regional Opera (Simpson College, Indianola), hills, symphony concerts, posh homes, houses with broad lawns, big cars, classes of business students, African Americans, hunting and fishing, U.S. Senior Open Golf Tournament, home offices of insurance companies, art festivals, recreation facilities, plants and industries, caucuses, sports achievements, drugs and crime, police officers, gangs, prostitutes, and run-down neighborhoods.

❷ 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; which do you like least?

Mary L. Ellis (Des Moines): "My favorite of the Iowa movies was *Field of Dreams*. I think that rural Iowa was portrayed pretty well in regard to dress, speech, relationships. (It is hard to go wrong with Kevin Costner.) Actually all of these movies with a rural theme do portray rural Iowa as it is. However, they never portray any other part of Iowa. Apparently the only reason that movies are made in Iowa is because they are looking for a setting that includes rural culture. They must not think we have anything else unique to offer. Although I liked all of these films, I don't think that *The Music Man* actually gave a good portrayal of Iowans. I grew up near Mason City ("River City"), I am not aware that people were much like those portrayed in the movie during that time period. But then, I don't think that movie was really attempting to portray Iowa. It was about the music."

Leslie Poulson (Colfax): "*Thousand Acres* shows the problems with farms and how they are having problems staying above water. *Field of Dreams* is just stupid and portrays Iowa as Hicksville USA. Makes people think we're a bunch of nuts who hear voices."

Winifred Kelley (Des Moines): "*A Thousand Acres*—family life."

William T. Miller (West Des Moines): "*Pleasantville*. None of the above give a fair, general view of Iowa, only 'specialties,' which are half-truths. *Flight 232*, Sioux City, is best and truthful."

Cathy Sloan (Atalissa): "I think *Country* portrays Iowa and Iowans the best."

Ann Wilson (Altoona): "I loved *Music Man* because of the music. Didn't see the others but suspect *Bridges* would be the least liked."

❸ Suppose you're a filmmaker with a huge budget and top-name stars. What would your film or documentary portray about Iowa or Iowans?

Sloan: "How Iowans jump in and help others who are in need of help. Example: A family member is hurt or becomes ill. Iowans who help after a disaster."

Marita Mastrofski (West Des Moines): "Buxton, an all-black community mining town."

Kelley: "Rise of Pioneer Hi-Bred Seed, showing a city man growing corn near a city, coat and tie; professors of genetics; Cedar Rapids CEO coming home to a big mansion, parties."

Miller: "Get interesting Iowa history events to filmmakers"; Mormons on the trail west; settlement of eastern Iowa; foreign investments and intrigue in Iowa; Iowans' roles in national politics; septuplets and good neighbors; floods and tornadoes; Iowa's war record; the arts and night life; Des Moines as insurance capital.

Ellis had several ideas to "emphasize some other positive Iowa features besides its rural character," including "1. Public education success stories (a child winning a national spelling bee; or state band contests; or Ivy League colleges competing for Iowa scholars but the scholar instead chooses an Iowa college/university because they love Iowa and don't want to leave their families). 2. Healthy family lifestyles (e.g., both parents work but are still actively involved in their children's lives and activities. Show how it can be done here because parents don't work long distances from their homes. . . .) 3. Community fund-raising efforts for civic improvements. 4. University or hospital research setting (something about gene therapy? Check with the IA Health System Gene Therapy Institute). 5. Dog shows. Iowa has one of the largest dog shows in the country each September. . . . 6. Government (There are lots of good stories about the Iowa legislature and the people who run state government or the Governor's office. Show off our Capi-

tol. Sit in on a few appropriation subcommittee meetings for topic ideas. Some crazy things go on there.) 7. Casino gambling—How it can have a negative effect on someone's life."

④ How does your experience with films about Iowa or Iowans affect your assessment of Hollywood's treatment of other regions of America or of historical events in America's past?

Sloan: "I do think Hollywood sometimes makes other places better than what they are."

Mastrofski: "Probably the filmmakers do best in portraying an area they are really familiar with."

Ellis: "Movies are a very powerful public relations tool. We tend to think that New Yorkers are sophisticated and wealthy and that there are also drug addicts on every street corner. Everyone in California is trendy. Texans all think and talk 'big.' I know people in all of these places and they are not at all like they are portrayed in the movies."

Wilson: "If they are as historically correct as regarding Indians/settlers, let's just keep them [Hollywood filmmakers] out!"

Poulson: "I think they overdo the things and exaggerate. I don't believe just what the movies show."

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

All respondents except Wilson thought that the images make a difference. Kelley thought films could affect "others' perceptions of where they might like to live." Poulson commented, "People who have never been to Iowa really think it's like that." Miller noted that "KCCI-TV weather shots give [images of] staggering beauty the world doesn't see." Ellis wrote, "Video rentals and TV allow the movies to be played over and over and firmly implant those images in peoples' minds."

Mark Singsank, executive director of the Dyersville Chamber of Commerce, commented on the local impact of *Field of Dreams*: "We can't estimate precisely how many people have come to visit, but 60,000–75,000 seems reasonable. Restaurants, gas stations, motels have all noticed the positive impact. Most [visitors] seem to be first-time travelers to the area. They comment on how nice Iowa is, and how nice the people are. . . . A woman from the East who lived in a pretty congested area. . . . commented on how the people here are laid back; life doesn't seem as stressful. She thought it might be nice to have a job here, or to retire here."

Readers also added to the list of films with Iowans as characters or Iowa as a setting:

Dan Sullivan (Cedar Rapids) suggested *Dribble*, "shot in Cedar Rapids 20 some years ago" with the Iowa Cornets women's professional basketball team and "Machine Gun Mollie" Bolin.

Fred Crane (Mt. Pleasant) suggested *What's Up Doc?* (1972) with Barbra Streisand and Ryan O'Neal, who plays a musicologist from an Iowa university; and the 1982 TV movie *Bill*, for which Mickey Rooney won an Emmy.

Another reader added *High Barbaree* (1947), starring Van Heflin, John Payne, and June Allyson; in the first half, the characters are childhood friends in idyllic Westview, Iowa. As one character says, they were "born in the best possible place." The film is based on *The High Barbaree*, written by Charles Nordhoff and James Norman Hall and published in 1945.

Perhaps the newest film set in Iowa is *The Straight Story* (1999), starring Richard Farnsworth, Sissy Spacek, and Harry Dean Stanton. The plot is based on the true story of Alvin Straight, a widower from Iowa who drove his riding mower across Iowa to Wisconsin to reconnect with his ailing brother. One reviewer wrote that director David Lynch "looks at America's small-town eccentrics without mocking them [and] celebrates family ties without schmaltz."

And finally, we received this letter from another reader:

In June I sat on my Iowa deck, on my Iowa glider, bathed in Iowa humidity, and read the Winter '98 *Iowa Heritage Illustrated*. What enjoyment I got from the articles about Iowa-related films, especially *State Fair*. I remember being taken by my parents, as a young girl, to see the 1945 version. Later, of course, I saw the 1962 remake with (swoon) Pat Boone.

I lived in Oregon, in the high plains desert region, for a short time. Folks there mostly don't know where Iowa IS, much less what it looks like. A conversation might go like this:

ME: I'm going to Iowa next week.

COFFEE COMPANION: I'm sorry.

While I was in Oregon, *Bridges of Madison County* was released. I encouraged people to see it, and went myself. What happened at the end of the movie was not normal theater behavior. Usually, people leap up and rush out as the credits roll. The film ended, and the camera panned up and away, showing a bird's-eye view of the scene, showing the Iowa landscape. No one moved toward the exit; they just sat silently watching. I heard someone say, "Look at all the big, old trees." I was PROUD.

Anita Hartley (Wilton)

Editor's note: To order the back issue featuring "Visions of Iowa in Hollywood Film," "Your Guide to Iowa Films," and a profile of *State Fair* author Phil Stong, send \$6 (plus \$1 shipping) to: Publications, State Historical Society of Iowa, 402 Iowa Ave., Iowa City, IA 52240. Be sure to specify "Winter 1998 *Iowa Heritage Illustrated*."