

## The Nineteen Forties

*J. Hyatt Downing*

It was not until the state was approaching its centenary that an Iowan accepted the major challenge of Iowa history to writers: in 1940 and 1941 J. Hyatt Downing published *Sioux City* and *Anthony Trant*, two volumes of a single novel in which the social and economic history of an Iowa city is deliberately and extensively used to provide functional background for personal drama.

The story bridges three generations. It begins with Dr. Trant, a physician who has endeared himself to the people of the pioneer town of Sioux City and especially to the farm people far around, and who dies during Sioux City's "boom period" of the 1880's. His son, Anthony, is the major figure of the long novel; and Anthony's career is a tragedy of misplaced ambition, of confused values. Wealth is what he lives for, sacrificing to it his love for Mavis Garnett, the firmly realized "feminine lead" of this soundly dramatic novel.

The chance for easy money and lots of it, which lies open to the son of the respected physician in the time of the city's rapid and speculative expansion, contributes to Anthony's following of a wrong direction in his life. But the real reason lies

deeper: Downing is too good a novelist to be a social determinist. His central character remains in some degree a mystery even to his creator — as is true of all really sound fiction. Yet there is no lack of human actuality in Anthony. He becomes for the reader a real person while at the same time the rapidly growing Sioux City holds a similar lively reality. We actually hear things happening:

And all day long, even into the night, the sound of hammers and the loud voices of masons could be heard working on the new business structures which were running up on Fourth Street. . . .

Sioux City was again moving forward. Cudahy had erected a large packing plant; a linseed oil factory had begun operations; soap, candy, mattress factories had started turning out their products; and there was a growing wholesale trade.

Downing's finest picture of Sioux City, however, is one which shows the city undergoing a depression, and one in which the magnificent physical setting is suggested:

. . . Jackson street as it fell away sharply from the high upper bench to the valley of the Missouri where Fourth Street, cluttered and shabby, ran its length. Far off a white mist was rolling down the huge trough of the river, and the Nebraska hills were vague and indistinct. The sky was a soiled gray, impenetrable as slate and closely cramped to the vague horizons. . . . Some raggletag houses were perched on the steep declivity, their blank eyes staring out into the murk of a fading winter afternoon.

I am in danger, however, of overemphasizing

the part played in Downing's work by description of the city and by social history in general. Actually his interest is in people, as the true novelist's must always be. Though his work is unique in our field in its utilization of a long span of a city's life, this historical material is wholly subordinated to and integrated with the human drama of Anthony Trant and those about him. Among the most interesting and attractive of these other characters is Major Gavin, a friend of his father's who remains a friend to Anthony even though he deplors his money worship and joins Mavis Garnett in fruitless effort to wean him from it. These two, in their relations to Anthony, provide the sustained dramatic elements of the novel. Beyond its very substantial value as social history, Downing's work is marked by genuine literary skill.

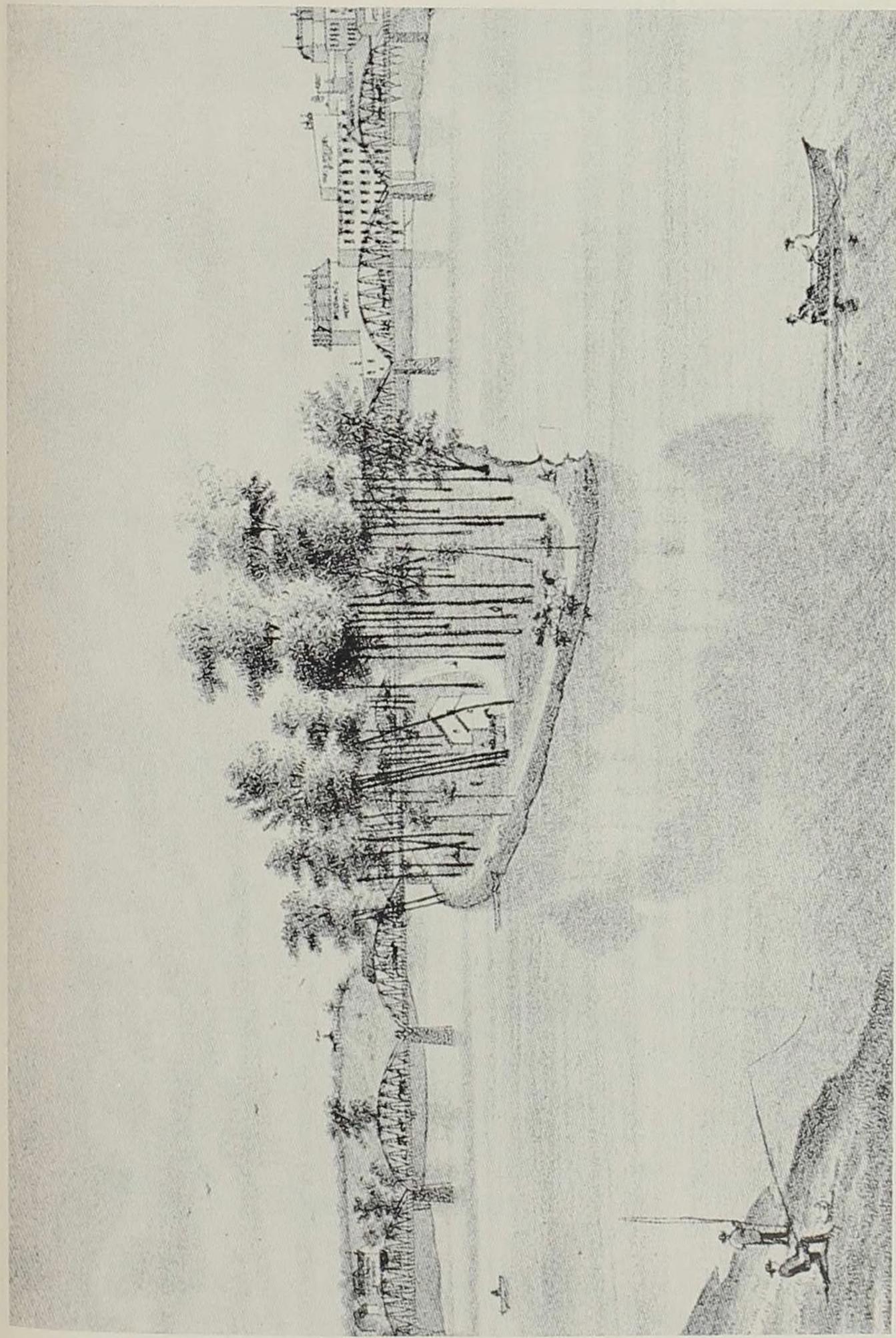
*Elisabeth Ford*

Perhaps there was something conducive to a long-range view of Iowa community life in the perspective afforded by the end of the 1930's. Elisabeth Ford's *No Hour of History*, also published in 1940, is another novel of a long life which presents much of Iowa's social history. Its central character, Virginia Ash, born in Iowa just before the Civil War and living until 1927, bridges with her life a period roughly parallel to that measured by the career of Anthony Trant. Born to wealth, Virginia Ash travels, and knows famous people.

But the richly woven texture of her everyday life in a small Iowa city seems to engage the chief interest of the writer, and the character is in some degree submerged in accurate but overabundant detail which pictures vividly one limited phase of Iowa life for most of a century.

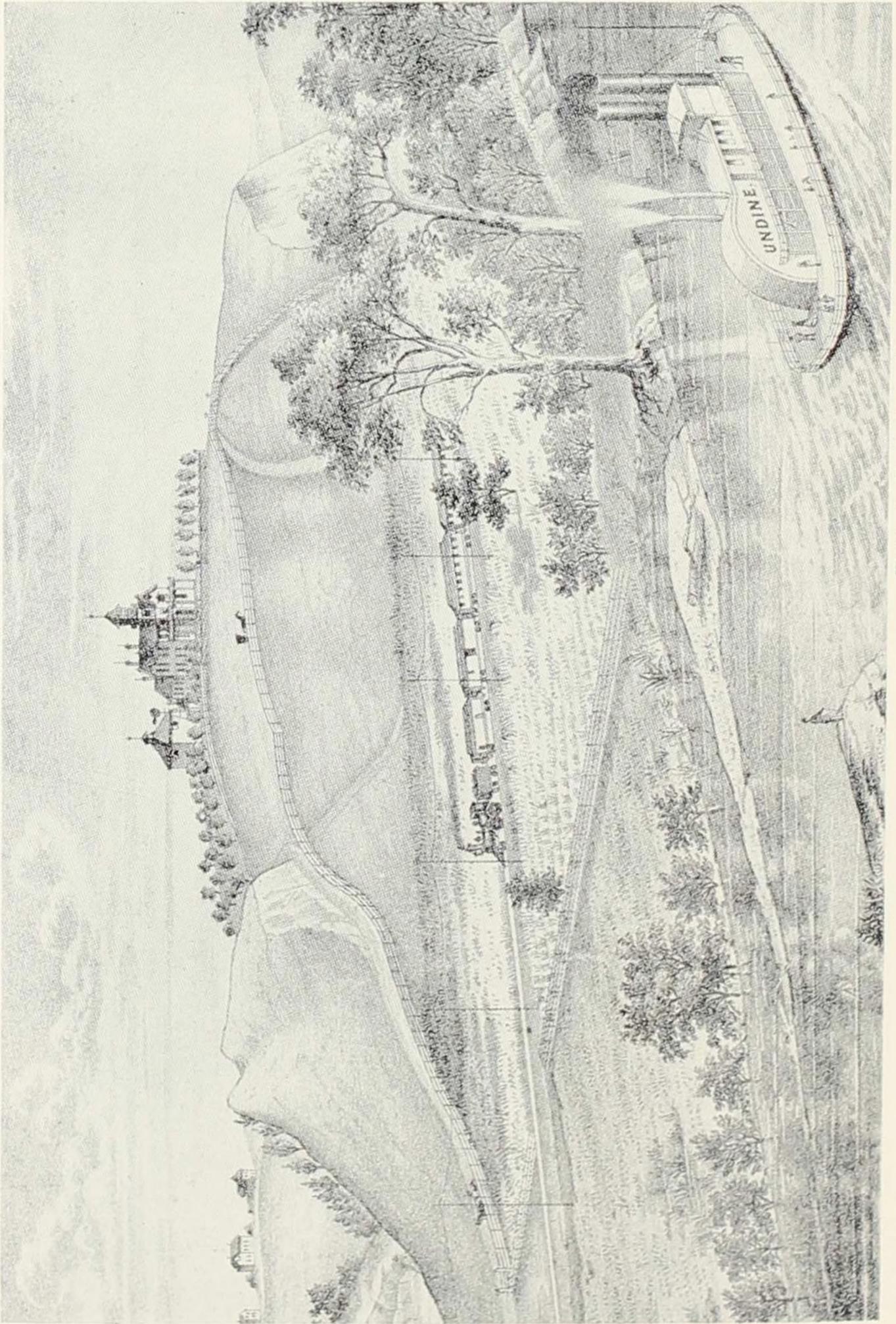
Miss Ford's later novel, *Amy Ferraby's Daughter* (1944), is definitely more dramatic, with class distinctions in the Iowa town of Prairie Grove as the dominant factor of conflict. Amy Ferraby, born an aristocrat and brought to Iowa by an adoring young husband, never forgets her childhood home and never comes to terms with Prairie Grove, which she hates. Her daughter, Caroline, grows up loving the Ferrabys' man of all work but too proud to marry him, fine person though he is in every way but that of social status.

Amy Ferraby's pride ruins her husband's life as well as her daughter's, for she insists on his selling his milling business — which he loves and in which he is successful — because she cannot bear to be a miller's wife. Though the background is nowhere emphasized, the book is rich in details that ring true for the reader with an Iowa background of the period toward the last century's end: crabapple and lilac, spring house-cleaning, the institution of the oyster supper. Some of the characters have marked vitality and firm individuality, notably Judge Rutherford and his daughter Harriet, Caroline's best friend. But the reader



—From A. T. Andreas *Illustrated Historical Atlas of Iowa*

Cedar River, the Island, and Portion of Cedar Rapids



—From A. T. Andreas *Illustrated Historical Atlas of Iowa*

Suburban Sioux City Showing Missouri and Floyd Rivers

who is familiar with the social history of Iowa towns will find it less than probable that "Prairie Grove had a caste system as relentless as that of India," and will conclude that Miss Ford has overdramatized this element in her material.

*Paul Corey*

In *County Seat* (1941) Paul Corey applied a fictional technique in the presentation of an Iowa town similar to that of his *Three Miles Square*. This book is the third volume of the trilogy of the Mantz family, and the Widow Mantz (who has moved to town but still owns the farm) and her sons and daughter are the major figures.

An ingenious device provides a panoramic view of the town for the novel's beginning: from the clock tower of the county courthouse, where repairs are in progress. Thereafter we go into each section and into every group and social level of the community. Complete inclusiveness like that of *Three Miles Square* is impossible, of course, for this county seat town of four thousand people; but the sampling is broad and judicious. It is a period of extreme tensions in Iowa towns of which Corey writes — the years of the 1920's, of prohibition, of depression on the farms and feverish speculation in the cities. Characteristic economic aspects of the time are spotlighted and validly dramatized through Corey's method: Otto Mantz has a garage and filling station, and could prosper if he

managed his expanding business efficiently. Verney Mantz's husband is a trucker, always on the edge of poverty from which rum-running rescues him temporarily. The tenant on the Mantz farm is unable to meet his rent, and other farm owners in the neighborhood are piling up debts.

Social stratification is a factor in *County Seat*, but the emphasis is on mobility: one of the best-realized characters is a boy who is sent to the reform school, but later becomes prosperous and makes a socially advantageous marriage. Strong and effective emphasis is laid on the vast importance of competition — keeping up with the Jones's — in the middle group of this fluid society. It is dramatized in the excessive and irrational demand of Marie, Otto Mantz's wife, for a new house that will mean social prestige, and the effect of this ambition on Otto's business.

One gets fairly tired of the Mantzes before the book is over — especially of the Widow with her fiercely selfish ambition centered solely on her youngest son. Their lives have a tremendous veracity, even to the adored youngest son's escape from his mother to a second-rate job in Chicago from which he returns when depression strikes. The story of the Mantzes, however, is not quite sufficiently dramatic to energize fully the whole substance of the book, with its many remotely extended complications and remotely related characters. So far as the Mantzes are concerned, *County*

*Seat* is dependent on its predecessors in the trilogy, *Three Miles Square* and *The Road Returns*. But it has integration as a portrayal of the town itself. Nowhere else in our fiction is there a study of an Iowa town so deliberately inclusive and representative, so accurate in observation, and so honestly put down.

#### *Hartzell Spence*

To this period belong the two deservedly popular Iowa books of Hartzell Spence, *One Foot in Heaven* (1940), and *Get Thee Behind Me* (1942). Although these books have all the appeal and much of the effect of good fiction, and although their portrayal of Iowa town life is exceptionally lively and acute, they belong in a strict sense to the fields of biography and autobiography, and for this reason I shall not consider them here.

#### *Martin Flavin*

The Harper Prize novel of 1943 — *Journey in the Dark*, by Martin Flavin — is an Iowa novel (at least fore and aft: amidship its setting is Chicago). Interestingly, its theme closely parallels that of J. Hyatt Downing's story of Anthony Trant: the "Dark" of the title is a confusion of ideals, a wrong direction in the journey of life; and it results from the equation of happiness with wealth. The motivation of the book is different from that of Downing's, however, and superficially viewed it is more adequate. Sam Braden, the

central character of Flavin's novel, is born "on the wrong side of the tracks" in "Wyattville," a little town definitely located as on the Mississippi a few miles below Muscatine. His ne'er-do-well father has a permanent job as town marshal; he is brave enough, but lazy and stupid. The boy's mother is of aristocratic birth and breeding, but is a person vastly different from Elisabeth Ford's Amy Fer-raby. It is not her fault that Sam becomes the vic-tim of confused values. She manages and largely supports the family.

When Sam comes to a belated realization of what it means to be poor, he resolves to be rich — and to marry Eileen Wyatt, who lives in the big house with the iron fence around it. Once more the social stratification of the small town is posited as affording the major character and the book their chief motivation. After a period of money-making in Chicago, and a briefer period of unhappy mar-riage to the aristocratic (and unfaithful) Eileen, Sam returns to Wyattville to build a tremendous show place with his money.

The period covered is some sixty years, from the 1880's to the Second World War — which af-fords elements that may have influenced the selec-tion of this novel for the Harper Prize in 1943. Its best portions, however, are those dealing with Sam's boyhood. His mother, the Negro neighbor girl with whom he has his first sexual experience, and — above all the rest — his callous and unam-

bitious father, all these are delineated memorably. The treatment of the town as background is dominated by Flavin's emphasis on class distinctions and opposition, but this involves an excellent if somewhat extravagant picture of a small town's eccentric rich man, the father of Eileen Wyatt.

*Martin Yoseloff*

Martin Yoseloff's *No Greener Meadows* (1946) and *The Family Members* (1948) have a single small Iowa city as setting, though it is called Stone City in the first and Rock Centre in the second. I have made no effort to identify the actual setting of these stories: it is not the real Stone City, for it is a place of some twenty thousand people, with a Y.M.C.A., a good library, and a junior college. It is a pleasure to round out our survey with attention to books as good as these. More than in any other works we have examined except Paul Corey's, an Iowa community as such is fully realized and is dramatically functional in these two books. This is true not of physical aspects of the town primarily, though the look and feel of streets and classrooms and offices are ably rendered when they are called for. It is rather the texture of social relationships through which Yoseloff reveals his community — the complex of attitudes and conduct of many characters centering in each case around a single family.

Perhaps *No Greener Meadows* should be reck-

oned as autobiography rather than as fiction, for it is written in the first person and tells the story of a boy's life from the age of six through his years at the junior college: his successive teachers and schoolmates, neighbors, employers, the "Y," and the high school. The emphasis throughout this record is on the friendliness and open-heartedness of people; the total portrayal is sympathetic.

There is no doubt that *The Family Members* is a novel. Its central character is F. M. Hollenbeck, the general secretary of the Y.M.C.A. at Rock Centre (who appears under another name in the earlier book); and its dramatic core is his discovery and eventual acceptance of the fact that his daughter, Lorraine, is going to have an illegitimate child. This book displays markedly firm characterization. Especially consistent and impressive is the treatment of Agnes, Lorraine's foster sister, and Cecil, her brother. The small city background against which this domestic drama is played out is set down with true realism, without satire or enmity and without glossing or softening. The texture of high school life, for example, is established without undue effort or emphasis and in a distinctly satisfying degree of adequacy. This book does for the Iowa town something a little different from anything provided elsewhere in the record we have studied. Martin Yoseloff's work is a valuable portrayal of the Iowa town in fiction.

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