

Iowa in the 1880s

by Burton J. Williams

The twenty-sixth annual meeting of the Missouri Valley History Conference took place in Omaha, Nebraska, March 10-12, 1983. It was my privilege to serve as commentator for a session entitled "Iowa in the 1880s." Three papers were presented at this session: "The State of the State: Iowa in 1885," by Mary K. Fredericksen, of the University of Iowa; "Regional Growth and Urban Welfare: The View from Sioux City, 1885," by William Silag, of Iowa State University; and "Sports and Games in Western Iowa in the Early 1880s," by Raymond A. Smith, Jr., of Central Washington University.

All too often sessional papers dealing with a common theme, if published at all, appear in different journals at different times and the focus intended is lost to the larger audience, the reader.

This session provided a near perfect model in organizational structure in that the papers focused on an Iowa town, an Iowa region, and the state of Iowa as a whole. Consequently, the combined publication of these papers is most commendable. Such a thematic combination of published papers sees history written as it should be, from the bottom up, not from the top down. Truly local, regional, and state history constitute the bedrock upon which larger historical themes must be erected.

History is among the most difficult of disciplines, simply because it is unique. Contrary to

popular myth it does not repeat itself. It only happens once. In any set of seemingly similar circumstances there are innumerable variables, such as ideas, values, motives, time, place, a different cast of characters, and on infinitum. There is an all too popular tendency in this increasingly complex world to make sweeping generalizations with little if any factual substantiation. Generalization is akin to recognizing a forest but not knowing it is composed of trees. However, a closer look at history (the forest) at the local and state level (the trees), as the late James C. Malin once put it, will enable the historian to "if he will, come to grips with reality in its most elemental forms and more intimately than at any other level of space organization."

As for the quality of the published papers which follow the readers are left to judge for themselves. As commentator on these papers I fear I was not overly delicate in inserting the dagger of historical criticism between the literary ribs of the authors. I trust the authors will look upon my previous commentaries with a spirit of forgiveness and take some consolation from the fact that at least I did not twist the dagger.

The papers to which Burton J. Williams refers have all been modified and edited for publication in this issue of the Palimpsest. Even the title of William Silag's paper has been changed in accordance with a suggestion made at the conference.

— Ed.