

Politics, Dime Novels, and Unraveling the Rainsbargers

WHILE WATCHING THE two political party conventions this summer, I tried to conjure up — from other campaigns decades ago — the candidates' stirring speeches, delegates' sustained cheers, and factions' assorted passions. Most of a campaign is ephemeral (including a fair number of promises), and what remains afterwards are the objects that, with interpretation, hint at what motivated voters. Although the simplicity of political slogans and gimmicks belies the complexity of political issues, our photo essay, "Campaign Collections: Reminders of Iowa's Political Past," presents the issues and objects that may have made Iowans' political blood boil as far back as the 1840s.

This *Palimpsest* also presents the success story of Oliver "Oll" Coomes, a Cass County farmer who wrote seventy-seven dime novels, several of them set in Iowa. Author Becky Wilson Hawbaker shows several ways in which Coomes used Iowa — and Iowans — for his stories. Like all successful dime novelists, Coomes tended towards hyperbole, colorful writing, and stereotypes. And he made sure that "the good guys always won."

Our third article throws that axiom up in the air. Some of our readers have probably heard about the Rainsbargers, a Hardin County family who became embroiled in a series of

dangerous and puzzling events in the 1880s. The family name was etched into Iowa history thanks to Eldora editor James S. Ross's overzealous efforts in his often-quoted "pamphlet history." This little booklet reads much like a dime novel, with hyperbole and stereotyping — all to the detriment of the Rainsbarger family. As author Raymond M. Tinnian comments, Ross "created an enduring myth," linking the Rainsbargers to "long-extinct criminal gangs." This is not a new story to Iowa history, but Tinnian shares new information and deftly unravels the complex events.

Why tell the Rainsbarger story again? First, it's an intriguing story, well-researched and well-written. Second, our view of the past is broadened and balanced by new information and perspectives. Perhaps we also need to continually reexamine long-standing historical accounts for the hidden "myths." And new information may alter our judgment of who's the "good guy" and who's the "bad guy" — as if it's ever that clear-cut.

As even Ross wrote in his introduction to his little booklet in 1885, "In every community there exists hope, hate, love, malice, ambition, grandeur — every sentiment that can ennoble; every passion that can degrade." Iowa's past is not just a success story — but it is a fascinating one. — *The Editor*



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Dime novels capitalized on color and suspense.