

STUDIES IN MIDWESTERN HISTORY

VOL. 2, No. 7

August, 2016

FROM SANDHURST TO RURAL IOWA: THE EDUCATION OF A PRAIRIE HISTORIAN

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I entered graduate school in the fall of 1967 with very poor preparation. I had left the British army at the end of 1965 and came to America in January 1966. I had heard that American universities accepted credits for previous academic work and I wanted an undergraduate degree. In those days the British Military Academy (Sandhurst) covered academic subjects as well as military ones. I was actually taught military history by John Keegan. It was his first term at the institution having just “come down” from Oxford.² I managed to collect almost a year and half of credits when I enrolled at Boston University (BU). Going to school full time, I graduated in eighteen months with a history degree. In the American survey course we read *The Perils of Prosperity* by William Leuchtenburg. At the beginning this book has a very evocative description of the small town and rural Midwest—that description stayed with me for some reason and made the prairie milieu seem

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² Keegan spent much of the course lecturing on the American Civil War. It is noteworthy that he took sixteen years to write his masterpiece, *The Face of Battle* (New York: Viking, 1976). Obviously there was no “publish or perish” syndrome at the Royal Military Academy, Sandhurst. He also wrote several books with American themes. Indeed his final publication was John Keegan, *The American Civil War: A Military History* (New York: Knopf, 2009).

attractive. Ironically, of course, it was tongue in cheek, for Leuchtenburg was using the rural heartland's backwardness to contrast with the fast paced life of 1920s urbanism.³

Because of the Vietnam War, everyone wanted to avoid the army in 1967. As a result it was difficult to get into graduate school. My minimal academic background and low GRE scores were not especially encouraging for placement in a high-powered history department. One place I applied was Iowa—without luck. However, the chair at BU was helpful. He told me that a new campus of the University of Illinois had just opened in Chicago, and an ex-colleague of his, Robert Remini, had recently joined the history department along with a number of other up-and-coming historians. So I applied and was accepted.

Graduate School: The Harvard on Halsted

If anything was emphasized in American history in a place like Chicago it was urban history. Actually, the field had not materialized at that point, but two faculty members, Melvin Holli and Gilbert Osofsky, were teaching what would be transposed into urban history in the early 1970s. Osofsky was a very inspiring teacher and charismatic figure. His “Negro History” course at the height of the Black Power struggle was first rate. Although he committed suicide in the early 1970s, partly as a result of a disastrous year at Cornell when African American activists came on campus with guns, he had a number of graduate students who went on to do good things in American history. William R. Taylor came to campus for one semester having divorced his wife and taken up with a graduate student. I remember we read *The New Radicalism in America* by Christopher Lasch. I was completely at sea, and was lucky to escape the course with a B-.⁴

I should say that I had been advised to study American history as an undergraduate. Why study European history in the United States? America was the world's super power and even in Britain some were beginning to recognize this. American Studies would eventually be offered in England. Presumably there would be jobs in US history when I went back. I found American history parochial, however. My first seminar was with Remini. I could not understand how anyone could make

³ William E. Leuchtenburg, *The Perils of Prosperity, 1914-1932* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958).

⁴ Melvin Holli, *Reform in Detroit: Hazen S. Pingree and Urban Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969); Gilbert Osofsky, *Harlem the Making of a Ghetto: Negro New York, 1890-1930* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967); William R. Taylor, *Cavalier and Yankee: The Old South and American National Character* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965); Christopher Lasch, *The New Radicalism in America, 1889-1963: The Intellectual as Social Type* (New York: Knopf, 1965).

their specialty Andrew Jackson—slaveholder, super patriot, destroyer of Native American civilizations—at the height of the 1960s upheavals.⁵ I wrote my paper on Charles Francis Adams and the Free Soil Party. I tried to connect his Vice Presidential run with the Revolutions that took place in Europe in 1848—Remini did not think much of this. I remember relying heavily on Martin Duberman's biography of Adams—probably the dullest book ever written. Later Duberman wrote his own very revealing autobiography, and went on to write a number of books of a very different genre.⁶

Some familiarity with what went on in the social sciences rescued me from what was, in 1969, an American history curriculum still dominated by political history. My brother-in-law, an anthropologist, though never telling me what to read, often made trenchant comments on the conservative nature of historical methodology. I also took a course with a British historian, Peter Jones. He was very eclectic and cross-disciplinary in his approach to history. As a British trained economic historian he had already written a Penguin history of the American economy and some other books about the Americas.⁷ His reading list included J.K. Galbraith, Eric Erickson, C. Wright Mills, and the two iconic British intellectuals of the period. We read Raymond Williams' *Culture and Society* and Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy*.⁸ Sometime in 1970 I came across Paul Kleppner's *The Cross of Culture*, which showed emphatically what a historian could do with a behaviorist or social science approach to history.⁹

It was Richard Jensen, who arrived at U of I, Chicago Circle, as it was then called in 1970, who was the major influence in my further development. I can remember being somewhat disappointed when his *Winning of the Midwest* came out. Unlike Kleppner, Jensen was much more accessible

⁵ Robert Remini, *The Election of Andrew Jackson* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1963); Robert Remini, *Andrew Jackson and the Bank War: A Study in the Growth of Presidential Power* (New York: Norton, 1967). Remini went on to write the definitive biography of Jackson, and other Jacksonian figures such as Clay and Webster.

⁶ Martin B. Duberman, *Charles Francis Adams, 1807-1886* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1961); see for example, Martin B. Duberman, *Stonewall* (New York: Dutton, 1993).

⁷ Peter d'A Jones, *The Consumer Society: A History of American Capitalism* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1965); Peter d'A Jones, *The Christian Socialist Revival, 1877-1914: Religion, Class, and Social Conscience in Late Victorian Britain* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968). Like several British trained historians of that era, Jones did not have Ph.D. He understood that he would never obtain promotion without one. One year he returned to Britain, signed up at the University of London, and researched and wrote what became his dissertation. He then returned in triumph to Smith College. The next year Princeton published his *Christian Socialist Revival*.

⁸ John Kenneth Galbraith, *The New Industrial State* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1967); Erik H. Erikson, *Childhood and Society* (New York: Norton, 1964); C Wright Mills, *White Collar: The American Middle Classes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1951); Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society, 1780-1950* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1960); and Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy: Aspects of Working Class Life* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1958).

⁹ Paul Kleppner, *The Cross of Culture: A Social Analysis of Midwestern Politics, 1850-1900* (New York: The Free Press, 1970).

and less of a social scientist in style. Although he emphasized voting behavior and used statistics, his book read like traditional history. Of course, Jensen brought a math background to his work. Already his pioneering statistics text was on the market, and soon after that the first usable computer statistical package (SPSS) came out. Jensen was an enormously exciting person to have on campus. He was bristling with new ideas, and although never interested in university teaching—he used to breeze in very late for class—his entrepreneurial talents set him apart from his plodding colleagues. This inevitably caused hostility, and enemies quickly surfaced. His conservative politics also caused umbrage, but he never wore his conservatism on his sleeve. Although Jensen had written about the rural Midwest in his book, he was not particularly interested in small towns, farming, and rural communities. When we cooperated for several years in the seventies and early eighties, I provided the enthusiasm for rural America; he, of course, brought the methodological and statistical expertise to the partnership.¹⁰

By 1970 the history “from the bottom up” movement was in full swing. Thernstrom had published his book in 1964 and social mobility and community studies using the US census manuscripts had become an industry.¹¹ Already the methodology for these kinds of studies was old hat, and practitioners were being criticized for the copycat and unoriginal work.¹² However, although people like Malin and later Bogue had used censuses years before in the farm context, the behavioral revolution was urban based, and had, for the most part, ignored the rural.¹³ My interest in social science literature had alerted me to work by rural sociologists and anthropologists, both in England and America. The American studies were often from the Depression era, where the farm Security Administration had looked at small rural communities in various localities. In the Midwest, Irwin, in Shelby County, in western Iowa was chosen. Horace Miner’s classic *Culture and Agriculture* was another Depression era study of Hardin County, Iowa. Like many states in the

¹⁰Norman H. Nie, *SPSS: Statistical Package for the Social Sciences* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1975); Richard J. Jensen, *The Winning of the Midwest: Social and Political Conflict, 1888-1896* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968); Charles Dollar and Richard Jensen, *Historians Guide to Statistics: Quantitative Analysis and Historical Research* (New York: Holt Rinehart and Winston, 1971).

¹¹ Stephen Thernstrom, *Poverty and Progress: Social Mobility in a 19th Century City* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964)

¹² See Mark Friedberger, review of Gordon W. Kirk Jr., *The Promise of American Life: Social Mobility in a 19th Century Immigrant Community, Holland, Michigan, 1847-1894* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1978), *American Historical Review*, Vol. 84, No. 2 (1977): 568.

¹³ James C. Malin, “The Turnover of Farm Population in Kansas,” *Kansas Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (1935): 339-372; Alan G. Bogue, *From Prairie to Corn Belt: Farming on the Illinois and Iowa Prairie* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963).

Midwest, the Iowa Experiment Station had conducted some early community studies. Useful surveys were undertaken in the teens and early 1920s in Cedar County, Clay County, and near Waterloo.¹⁴ William Williams' *A West Country Village: Ashworthy* provided an historical dimension to conduct research on a contemporary British farming community.¹⁵ The Cambridge Group was beginning to publish seminal studies of the family that used the census and family reconstitution.¹⁶ Michael Anderson's *Family Structure in 19th Century Lancashire* was an important influence because it dealt with rural migration from the countryside to an industrial town, and analyzed the structure of the household and family.¹⁷

Thus by the time I was ready to choose a dissertation topic I had absorbed a literature which was very different from traditional American history, or for that matter anything typical of most Prairie historians. My original intent was to write a dissertation on Chicago's Back of the Yards: to revisit Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*. However, I got cold feet. I guessed that others, better qualified than me, would tackle this topic. In the end my calculations proved correct: a number of excellent studies were published in the next few years that would have left my efforts high and dry—serendipitously the Prairie beckoned.

In the summer of 1971 I attended the ICPSR (Inter-Universities Consortium for Political and Social Research) history seminar at Michigan, which was designed to teach behavioral and statistical methods. Jensen had already alerted me to the whereabouts of the Iowa State Census manuscripts, which were extant and were available up to 1925. They not only contained data which the Federal Census did not collect until the 1940s, like income and education, but they also asked respondents for their religion, something the Federal Government never collected. Jensen suggested that rather than tracing individuals through census manuscripts—which often led to a poor return for considerable labor, I should employ a cohort approach. In other words trace an age group

¹⁴ See for example, Paul S. Pierce, *A Social Survey of Three Rural Townships in Iowa* (Iowa City: State University of Iowa, 1917); George H. Von Tangeln, *et. al.* "A Rural Social Survey of Hudson and Jesup Consolidated School Districts, Black Hawk, and Buchanan Counties, Iowa," *Iowa Agricultural Experiment Station, Bulletin*, 224, 1924; George H. Von Tangeln, "A Rural Social Survey of Lone Tree Township, Clay County, Iowa," *Iowa Agricultural Experiment Station, Bulletin*, 193, 1920; George H. Von Tangeln, "The Social Aspects of Rural Life and Farm Tenancy in Cedar County, Iowa," *Iowa Agricultural Experiment Station, Bulletin*, 217, 1923.

¹⁵ William Morgan Williams, *A West Country Village: Ashworthy, Family, Kinship, and Land* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963).

¹⁶ Peter Laslett, *The World We Have Lost* (London: Methuen, 1965); and his more technical work, Peter Laslett and Richard Wall, eds., *Household and Family in Past Time* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972).

¹⁷ Michael Anderson, *Family Structure in 19th Century Lancashire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971).

through the manuscripts from 1875 to 1925—each year the age cohort grew ten years older.¹⁸ I chose Davenport and surrounding Scott County for this task. Not only was the city fairly near Chicago, it was also where my wife’s family had run a restaurant some years before. The dissertation was narrow in scope, and although the methodology worked, it had all the features of a census community study of those years. Davenport was an interesting city politically. It suffered an upheaval in World War I when its German population voted in socialists after some of their number had been put on trial for sedition in the spring of 1917. While I covered these activities, they did not blend into the social structural emphasis of the first half. In essence it was two dissertations. Because of my total absorption with methodology, I missed entirely an earlier political fight over prohibition and prostitution that probably had as much to do with the German revolt as the draft issue in the war.¹⁹ At any rate, “Corn Belt and River City,” my dissertation, did look at the rural part of Scott County, and whetted my appetite for more research on rural Iowa beyond the banks of the Mississippi.²⁰

Post-Graduate, The Newberry

In those days no statistics were published about PhD production. The year I got my degree, (1973) coincided with the highest number of doctorates in history either before or since. Jobs were few and far between. I interviewed for a one-year position at Iowa State, but Jensen’s lack of enthusiasm for teaching rubbed off on me. We discovered that a new agency, the National Institute of Education, created by the Nixon Administration no less, had just put out a Request For Proposals for research on educational topics. The year before, the sociologist Christopher Jencks had published *Inequality*, a study that looked at the impact of education on social mobility and had created a big splash.²¹ As the Iowa State census of 1915 had all the Jencks variables, why not do an historical study on a rural state? In the short time available we wrote the proposal, and sent it

¹⁸ Henry J. Dubester, *State Censuses: An Annotated Bibliography of Censuses of Population Taken after the Year 1790 by States and Territories of the United States* (Washington: Library of Congress, Census Library Program, Government Printing Office, 1948), 14-20; Mark Friedberger, “Cohorting with the State Census: The concept of the Cohort, and its use in Manuscript Census Research,” *Historical Methods Newsletter*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (1972): 1-4.

¹⁹ See Sharon E. Wood, *The Freedom of the Streets: Work, Citizenship and Security in a Gilded Age City* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).

²⁰ Mark Friedberger, “Corn Belt and River City: Social Change in a Midwest Community, 1885-1930,” (PhD diss, University of Illinois, Chicago Circle, 1973).

²¹ Christopher Jencks, *Inequality: A Reassessment of the Effect of Family and Schooling in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1972).

in. In the summer of 1973 Jensen had begun his long running Methods Workshops at the Newberry Library in Chicago. Federal largesse allowed for an institution in those days to rake in 100 percent overhead for any grant. So if the grant called for \$50,000 to be spent on research, another \$50,000 was supplied for overhead. Naturally the Newberry was interested in this sponsorship, and “Education and Social Structure: a Historical Study of Iowa,” was the first research grant under the auspices of the Newberry’s Family and Community History program. The funding allowed for two years of study—one year for research in Iowa, and the second to write up the results.²²

In the fall of 1973 I moved to Des Moines where the records were held, and began the study. It was designed to sample all types of Iowa communities: farm townships, villages, small towns, and city neighborhoods. Something over 4000 cases were collected—four boxes of IBM cards—and these cases were traced back and forth in the censuses. We followed the flawed social mobility methodology that had been rejected in the dissertation. While this produced around 2000 eventual cases, and provided the variables for a model to be used to predict the effect of education on life chances, it was badly skewed towards stable individuals. I spent about 8 months collecting and tracing individuals in the archive. I remember the Iowa Historical Building in Des Moines was depressing. A semi-professional staff ran it. The archive occasionally hosted genealogists. But this was before “Roots,” and on most days I was alone listening to the gossip of the staff on their coffee breaks. While the paycheck was welcome, and I visited most of the study communities, overall this prolonged period in Des Moines was not something to remember. In order to make the study publishable, a lot more conventional material needed to be added to the statistical data.

This was never done, mostly because the Family and Community History Center was a “shop.” Its existence depended on soft money, so that grant opportunities were continually sought to keep the doors open. Jensen’s entrepreneurial skills were crucial here, and he was able to take advantage of the Federal trough that in the 1970s and 1980s was willing to fund history. While the NEH was the obvious agency to cull for funds, grants also came from the National Institutes of Health, and the National Institute on Aging, and the National Institute of Child Health. We used the census model to investigate the elderly, and the disabled with grants from these agencies.²³ For fifteen years I worked on soft money grants of various kinds. Three of those years were spent

²² Richard J. Jensen and Mark Friedberger, *Education and Social Structure: An Historical Study of Iowa* (Chicago: The Newberry Library, 1976).

²³ For example, Mark Friedberger, “The Decision to Institutionalize: Families with Exceptional Children in 1900,” *Journal of Family History*, Vol. 6, No. 4 (1981): 396-409.

directing “Workshops in Community History” which brought non-academic historians to the Newberry to improve the writing of local history.²⁴ However, in 1979 the Newberry decided that Jensen had overstayed his welcome at the institution—the administration of some grants had been slipshod, and money had to be refunded to the agencies. Jensen simply transferred operations to the University of Illinois which was only too welcome to host a successful grants man.²⁵

In these days of severe cut backs in academia and budget restraint in government, it is remarkable to think back on the flush times of those years. Even when Reagan was President the money kept on coming. I remember going to a fancy dress party as David Stockman. At a time when everyone thought the Administration was going to cutback academic research—the Reagan years proved just as lucrative as those of Carter, Ford, and Nixon.²⁶

All this grant activity, and the need to secure soft money on a regular basis, precluded the write up of the results in publishable form. The grants produced a few articles, and conference papers, but that was all. Moreover, the research, for the most part, was not interesting.²⁷ It was time for me to strike out on my own. From 1983-87, I concentrated my energies on rural America.

In Rural America

The farm family was an obvious place to start. I had a good understanding of both the history and social science literature on the family. In the late 1970s I had visited Sonya Salamon who was in the middle of her study of farm families on the Illinois Prairie. The visit was enormously helpful, for it showed me how an anthropologist worked in the field and also how farm families engineered the inheritance process of handing down the farm from one generation to another.²⁸ The obvious question to answer from an historical perspective, was how had the contemporary US farm family got to its present state? I had always wanted to do something comparative, so the classic farm state

²⁴ Products of the workshops included Mark Friedberger, *Workshop Exercises for Local Historians* (Chicago, Newberry Library, 1979); Glen E. Holt and Dominic A. Pacyga, *Chicago: A Guide to the Neighborhoods: The Loop and the South Side* (Chicago: Chicago Historical Society, 1979); Jean F. Block and Samuel W. Block, *Hyde Park Houses: An Informal History, 1858-1910* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).

²⁵ Richard Jensen, “The Accomplishments of the Newberry Library and Family and Community History Program: An Interview with Richard Jensen,” *The Public Historian*, Vol. 5, No. 4 (1983): 49-61, speaks for itself.

²⁶ Reagan’s budget director David Stockman—a farm boy from Michigan—tried to prevent inflationary budgets from reaching the President’s desk, but to no avail. See David A. Stockman, *The Triumph of Politics* (New York: Harper and Row, 1986).

²⁷ Daniel Scott Smith, Mark Friedberger, and Michel Dahlin, “The Family Structure of the Older Black Population in the American South, in 1880 and 1900,” *Sociology and Social Research*, Vol. 63, No. 3 (1979): 554-563.

²⁸ Sonya Salamon, *Prairie Patrimony: Family, Farming, and Community in the Midwest* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992). The classic study of the dynamics of the farm family over time is Peter Dorner, *Economic and Social Change in Wisconsin Farm Families: A Sampling of Wisconsin for 1950, 1960, 1975* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, Agriculture and Life Sciences), Bulletin, R3105, 1981.

of Iowa might be contrasted with California the quintessential pioneer in agribusiness. I wrote several grants, and either the NEH or NIH funded all of them. This time I was determined to not only base my research on the archives—the main focus was county court house probate files—but as important, to become a social scientist, and interview farm families armed with the documentary evidence from the courthouses.

The Iowa part of the study was conducted mainly in two counties Fayette and Benton, in eastern Iowa. The former had a large German Catholic population, and the latter a large German Protestant community. The Germans had come to Iowa before the Civil War and had stayed. In both communities a number of families had gone thru probate several times. On the other hand, so called inter-vivo transfers were permitted in Iowa. In other words parents could transfer their land to children before death, and receive support from children in their old age. Such a strategy by-passed probate, and required the researcher to investigate mortgages and land records. Land and probate records are much used by the real estate industry, and in certain states like California by land men for the oil and gas industry. Unlike the typical historical archive, courthouses can be busy places. In rural Iowa locale was not really an issue, but in California, access to records in a courthouse might be problematic. Arguably the most important agricultural county in California, Fresno, would be difficult to study because its courthouse is located in a major city. Kings County, just south of Fresno, proved a good alternative. California is a community property state, and its probate laws are more liberal than in the Midwest. Inter-vivo transfers were not permitted, but the county clerks' offices were better organized.²⁹

I would argue that despite the exotic climate of the Central Valley, and the fact that over 200 commodities can be grown there, by the 1970s farming was conducted very much as it was in Iowa. To be sure, historically California had pioneered the use of farm labor, had introduced cooperative marketing methods, used irrigation extensively, and had seen open conflict between the family farmer and larger farms organized along agribusiness lines. In northern Kings County Portuguese dairymen and Swedish and Danish fruit farmers had clung tenaciously to the land, and this kind of behavior followed similar Iowa patterns. One striking difference between the Midwest and California was the lack of input by the Experiment Station on the human problems of agriculture—there were no community and farm family studies like those conducted by state researchers in

²⁹ Mark Friedberger, "Probate and Land Records in Rural Areas," *Agricultural History*, Vol. 58, No. 4 (1984): 123-126.

Iowa, and Wisconsin. Instead, the Federal government had made a big impact in California in the 1930s. The Farm Security Administration's camps and photographs had left their mark. Walter Goldschmidt's study *As You Sow*, came out of this 1930s Federal push to document the structural aspects of agriculture in the Central Valley.³⁰

The Farm Crisis

By the end of 1984 I had collected inheritance data from both states when I read of the worsening farm financial crisis in Iowa. I had two more years on my grants—enough time to not only write-up a book, but also to concentrate entirely on the Iowa farm crisis. I had a perfect platform. My inheritance work had allowed me to become familiar with families living in various communities, some of whom were suffering.

The Farm Financial Crisis of the 1980s was quickly forgotten, but like similar later financial downturns—the Savings and Loan debacle, and the recent Wall Street slump—people got into trouble usually because of unwise borrowing practices. However, farmers had more reason to feel sorry for themselves than homeowners in 2008. To farm you need land, and land was in short supply in Iowa in the 1970s. It was also becoming much more expensive—Central Iowa black prairie land could sell for \$4,000 an acre. In order to continue farming and compete with neighbors, young men who were not involved in an inheritance arrangement with parents had to borrow money. Here my material on inheritance proved significant because it showed that those who inherited farms, not surprisingly, were less likely to be in financial trouble than those who had to pull themselves up without family assistance. “The Farmers are crying again,” was a way one Iowa woman described the chorus of complaint that began to surface in early 1985.³¹ While homeowner losses undoubtedly caused some public protests in the past few years, Iowa farmers and their allies were vocal and often used tactics borrowed from the Civil Rights Revolution to publicize their plight. Here the media was co-opted to portray lenders in a poor light on the evening news.³²

One lesson to be learned from any crisis is that the media exaggerate its dimensions. This was true of the farm downturn in Iowa. The Farm Unity Coalition, which transposed itself into an organization called Prairie Fire, was quick to make itself available to assist farmers in financial

³⁰ Walter Goldschmidt, *As You Sow: Three Studies in the Social Consequences of Agribusiness* (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1947).

³¹ Quoted in the *Des Moines Register*, October 24, 1982.

³² Several of my respondents were able to contact the television media during times of stress caused by the potential loss of a farm. The chance to highlight confrontations between bankers and farm families made for good viewing. See Mark Friedberger, *Shake-Out: Iowa Families in the 1980s* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1989), 83.

trouble by the summer of 1984. The media picked up their doom and gloom scenario, and Iowa's major newspaper, the *Des Moines Register*, gave the downturn full coverage. The *Register* was extraordinarily useful for anyone following the situation. In this pre-Gannett phase of the paper's history the editor utilized major resources in the form of stories on multiple days on a host of issues that effected farming. In the early months of 1985 the Iowa Farm Unity Coalition was also willing to assist an outsider who was adjusting to the situation. Their hot line was initially the only contact that farm families in distress could use to seek help. Later state resources were marshaled to do similar tasks.

My strategy was simple: to cover those communities in eastern Iowa where I had already collected data, and expand coverage to the western part of the state where the downturn was more serious. My research design was to administer an interview questionnaire that covered intergenerational issues and the current financial status of the family. One satisfying aspect of the study was the openness with which these families discussed their affairs. Partly this was because I did my homework in the courthouse before hand, and had also contacted key local respondents who I could use as references when I made cold calls. Certainly farmers were used to the appearance of salesmen at odd hours of the day, and the presence of a stranger at the farm was not that unusual. Moreover, in the comparative isolation of the farm, a break for a discussion of problems could be a welcome relief. Often wives were more than willing to open themselves up. Several women in the sample became very active advocates in the struggle to save their farms. Obviously the final sample was hardly representative of the farm families of Iowa. I concentrated on those with intergenerational partnerships for a start, and my sample sites covered only a small population of the farm population as a whole. On the other hand, this snowball sample had the advantage of face-to-face contact and a rich database.³³

I had moved to Vinton, in Benton County, in the fall of 1985. For the first time in my life I lived permanently in a small town in the Heartland. Vinton was in striking distance of western Iowa, and also fairly close to the bankruptcy archives that I needed to consult. As the farm crisis developed and then waned in 1986, I had completed most of the interviews in Fayette, Benton, Sac, and Ida counties, had written one book, and was beginning another. Certainly I had been fortunate. Contemporary history is a tricky business, but I had steered clear of most of the pitfalls.

³³ Mark Friedberger, "Women Advocates in the Iowa Farm Crisis of the 1980s," *Agricultural History* Vol. 67, No. 2 (1983): 224-234.

By the end of the year, I was ready to move on. I wanted to obtain a teaching job, and begin grading papers and exams—something I had avoided for fifteen years.³⁴

In 1990 Texas called. I was hired to teach Agricultural History at Texas Tech in Lubbock. Thus my years as a Prairie historian were terminated. I began to work on Texas small time ranchers—I called them hobby farmers—and also published material on urban sprawl. Eventually I moved to Fort Worth, and finished my teaching career at Texas Christian University.³⁵

Conclusion

When I was writing *Farm Families and Change* in 1986, I wanted to end the book positively. One objective of the book was to trace the trajectory of the family farm in the twentieth century, but also, somewhat naively, to bolster the idea of family farming at the end of the century. I visited the Center for Rural Affairs, then at Walthill, Nebraska, and was impressed with their efforts to support medium sized family farms and alternative agriculture. At least one reviewer of the book pointed out that my suggestion that family farms might have benefited from the downturn, and they would enter the twenty-first century in a position of strength, did not square with the facts. Unfortunately the reviewer was correct. Not only did corn-belt agriculture suffer during the Farm Crisis, afterwards it underwent a radical adjustment. This favored larger industrialized operations at the expense of medium sized family farms. In 1980 there were roughly eighty thousand Iowa farm families who made a living entirely from farming; by the turn of the century only about twenty thousand were in this category.³⁶ In the late 1980s Iowa had relatively few large-scale hog operations and confinement operations were the exception. Ten years later the industrialization of hog farming was complete. To be sure there were pockets of old style hangers-on, and some alternative agriculture operations, but many of them were part-timers. Full time farm families depended on

³⁴ Two books and some articles were produced from this labor. See for instance Mark Friedberger, *Farm Families and Change in 20th Century America* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1988); Mark Friedberger, *Shake-Out: Iowa Farm Families in the 1980s* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1989); Mark Friedberger, "The Farm Family and the Inheritance Process: Evidence from the Corn Belt, 1870-1950," *Agricultural History*, Vol. 57, No. 3 (1983): 1-13; Mark Friedberger, "Handing Down the Home Place: Inheritance Strategies in Iowa, 1870-1945," *The Annals of Iowa*, Vol. 47, No. 2 (1984): 518-536.

³⁵ See for example, Mark Friedberger, "Rural Gentrification and Livestock Raising: Texas as a Test Case, 1940-1995," *Rural History*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (1996): 53-68; Mark Friedberger, "The Impact of the Gentleman Rancher on a Southeast Texas Community, 1945-1990," *Locus: Regional and Local History of the Americas*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (1996): 235-246; Mark Friedberger, "Cattlemen Consumers and Beef," *Environmental History Review*, Vol. 18, No. 3 (1994): 37-57; Mark Friedberger, "Development, Politics, and the Rural-Urban Fringe in North Texas," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 109, No. 3 (2006): 359-383.

³⁶ Bruce L. Gardner, *American Agriculture in the Twentieth Century: How It Functioned and What It Cost* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), from a cheerleader for the industrialized model.

the farm program and a corn and beans regimen. If they had previously raised livestock, most quit and concentrated on row crops.

In the 1970s and early 1980s the Iowa political scene was competitive between Republicans and Democrats. In the nineties state politics grew more partisan, with Democrats holding onto the urban dominated east, while western Iowa became a Republican bastion. Rural Iowans had always been churchgoers, but by 2000 the evangelical tide swept small towns and the countryside. Methodists had traditionally been the largest denomination in the state, but as elsewhere the old-line denominations lost members to the more dynamic conservative non-affiliated churches. Although I interviewed “born again Christians” who usually lived frugally, and therefore did not “get into trouble,” I failed to understand the importance of religion in their lives—my liberal biases blinkered me. I often went to church, but my motives were research orientated: to further my integration into the community.

Without a doubt my time working in rural Iowa was the high point of my career. The families I studied were generous with their time, interested in what I was trying to do, and supportive and cooperative. I would hazard a guess that such a relatively unstructured study, which required one-on-one interviews, would be impossible today. A pall of distrust of the media, of academia, and urban-based investigators, would make a similar study difficult. In the eighties there was no internet or cell phone communication. Farm families were still relatively isolated, which made the sudden appearance of a fellow from Chicago with a funny accent a welcome presence.

Another important difference between the eighties and today is the sad deterioration of the press. When the Des Moines *Register* was owned by the Cowles family it specialized in investigative reporting and placed enormous stress on farming and rural life. The paper earned more Pulitzers than any other paper save the *New York Times*. Coverage of the Farm Crisis was unyielding.

Not surprisingly, the field of history has also changed dramatically in the past thirty years. History from the “bottom up,” so fashionable decades ago, with an emphasis on quantitative methods, was jettisoned by other methodologies. In most departments, class, race, and gender drive hiring and course content for Americanists. In the nineties agricultural history succumbed to pressure from rural and environmental history. By my count, there are only two departments left that list agricultural history in their course catalogs—Texas A&M and Iowa State. To be sure, the journal *Agricultural History* is eclectic and lively in its coverage. Articles on world agriculture are as likely to be published as those that cover North America.

Despite this relative gloom some scholars have tried to resuscitate American agricultural history. The sociologist Robert Wuthnow's *In the Blood* used survey data and in-depth interviews to give a lay audience some idea of what farm families are all about. Even more impressive was the contribution of women historians over the last thirty years. Indeed their dynamic thrust was the highlight of the historiography of rural life before and after the turn of the twenty-first century.³⁷ Finally, there has been a push to reinvigorate Midwestern history by way of the new Midwestern History Association and through the medium of scholarly journals. The fall 2015 issue of the new *Middle West Review* devoted its pages to a reappraisal of the Farm Crisis of the 1980s. Grass roots coverage of women activism and the effects of economic stress on farm youth are just some of the topics that were included in this special issue.³⁸

³⁷ Robert Wuthnow, *In the Blood: Understanding American Farm Families* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015); for women, see Deborah Fink, *Open Country Iowa: Rural Women: Tradition and Change* (Albany, NY: State University Press of New York, 1986); Mary Neth, *Preserving the Family Farm: Women, Community, and the Foundation of Agribusiness in the Midwest, 1900-1940* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995); Jenny Baker Devine *On Behalf of the Family: Iowa Farm Women's Activism since 1945* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2015).

³⁸ Pamela Riney-Kehrberg, "Children of the Crisis: Farm Youth in Troubled Times," *Middle West Review* Vol. 2, No. 1 (2015): 11-25; and Denise O'Brien, "Memories of the Crisis," *Middle West Review* Vol. 2, No. 1 (2015): 51-68.