Your Guide to Iowa Films

Want to have your very own Iowa film festival in your own living room? Use this guide to identify six decades of Iowa films.

Iowans and Iowans have appeared as setting and characters in more than three dozen popular films (that is, feature-length films made for movie theaters or television that attempt to reach a wide audience). For each of those films, this chronological filmography lists the director, studio, year of release, principal actors, Academy Awards and nominations, literary source, and a brief synopsis of the plot and pertinent Iowa themes. (“See article” means that the film’s synopsis already appears in the preceding article.) Unless noted, all films are currently in a videocassette format, though not all are widely available.

By our criteria, films listed here must be at least partially set in Iowa (or in a setting that strongly hints at Iowa), or must have at least one Iowan as a significant character (in some cases, the Iowan is transported to a setting beyond Iowa). However, this list does not include films made in Iowa but not about Iowa (such as Children of the Corn), or films in which the Iowa setting is both incidental and insignificant (such as Noses Off).

Happy viewing!

—Marty S. Knepper and John S. Lawrence


A small-town father grieves over his son’s death in World War II. The ghost of his own father helps the man recall happier times in his son’s life.


A restless Iowa teen in the 1920s, attractive LaVerne runs off with a World War I flyer. A paternalistic reporter in Des Moines, though not all are widely available.


—Marty S. Knepper and John S. Lawrence

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An earnest teen couple from Waverly, Iowa, Lexie and Nick share skating ambitions, but her figure skating brings more success than his ice hockey, leading to estrangement. When Lexie becomes blind, Nick helps her skate again. This tear-jerker affirms "Iowa values" of courage, hard work, and family, but it also shows that it is too easy to drop out, stop trying, and live depressed in a small Iowa town. Waverly residents won't recognize this tiny, desolate place as their town.


An Iowa farm couple loses their son in a "friendly fire" incident in Vietnam. Angry at the Pentagon's treatment of them, they become a national symbol of ordinary citizens in a crusade for the truth. Their quest creates family conflict as well as a window to the world outside Iowa. The film is based on the experiences of Gene and Peg Mullin of La Porte City.


Set in the working-class culture of Dubuque, Iowa, the film shows successful young preppie Frank Macklin returning to his hometown to run a brewery for his corporate boss. He is torn between urban prosperity and corporate politics, and his hard-drinking, good-hearted former friends and brewery employees who enjoy football, mudderingst, big wheel truck competitions, and other good of boy pursuits.


Anne travels to India to investigate the fate of a great aunt who left her husband for a local Indian prince in 1923. She encounters Chid, a spiritual seeker with roots in India who has abandoned his name and all previous identity. Pathetically ridiculous, he tries to be more Indian than native Indians and to seduce Anne. Chid eventually must return to his aunt's clean house in Washington, Iowa, because Indian food has destroyed his health. (A comment on Iowa's bland food?) Clean, green Iowa seems to be set up as the antithesis of dusty, exotic India.


Though they are sons of an award-winning farmer, two brothers lose the family farm to the local bank. They burn the farmstead, hit the road, and become outlaw celebrities. The film shows the frustrations of those trying to keep farms economically viable.


The true story of a Grinnell woman, this film is based on a series of articles in the Des Moines Register. After she is raped in a Des Moines parking lot, Nancy decides to go public with her story, a decision that complicates her life by making her a celebrity but ultimately helps her work through the trauma of rape. A realistic film about courage and contemporary problems in Iowa.

Married to It. Directed by Arthur Hiller. Orion. 1993. Principals: Beau Bridges, Stockard Channing, Robert Sean Leonard, Mary Stuart Masterson, Cybill Shepherd, Ron Silver. Two graduates from Iowa State University attempt to shed their wholesome Iowa background and become successful and sophisticated professionals in New York City. Their Iowa roots make them vulnerable to manipulative New Yorkers and make it hard for them to talk over their problems. Two New York City couples befriend them and provide a cultural contrast.


Sioux City. Directed by Lou Diamond Phillips. IRS. 1994. Principals: Bill Allen, Apeesahkwat, Lise Cutter, Gary Farmer, Leigh Goodman, Lou Diamond Phillips, Salli Richardson, Adam Roarke, Ralph Waite. This geographically mistitled film has only one scene in Sioux City, Iowa. Born on a reservation south of South Sioux City, Nebraska, physician Jesse Goldman, a Lakota Sioux, was adopted and raised by an affluent Los Angeles Jewish family. He returns to investigate his roots, his mother's murder, and his true parentage. The film reveals that hidden under the myth of midwestern neighborhood lies the reality of racism that can poison romance and family life.


Troublesome Creek: A Midwestern. Directed by Jeanne Jordan and Steve Ascher. West City Films. 1995. Academy Award Nomination: Documentary. This documentary about Russel and Mary Jane Jordan of Wota, Iowa, was lovingly made by a daughter and son-in-law. The film narrates with poignancy and humor the crisis that develops when bankers become aggressive about forcing payback of delinquent loans. The family teeters on the brink of disaster but pulls through with luck, timing, and family cooperation. The film is a "midwestern," a contrast to the westerns that Russel loves.


The Big One. Directed by Michael Moore. Miramax. 1998. Principals: Garrison Keilor, Phil Knight, Michael Moore, Rick Nielsen, Studs Terkel. This humorous, heart-breaking documentary chronicles a cross-country book promotion tour by corporation foe Michael Moore. He interviews an Iowa woman who must work two jobs to provide food for her family—in a state that produces food. He attends a secret meeting of Des Moines Borders Bookstore employees who eventually unionize because they are forced to pay for health care they can't get in the Des Moines area. Moore shows that Iowans, like other Americans, suffer from the effects of U.S. corporate greed.


Yidl in the Middle. Directed by Marlene Booth. Marlene Booth and family members, New Day Films, 1999. Not on video. Currently residing in Cambridge, Massachusetts, filmmaker Marlene Booth found herself constantly explaining to skeptics that—no kidding—she was a Jewish Iowan. So she compiled snapshots, home movies, and interviews to chronicle her family's history in Iowa and her happy childhood in Des Moines in the 1950s and 1960s. The documentary reveals what it means to be both native Iowan and cultural outsider.