

Governors of Iowa

Peter Hoehnle

ISSN 0003-4827

Copyright © 2007 State Historical Society of Iowa. This article is posted here for personal use, not for redistribution.

Recommended Citation

Hoehnle, Peter. "Governors of Iowa." *The Annals of Iowa* 66 (2007), 211-212.

Available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.1126>

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](#)

first was from the Illinois rolls and the second from Indiana, with a fourth from Pennsylvania “coming next.”

One of the key questions that concern scholars of the Civil War is, What happened to the soldiers after the war? Northcott looks to the records of the Grand Army of the Republic for some of the answers. In the book’s introduction, he gives a brief history of the organization and how its death records were kept; explains how he compiled his lists and the lists’ limitations; explains the abbreviations; and includes a good page on “How to Use This Book.” The lists do not contain every soldier’s record, but they are as complete as possible. I found the names of many Iowa soldiers who had been part of my own research. This book, as part of Northcott’s ongoing series, will be a valuable research tool for anyone trying to learn the histories of individual Civil War soldiers.

Governors of Iowa, by Michael Kramme. Des Moines: The Iowan Books, 2006. Illustrations, bibliography. 103 pp. \$14.95 paper.

Reviewer Peter Hoehnle lives in Homestead, Iowa. He is the author of several articles in the *Annals of Iowa* and *Iowa Heritage Illustrated* and other publications, and has taught Iowa history at Iowa State University and Cornell College.

Michael Kramme has produced a heavily illustrated short reference book on the governors of Iowa, through Thomas Vilsack. A book of this type is long overdue and necessary. Typically, volumes such as this are useful and entertaining for both casual and academic readers. Unfortunately, the present volume suffers from some flaws.

Each governor receives an average of two pages in this work. Each entry has at least one portrait or photograph of the governor, a photograph of his home, and a photograph of his gravestone. Each entry typically provides information on the governor and his family, details about his career before becoming governor, and also highlights of the governor’s period in office. In many cases, Kramme quotes from a governor’s inaugural address to highlight issues important to that governor and to Iowans of the time. Given the absolute dearth of material on early Iowa governors, and the abbreviated tenures of others, Kramme does a good job of providing fairly standard coverage of each administration.

Governors of Iowa, as one would expect from a publication originating with *The Iowan*, is full of color photographs. What is surprising for this publisher, however, is how many of those images are distorted by the digital production process. One might reasonably expect that a publication by the publishers of the *Iowan* magazine would have a more appealing layout.

The book also suffers from a lack of focus. The introduction to the small work, instead of providing readers with an overview of the office of Iowa governor and how that office has changed over the years, instead provides a collection of interesting but not very informative pieces of gubernatorial trivia (the first governor born in Iowa was Beryl Carroll; the oldest Iowa governor was Francis Drake; 18 governors served in the military; 22 governors were lawyers, and so on).

The bibliography indicates that a majority of the supporting research was done from the obituaries of various Iowa governors. Occasionally, an *Annals of Iowa* or *Palimpsest* article is cited, as well as some, but by no means all, of the published book-length studies of Iowa's chief executives. Perhaps due to this narrow research base, there are too many simple errors of fact, such as the assertion that Terrace Hill became the governor's mansion in 1983 (it achieved that distinction in 1976); the identification of Territorial Governor John Chambers as "Jonathan" (he is referred to as John in all available sources); and the claim that Governor Boies was born on December 7, 1872, and elected governor in 1890, which would have made him 18 at the time of his election. Most of these errors are typographical, but they are numerous and easily identified.

There are errors of omission as well. Governor James Grimes's biography neglects his important role in creating the Meskwaki Settlement in Tama County and ignores his significant career as a senator during the Civil War. Governor Hoegh, Kramme notes, was once on the cover of *Time* magazine, but we are not told why (85). Governor Fulton receives a short one-page entry, as befits his short 16-day tenure, but Terry Branstad, whose 16 years in office made him Iowa's longest serving governor, gets only slightly more space. Were it not for a photograph of the Branstad family, his biography would occupy only a single page, which does not mention the farm crisis of the 1980s. Other administrations receive similarly short lists of accomplishments, buried in the middle of biographical detail. A list of all Iowa governors and their terms of office would have been a useful inclusion.

It would be unfair to demand a serious assessment of each Iowa governor in a popular work of this size. We can hope that the *Iowa Biographical Dictionary*, currently in production, will provide readers with more serious treatments of Iowa's chief executives with succinct summaries of their administrative accomplishments and failures.

This little volume does have some strengths, such as an interesting selection of illustrations and fascinating biographical details about little-known Iowa governors, but typographical, technical, and research errors compromise its usefulness and its quality.