

# The Small-Town Midwest: Resilience and Hope in the Twenty-First Century

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bilities in the face of despair. The focus on Lafayette clues us in to the mechanics of a global phenomenon, and right now there is no greater laboratory than the Midwest. This is the region where new waves of Latinos are transforming communities and where, ironically, Latinos are giving new life to a region that is tagged by many as “the real America.” I loved this book because it hooked me in early with its engaging stories and theoretically sophisticated analysis. Vega crafted a beautiful narrative that allows readers to feel and visualize the Midwest: the smells, the stillness, and the gray skies that cover the sun’s shine. This is an important book that should be read by everyone who cares about the changing politics and demographics of the Midwest.

*The Small-Town Midwest: Resilience and Hope in the Twenty-First Century*, by Julianne Couch. Iowa and the Midwest Experience Series. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2016. 230 pp. Illustrations, note on sources, index. \$35.00 paperback.

Reviewer Drake Hokanson is professor emeritus at Winona State University. He is the author of *Reflecting a Prairie Town: A Year in Peterson* (1994).

With the great social and economic changes in the prairies and plains during the past several decades, what has happened to our thousands of small towns? How can we evaluate their health or somehow take full measure of these scattered and varied communities? Many main streets bear empty buildings, and often the only going businesses are the grain elevator, a convenience store, and maybe an antique store slowly selling off the collective memories of a once hopeful town. Others show signs of growth and vitality when a new industry arrives or when retirees discover quiet neighborhoods, affordable housing, and rural scenery.

Author Julianne Couch knows her small towns and is devoted to them. In *The Small-Town Midwest* she digs in to eight towns (average population 2,036) and one county scattered across five states. Two are Iowa towns: Emmetsburg and Bellevue. While in the process of writing the book, she moved from one of her subject towns, Centennial, Wyoming, and settled in Bellevue. Centennial, at the foot of the Snowy Range in Wyoming, hardly fits the description of a midwestern town, and towns from the midwestern states of Minnesota, Illinois, Indiana, and Ohio are oddly missing, but her selections are otherwise varied and interesting. Tarkio, Missouri, for example, suffered steep decline when its local college closed, while a two-year college and a casino brought new opportunities to Emmetsburg, Iowa. In Bridgeport,

Nebraska, town leaders work to lure disaffected urbanites to quiet and safety at the edge of the Sandhills.

Couch selected her towns by "Internet searching, calendar consulting, and dart throwing" (4-5). Except for the two towns she has lived in, she knew not a soul in the other seven places, lending a freshness to her vision. She selected towns big enough to have at least some public venues, such as restaurants and public libraries, and a motel for her visit. Couch looked for economic diversity among them, such as colleges or a tourist niche. The towns are spread across her study area, off the beaten path; they are not bedroom towns near a city and have no Interstate highways and no Walmart.

She refers to her approach as that of "an interested traveler" (9), but her observations and analysis go far deeper than those of a tourist. More like a journalist working on an extended project, she looked for the story behind the story, the deeper insights, and included her own observations as a resident of small towns and as a self-described "Middle American" (3).

Hers is a modern take: there is little history or classic geography here. She makes good use of census and economic data but does not burden the reader with myriad details. She interviews and quotes mayors, newspaper editors, and reporters, elderly and young residents, locals in grocery store lines, each with concerns about the places they call home. Carefully folded in are Couch's reflections on her own experiences living in and visiting small towns and her analysis as a growing expert on small-town trials and successes.

Not surprisingly, themes arise that are common to all her research sites, chief among them the loss of population and diminished economic vitality. Residents of almost every town she visited lament the outflow of young people after high school graduation and the difficulty of luring outsiders to come and take up residence. Lack of good housing is a factor, but the paucity of good jobs heads the list, along with the limited amenities of places far from big cities. Residents talk of resilience, observing that they "take what remains and make do" (2). Our town is quiet and safe, and we know our neighbors, they say. And in most cases a larger town within reasonable distance offers health care, a large grocery store, a car dealership. Couch addresses other important issues facing small towns in the Midwest and Plains: racism in places that are almost entirely white; the meth epidemic; living in fly-over country and being ignored by the culture at large.

Couch's text is clear and nonacademic and her analysis is cogent, but the book lacks sufficient illustrations. The author's nine photographs only hint at what these places look and feel like. Readers will

want to see, through her eyes, her camera, the empty Tarkio College campus, the Riceland processing plant, Main Street in Bellevue, Iowa. But *The Small-Town Midwest* is a well-researched, well-written, up-to-date analysis of the nature and challenges of small towns and adds significantly to the literature of an iconic American archetype. It should be read by anyone who knows and loves small towns even half as much as Julianne Couch does.