

Corn Kings & One-Horse Thieves: A Plain-Spoken History of Mid-Illinois

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Accordingly, readers are treated to snippets regarding the area's native population, the arrival of the first European-American settlers, the coming of the railroad, and the heinous activities of assorted criminals that have remained a subject of conversation over the decades. Of greater significance to Mitchell's effort to connect Lucas County to the national experience is his valuable discussion of the coal mining communities that once dotted the region. John L. Lewis, perhaps the most famous miner to come from the county, provides an interesting segue into union activities in the early twentieth-century coalfields.

Chapters detailing life in the late twentieth century and the early years of the twenty-first do not receive as much attention as more distant decades. Of merit, however, is the examination of two Lucas County companies that gained national attention: Johnson Machine Works and the Hy-Vee supermarket chain. The changing face of agriculture also makes a worthy appearance.

A few problems do appear. The vast majority of the research for *Locale and Universe* comes from secondary sources, community wits, and local newspapers. Even those are cited rather enigmatically as a "source" or a "conversation." More serious are the factual errors that occasionally arise. James B. Weaver did not run as the Republican candidate for president in 1880; he did run as a member of the Greenback Party. Mitchell's assertion that, for the Amish, "genetics determine which men wear beards that rim their jaw and leave the rest of their pinkish face smooth and free of hair while others have full beards" (411) is decidedly in error.

Such issues should make readers wary of the "facts" Mitchell provides. However, for those interested in a rather simple tale of one county as an exemplar of the nation, the text should suffice, especially if they happen to be from southern Iowa.

Corn Kings & One-Horse Thieves: A Plain-Spoken History of Mid-Illinois, by James Krohe Jr. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2017. xii, 346 pp. Maps, illustrations, notes, index. \$29.50 paperback.

Reviewer James A. Edstrom is professor of library services and history at William Rainey Harper College in Palatine, Illinois. A scholar of local and Illinois history, he has written a history of Illinois's admission to the Union in 1818 that is under consideration for publication.

Researching and writing the history of even well-defined geographic entities is no simple matter. Boundaries of cities, villages, townships, and counties evolve over time and in the process exert a profound influence over the histories of those political jurisdictions. The central

problem facing a scholar focusing on larger regional histories, by contrast, is the challenge of clearly delineating a given geographic entity. Such is the task confronted by James Krohe Jr. in *Corn Kings & One-Horse Thieves*. A prolific writer and observer of Illinois culture over four decades, Krohe has written a lively and engaging study of a region he calls mid-Illinois, encompassing “the territory that lies wholly or in part between the Indiana state line and the Mississippi River and between interstates 70 and 80” (2).

It is natural, perhaps, to think of Illinois primarily in terms of Chicago versus Downstate, so the concept of focusing on other regions is a novel one. The difficulty, as Krohe readily acknowledges, is that mid-Illinois is “defined by its lack of definition. The region as a whole lacks Chicago’s and southern Illinois’ self-consciousness as a place. . . . In sum, mid-Illinois is a mini-Illinois . . . its averageness, its lack of a specific identity, its unambiguous ambiguity, its Illinois-ness, is mid-Illinois’ true identity—the region of Illinois that is both the most and the least like itself” (3-4).

This is a clever conceit—contrasting the ordinariness of mid-Illinois against bustling Chicago and colorful southern Illinois. It runs the risk of sounding like a rather half-hearted rationale for exploring an arbitrarily defined geography, but Krohe creates a narrative encompassing a fascinating amalgam of anecdote and scholarly research. Indeed, the lack of a clearly defined region to some extent provides Krohe with the basis for exploring a variety of important themes. These range from the region’s demographics stretching back to the pre-Columbian era to its natural resources, its industrialization, its urbanization, its politics, its religion, and its infrastructure. He writes knowledgeably, for example, of the challenges faced by early settlers in breaking up the prairie—“like ploughing through a heavy woven door-mat,” remarked one pioneer (51)—and of their ultimate success in more or less completely eradicating it from the state of Illinois. He observes that remnants of the prairie persist in places “safe from plows” such as “steep creek banks or railroad embankments” or pioneer cemeteries. “What more apt resting place for a dead ecosystem than a graveyard?” (48).

Krohe is both entertaining and enlightening on a wide variety of issues, events, and personalities. His literary voice is knowledgeable and bemused, with a dry wit that makes for an enthralling narrative. If *Corn Kings and One-Horse Thieves* makes something less than a convincing case for mid-Illinois as a discrete geographic entity, it nonetheless underscores the value and appeal of a work focusing on regions defined by their topography and infrastructure as opposed to their

political geography. Stephen Aron's *American Confluence*, which considered the lands bordering the conjunction of the Missouri, Mississippi, and Ohio Rivers comes to mind as a successful example of such a study. The idea could be applied to a study of the Galena lead region and its impact on the surrounding areas of Iowa and Wisconsin, or to an analysis of the Quad Cities. It could provide a particularly valuable approach to a better understanding of Native American history. Krohe's book will be of interest to scholars as an example of lively writing and innovative regional history and to lay readers looking for a diverting and fascinating perspective on the Prairie State.

From Furs to Farms: The Transformation of the Mississippi Valley, 1762–1825, by John Reda. Early American Places Series. DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2016. xiii, 201 pp. Maps, notes, bibliography, index. \$38.00 hardcover.

Reviewer William E. Foley is professor of history emeritus at the University of Central Missouri. He is the author of *Wilderness Journey: The Life of William Clark* (2004) and *The Genesis of Missouri: From Wilderness Outpost to Statehood* (1989).

John Reda's carefully crafted account of the region once known as the Illinois Country details its transformation from a multiracial, multicultural borderland powered by a thriving fur trade to a place where agricultural cultivation by white American farmers was the driving force. Between 1762 and 1825 powerful indigenous nations competed with French, Spanish, English, and, eventually, American powers for control in the territory encompassing the present-day states of Illinois and Missouri, but Reda contends that imperial clashes mattered far less than economic forces in the quest to establish sovereignty over the region.

Notwithstanding the river barrier separating Illinois and Missouri, Reda makes a compelling case for viewing both as parts of a coherent society linked by common historical experiences. In the late eighteenth century the fur trade tied French settlers on both sides of the river to their indigenous neighbors. Following the Seven Years War, British officials staked a claim to land on the Mississippi's east bank while Spanish authorities sought to establish control on the west side, but their ambitious imperial designs fell short of the mark as long as native people remained a dominant force and the fur trade held sway.

Conditions began to change in the wake of an onslaught of agriculturally oriented Americans who settled on both sides of the Mississippi following the American Revolution and the Louisiana Purchase. Their arrival hastened a decline in the fur trade, intensified demands for the