

## The Midwestern Moment: The Forgotten World of Early-Twentieth-Century Midwestern Regionalism, 1880-1940

Charles Johanningsmeier  
*University of Nebraska Omaha*

ISSN 0003-4827

Copyright © 2018 State Historical Society of Iowa. This article is posted here for personal use, not for redistribution.

---

### Recommended Citation

Johanningsmeier, Charles. "The Midwestern Moment: The Forgotten World of Early-Twentieth-Century Midwestern Regionalism, 1880-1940." *The Annals of Iowa* 77 (2018), 211-213.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.12513>

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](#)

Nationalism took two very different paths in these brothers' lives. Their stories connect in interesting ways—at times directly when proceeds from concerts helped finance the militias. The conflict between Norway and Sweden over their separation—while very tense at times—manifested itself in conflict between these two immigrant communities in the United States. One example included here is of the pointed removal of a Swedish song from a concert program. These are interesting details that reflect the complexity of immigrant communities' relationships to their home countries and to each other. The shift in focus—from success in the United States to the larger context of Norwegian identity—is interesting and refreshing; often the immigrant success story seems to leave the homeland behind. Being reminded of the continuing connections between immigrant communities and the politics of the homeland is an important part of this text.

For those interested in the place of immigration history in the development of Iowa, this will be an invaluable contribution. Oleson's life had a lasting impact on Fort Dodge. The author provides detailed historical evidence about his life and contributions, including extensive accounts of his business dealings, names of his associates, details of the programs of each choir concert, and each trip he took. This level of detail and the inclusion of all the archival research will be invaluable to others researching related topics. The text includes far less interpretation of these details; the connections between topics are not always present but are left for the reader to put together. The context and significance are not clearly established, and the text would have benefited from a stronger narrative thread. I appreciated the detailed treatment of the history of Fort Dodge and Oleson's impact on the male choir movement; on the historically important context of nationalism and immigrant identity and on the interesting ways communities retained links to their homeland, I would have liked to read more.

*The Midwestern Moment: The Forgotten World of Early-Twentieth-Century Midwestern Regionalism, 1880–1940*, edited by Jon K. Lauck. Rediscovering the American Midwest Series. Hastings, NE: Hastings College Press, 2017. xv, 287 pp. Illustrations, notes. \$24.99 paperback.

Reviewer Charles Johanningsmeier is professor of English at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. He is the author of numerous works of scholarship about regionalist authors of fiction, with a special interest in Willa Cather.

Editor Jon K. Lauck has, during the past decade, served as a prolific booster of midwestern studies. The present volume is a collection of 16 essays that deal with various elements of the region's history during a

period defined here as "The Midwestern Moment," when the Midwest appeared poised to serve as a shining example of the best of America and thus lead the nation into the future.

Taken together, these essays do valuable work in the project of documenting important aspects of midwestern life from this era. Many bring forth the region's previously well-known, and now much lesser-known, voices (many with strong connections to Iowa) for new generations to consider. Figures receiving detailed attention include fiction authors Ruth Suckow, Booth Tarkington, Bess Streeter Aldrich, Jay G. Sigmund, Frazier Hunt, Sherwood Anderson, Sinclair Lewis, and Edna Ferber, as well as syndicated humor poet Walt Mason, painter Harvey Dunn, radio personality Henry Field, and social activist Jane Addams. The Society of Midland Authors, the Minneapolis Symphony Orchestra, and the Catholic agrarian movement of the 1930s also are the subjects of separate chapters.

Some of the contributions, unfortunately, do not contribute much new knowledge to any relatively well-informed reader's understanding of midwestern culture, since much fuller treatments of these subjects (such as book-length biographies) already exist. In addition, too many of the essays are almost wholly descriptive, merely recounting information rather than subjecting it to rigorous, theoretically informed analysis. Almost all of these writers needed to ask harder questions of their subjects. For instance, the basic history of the Society of Midland Authors, including its goals, has already been fairly well documented; of greater value would be an investigation into what, exactly, the society actually accomplished. In a number of other instances, coastal elites are, as usual, depicted as the villains responsible for the relative lack of success achieved by various midwestern artists and cultural organizations; left unasked, though, is the question of the role midwestern audiences and cultural arbiters themselves played in the failure of these artists and groups to achieve positive, lasting reputations.

The most glaring shortcoming of the collection as a whole, though, is its almost total lack of attention to questions involving ethnic and racial diversity. Was part of the appeal of Catholic agrarianism during the 1930s, for instance, due to any racially tinged rhetoric? Did radio personality Henry Field traffic in ethnic humor in order to achieve large audiences? Second, of the 16 contributors, only three are women. Third, and most important, there is no engagement with the artistic achievements of any members of the wide variety of ethnic groups that inhabited the region during this period. One would have appreciated an essay, for example, looking at a Swedish, Norwegian, Bohemian, or German writer or artist, or the role played by the ethnic press in the

Midwest's culture, both in urban and rural areas. What, too, about the many midwestern authors of color? If the Midwest of this era is not to be regarded as a region justifiably left behind by the modernizing nation but rather as a place where issues relevant to the country's future were being worked out, more scholarship must be carried out about the conflicts and alliances among its various cultural groups.

Despite these shortcomings, this collection includes some good points. For one thing, the endnotes for a good number of the essays yield a rich trove of resources worthy of future exploration. A few of the essays also either bring to light extremely under-researched topics or offer intriguing revisions of previous ways of thinking about them. Paul Emory Putz's essay about Walt Mason's syndicated poetry is one highlight, for he astutely shows how Mason's poetry skillfully negotiated the boundaries of "high" and "middlebrow" culture. I was also fascinated by Kimberly K. Porter's article about radio station owner and on-air personality Henry Field, an Iowan I had never heard of. Allan Carlson's piece about "Midwestern Catholicism and the Last Agrarian Crusade" brings to light an influential, yet little-known, social movement and makes interesting connections to the Nashville Agrarians responsible for the similarly antimodernist manifesto *I'll Take My Stand* (1930). Jon K. Lauck himself provides a provocative revisionist reading of Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* and Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street*, contending that neither one is actually the type of wholehearted critique of small-town midwestern life it has been made out to be.

This volume makes a number of valuable contributions to the ongoing project of making today's readers more aware of the cultural achievements of midwesterners in the past. Most important, its essays both draw attention to a number of lesser-known elements of midwestern culture that deserve to be examined in greater detail and indicate the type of scholarship that needs to be carried out on them.

*Glenn Miller Declassified*, by Dennis M. Spragg. Lincoln: Potomac Books, an imprint of the University of Nebraska Press, 2017. xvii, 386 pp. Tables, illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$34.95 hardcover.

Reviewer Paige Lush is director of bands and instructor of music at McHenry County College. Her doctoral dissertation was "Music and Identity in Circuit Chautauqua, 1904-1932."

There is perhaps no more cinematic story in the history of American music than that of Glenn Miller's disappearance over the English Channel on December 15, 1944. The mystery surrounding Miller's dis-