

## The Biographical Dictionary of Iowa

Tom Longden

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## Book Reviews and Notices

*The Biographical Dictionary of Iowa*, edited by David Hudson, Marvin Bergman, and Loren Horton. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press for the State Historical Society of Iowa, 2008. xi, 594 pp. Topical index. \$45.00 cloth.

Reviewer Tom Longden is a longtime *Des Moines Register* copy editor who, since 2000, has written an ongoing *Register* feature titled "Famous Iowans."

A new work published for the State Historical Society of Iowa by the University of Iowa Press invites readers into the lives of historic Iowans who made a difference. *The Biographical Dictionary of Iowa* is a scholarly, fact-filled volume of hundreds of entries, ranging from legendary athlete Nile Kinnick to Harold Hughes, "self-proclaimed college dropout and drunk with a jail record who overcame childhood poverty, personal tragedy, and alcoholism to become governor of Iowa [and] a U.S. senator" (261). The book is a monumental project involving about 200 contributors. Editors David Hudson, Marvin Bergman, and Loren Horton deftly handled the huge task of compiling the entries and making them match in length, style, and readability. All three editors, with connections to the State Historical Society, were up to the challenge. The admirable aspect of the volume is that so many contributors, through their short biographies, paint "the character of the state" as it "has been shaped by the character of the individuals who have inhabited it" (ix).

Readers will immediately want to hold this pleasingly plump volume in their hands when they see the bright and colorful dust jacket, which features *Agriculture*, a mural at the U.S. Post Office in Cresco, a Richard Haines work circa 1934. The jacket covers a soft-to-the-touch red-cloth binding/cover.

Each entry includes the person's name in bold type followed by birth and death dates, place of birth, schooling, and accomplishments. Details abound. The emphasis is on pioneers and public servants, many with university connections and many of whom served in government posts. The editors explain in their introduction that the volume, unfortunately, excludes anyone still alive after December 31, 2000, which results in the omission of many notables but allows for the inclusion of many lumbermen and people with Dubuque connections (that being an early settlement). Otherwise, every Iowa governor is

included, showing an emphasis on the gubernatorial role, if not any necessarily outstanding accomplishment by the person who sat in the governor's chair. Some do not spark a reader's interest.

Some of the writing is vivid. For example, the entry on industrialist Roy Carver (76–78), captures his character with this description: "Risk-taking, entrepreneurship, and hard work characterized Carver throughout his life. In addition, in the last decade of his life, Carver became known for both expensive tastes and philanthropy. Steadily, through the 1970s, Carver withdrew from Bandag's daily operations and other business endeavors. At the same time, after separating from his wife in 1972, Carver cultivated a flamboyant lifestyle, with airplanes, yachts, and cars, and homes in Cannes and Miami. Still, Muscatine remained home, and Iowans became the primary beneficiaries of his philanthropy." More oblique and stodgy is the entry on noted governor James Wilson Grimes, described at the beginning of the entry as "Iowa's leading Civil War-era politician." But only well into the entry do we find "his candidacy in the 1854 gubernatorial contest" and only after *that* does the tired reader actually spot the word *governor*.

Is this volume the definitive book on Iowans who contributed to their state's legacy? It's unlikely. Books such as this are published routinely and periodically, and must, by space constraints and for other reasons, omit some candidates that some readers would find essential for inclusion. (Such readers will therefore say, "I can't believe they didn't include. . . .") In this work, it's rewarding to see entries on ornithologist Gladys Black and Muscatine button manufacturer John Frederick Boepple, but one has to wonder about the inclusion of Mary Louisa Duncan Putnam, described as "a supporter of the Davenport Academy of Natural Sciences." Or church figure Joseph Smith III of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, who "helped establish Lamoni, Iowa, as the church's headquarters in 1881" and seemed thereafter to have a more national presence. Also possibly borderline is the inclusion of Oren Lee Staley, founder of the National Farm Organization (NFO), with the entry explaining, in parentheses, "Although Staley never lived in Iowa, he can be considered an Iowan because of his continuous work in the office in Corning." No, he really can't. The entry on bandmaster Karl King shortchanges him by saying he conducted bands "numerous times at the Iowa State Fair," when it could say something like "for 10 days every year, from 1921 to 1959, he led the band at the fair." The entry on railroad developer and Dubuque mayor Jesse P. Farley, on the other hand, shows enviable sleuthing by saying he had two wives named Mary — Mary P. Johnson, who died in 1844, and then, a year later, her niece, Mary L. Johnson.

With its many contributors, the dictionary fails to give any of their credentials, and the name of the author of each entry is rather lost by being positioned at the bottom of each article, even under the sources.

The major drawback is the lack of photos or artists' depictions of the notables. Matching facts with a face can be key to understanding and remembering.

Still, this book is great for the bookshelf of anyone who appreciates Iowa history and the people who made it the state it is today.

*Iowa's Numbers: 150 Years of Decennial Census Data with a Glance to the Future*, by Willis Goudy. Ames: Department of Sociology, Iowa State University, 2008. iii, 178 pp. Tables, graphs, maps, notes, appendix.

Reviewer Daniel Scott Smith is professor of history emeritus at the University of Illinois at Chicago. He has published extensively about demographic history, including "How a Half-Million Iowa Women Suddenly Went to Work: Solving a Mystery in the State Census of 1925" (*Annals of Iowa*, 1996).

In this volume, Willis Goudy, emeritus professor of sociology at Iowa State University, compiles and comments on the state's numbers that have been tabulated from each federal census since 1850. Aiming at continuity with current data, he includes only those variables that appeared in the 2000 census of population and housing. Among these are demographic attributes such as age and gender as well as socio-economic characteristics such as education, occupation, income, and housing value. By my count, 81 tables, 43 color maps, and 16 figures appear in the 15 chapters that contain only 153 pages of text. In addition, an appendix contains the population totals of the approximately 1,000 incorporated places in the state every ten years during the twentieth century. The geographic frames of reference are to the other states in the United States and more commonly to the counties in Iowa.

Professor Goudy meticulously documents the sources of his tables and points out technical issues such as changing definitions of occupational categories. Those who might be interested in additional analyses of federal census data should be aware of the comparably formatted samples of individual records taken from the original manuscripts for each (except 1890) census; these are conveniently available for analyses from a University of Minnesota Web site (<http://USA.ipums.org/USA>). Although Goudy's focus is on the present and on the federal census, any historical discussion of Iowa's numbers should also point out that a century ago the state was highly innovative in its own census taking. For example, only one other state has been bold enough to ask individuals about their religious affiliation, as Iowa did in 1895, 1905, and