

# Communities of Frank Lloyd Wright: Taliesin and Beyond

Rob Sovinski  
*Purdue University*

ISSN 0003-4827

Copyright © 2010 State Historical Society of Iowa

---

## Recommended Citation

Sovinski, Rob. "Communities of Frank Lloyd Wright: Taliesin and Beyond." *The Annals of Iowa* 69 (2010), 231-233.

Available at: <http://ir.uiowa.edu/annals-of-iowa/vol69/iss2/13>

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](#)

after World War I. During the 1950s, however, the expansion of roads to accommodate defense needs, housing opportunities, and increased pleasure travel rearranged the transportation geography in a way that increasingly limited the use of downtown hotels for motor travel by the 1960s. New motels joined other commercial ventures and new housing developments on the urban periphery, and the travel dynamic shifted away from the central city.

As community-based institutions, downtown hotels provided a range of services, from hosting service clubs and offering fine dining to providing rooms for local residents to mark special occasions. Hotels provided arenas for social interaction and local identification. By providing services and venues for activities, these hotels helped define what it was to be modern as well as to belong in small-town America.

Jakle and Sculle explore all parts of the United States, but the midwestern section of the nation figures prominently in their analysis. From Sinclair Lewis's fictional town of Gopher Prairie in *Main Street* to the Iowa hotels in Marshalltown, Rock Rapids, and Fort Madison to the hotels located in small towns along U.S. 40 and the Lincoln Highway, the midwestern world of traveling gets significant coverage.

Regardless of their location, small-town hotels faced seemingly insurmountable challenges as the nation's automobile landscape shifted the economic locus of most small towns to the fringes of the community. Downtown districts languished, and the bustling hotels that helped define these communities fell on hard times. Reinvention, however, can occur at any time. Jakle and Sculle end their study with a look at the ways some of these institutions have adapted to changing conditions.

Rather than offering an exhaustive study, Jakle and Sculle have sketched the outlines of an unfinished story and have whetted the imagination. Anyone interested in his or her community will find similarities and differences in the fate of their own hotels. New research will flesh out this story and deepen our knowledge of life in our communities.

*Communities of Frank Lloyd Wright: Taliesin and Beyond*, by Myron A. Marty. DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2009. x, 306 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$45.00 cloth.

Reviewer Rob Sovinski is professor and chair of the landscape architecture program at Purdue University. He is the author of *Brick in the Landscape: A Practical Guide to Specification and Design Materials and Their Applications in Landscape Design* (1999).

Myron Marty's book on Frank Lloyd Wright manages to occupy a unique niche among the considerable library of books that deal with

America's greatest architect — and that's not an easy thing to do. In the universe of Frank Lloyd Wright authorship, there aren't many niches left. An astonishing (and growing) number of books — biographies, essays, novels, and an autobiography (which for the most part belongs in the fictional category, too) as well as coffee table books, coloring books, pop-up books, and photo journals — endeavor to address some facet of Wright's life and architecture. Most books justifiably focus on his architectural output: there are encyclopedic overviews and books that focus on individual buildings, books about his bootleg homes, his neighborhoods, commissions that never came to fruition, his ever-evolving styles of architecture, his furniture designs, his leaded glass windows, and his landscapes, as well as portfolios of his elegant architectural renderings and books. Recently, a growing number of texts delve into the foibles, the women, and the tragedies that marked his personal life.

Given such a daunting array of choices, the Wright-inclined reader needs to know where this book fits into the substantial spectrum of the Wright library. It is not targeted at beginners. The author presumes that the reader already possesses the basic broad brush outline of Wright's story and proceeds to fill in the canvas with a much finer stroke. Those hungry to attain a deeper understanding of this charismatic figure will find Marty's careful attention to detail both satisfying and illuminating. Those with only a passing interest in learning what all the fuss is about would do better with a broader overview.

Marty is explicit about his primary objective: "My purpose in this book is to tell a fresh story about Frank Lloyd Wright by focusing on his intentions in creating communities of apprentices and coworkers — most notably the Taliesin Fellowship, but also those that preceded it — and revealing how his intentions were realized, or, in some instances, not realized" (5). The author restates his mission later: "to identify Wright's closest and most dependable associates, to discover the circumstances in which they worked, and to consider whether they functioned as effective contributors to his communities" (51). This is a book about the people (often told *by* those people) who worked with or for, supported, befriended, and sometimes abandoned Wright over his lengthy career. Marty accomplishes his mission admirably in this well-researched book.

Readers need to understand that this book represents a solid, well-crafted piece of *scholarship*. Marty is a seasoned academic and understands what that word entails. Four fundamental requirements define good scholarship. The first is *research*. This book grows out of an intensive period of reviewing archives, records, and correspondence in or-

der to piece together the second requirement: *discovery*. Too few of the books mentioned earlier offer readers much in the way of discovery. *Communities* provides new insights and perspectives that are fundamental to its primary objective. Scholarship also demands *dissemination* for the review, critique, and benefit of the larger community of similarly focused scholars. Last, a scholarly product demands clear and accurate *documentation* so the work can be evaluated and, more important, carried forward by future researchers.

If the author accomplished his stated objectives and no more, this would be a welcome addition to the ever growing Wright repository. But *Communities* manages to achieve another vitally important, but unstated, objective. Scholars who choose to probe into the genius that was Frank Lloyd Wright invariably arrive at the same frustrating conundrum. *What made him tick?* How did he justify his reckless and often self-destructive attitude regarding societal ethics and morals, his reluctance to grant credit (and payment) to his colleagues and employees, his propensity to revise even the basic truths of his life? We may never know the answers to these questions because it is unlikely that Wright knew the answers or even grappled with these questions to any degree. Marty's book, through its detailed exploration of the communities that Wright carefully orchestrated to achieve his purposes, inches us ever closer to an understanding of the mind of this most contradictory genius.

*I Go to America: Swedish American Women and the Life of Mina Anderson*, by Joy K. Lintelman. St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2009. vii, 294 pp. Illustrations, maps, appendix, notes, index. \$29.95 cloth.

Reviewer Paula M. Nelson is professor of history at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville. She is the author of *After the West Was Won: Homesteaders and Town-Builders in Western South Dakota, 1900–1917* (1986) and *The Prairie Winnows Out Its Own: The West River Country of South Dakota in the Years of Depression and Dust* (1996).

On November 7, 1913, Hilda Burgeson, an 18-year-old immigrant from Frillesas, Halland, Sweden, crossed the Canadian border into Minnesota. Accompanied by her two younger sisters, she was headed to Hector, in Renville County, where a large population of Swedes, including some of her family members, had settled south of the town. Hilda was my grandmother. Although she does not appear in Joy Lintelman's book, it is her story, as well as the story of the quarter-million Swedish immigrant women who came to America between 1880 and 1920 in search of something better than they had. The author has taken