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Comment

John Ely Briggs

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Comment by the Editor

COMMUNITY CHARACTER

Any neighborhood, village, or city is much like any other, being composed of people who live in houses arranged in some kind of geometrical pattern. Midwestern towns have so many features of similarity that each one is more or less typical of them all. The frame houses are so box-like, the railroad water-tank and the grain elevators are so inevitable, the streets are so certain to be at right angles, the churches are so sure to have steeples, and even the gardens are so likely to be filled with peonies and dahlias that superficial observers are impressed, if not oppressed, by the monotonous regularity. In contrast with the natural charm of the landscape, not many Iowa towns can be described as picturesque.

Nevertheless every community has its own character just as each individual possesses a distinctive personality. It is so easy and natural to generalize and so difficult to differentiate that the subtle peculiarities of a locality are usually overlooked; yet in the historical background of every community there are invariably certain conditions which have determined its physical features and imparted local variations to the spiritual atmosphere of the place. The

location of a railroad was once a matter of life and death importance to many an Iowa town, and in the near future paved highways and airports may be equally vital factors. If Irish Catholics instead of Quakers had settled at Springdale the temperament of that neighborhood would have been quite different. Some towns have grown and prospered while others have witnessed no material change in thirty years: some display the bustle of enterprise while others have an air of drowsy contentment. Nor are population and general welfare always due to fortuitous circumstances. The natural thrift, intelligence, ambition, moral standards, and civic ideals of the people are far more essential elements of community character than the obvious characteristics.

A TREASURY OF MEMORIES

In the past of a community lie the sources of its present individuality. The ethnic origin of its citizens, industrial development, dramatic episodes, religious influences, and dynamic personalities all leave traces in the body politic like the passing of the seasons is indelibly recorded in the trunk of a tree. Indeed, the forces of local environment shape the life and habits of the individual no less than the group: it is the size and shape of the cells which determine the appearance of the annual rings. Outward appearances offer few clues to past experience. But in the memories of men and women who have lived long in the same locality are stored the intang-

ible resources of their neighborhood. Whoever would know the true spirit of a village, city, or State must draw upon this treasury of memories.

Fortunate is the community that has a custodian of local tradition, a treasurer of historical wealth, for he can interpret the significance of present conditions. The Springdale school and the West Branch Community Club express something of the temper of this generation, but the deeper nature of that community is revealed in the recollections of Laurie Tatum, Willard Maxson, and Mrs. Ellen K. Mather. To have listened to their stories of old John Brown, of Quaker meetings, or of neighborly endeavor is to have gained a truer appreciation of the character and environment of the founders of Springdale and West Branch.

J. E. B.