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Reading the Past

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Olaf Martin Oleson (subject of the previous profile in this issue) immigrated to Fort Dodge, Iowa, in 1870 from Norway and quickly established himself as a successful business leader in the community. At the same time, he worked tirelessly to promote a native-language singing group in his community and similar groups across the country. Such stories are the stuff of history.

Because all Iowans have immigrated to this state from other places—yes, even the Meskwakis of Tama County—immigration has long been a popular topic for historians of all types, as well as for readers of history. How did immigrants adapt to their new surroundings? What traditions did they bring with them from their points of emigration, how long did those traditions survive, and how did they change?

For a long time, historians focused on the process of assimilation—the integration of immigrants into the dominant, prevailing culture of their new home. The "melting pot" metaphor for assimilation has persisted in the popular imagination long after professional historians proposed other more apt metaphors, such as the patchwork quilt or mosaic, which emphasize the piecing together of separate, distinctive elements into a pluralistic whole rather than a "melting down" of those elements into a homogenous, undistinguished mass. Historians now repeatedly call attention to the remarkable persistence of Old World traditions and to the ways the host culture adapted to immigrants as well as the ways immigrants adapted to it. Although many of those recent studies focus on immigrants to the nation's urban centers, one of the best studies focuses on the rural Midwest and draws much of its evidence from Iowa's German and Scandinavian immigrant communities: Jon Gjerde's The Minds of the West: Ethnocultural Evolution in the Rural Middle West, 1830–1917 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

Gjerde's themes are timely ones at a time when Iowa politicians worry about new immigrants who seem slow to adopt their host culture's language and values. The Minds of the West opens by noting that in the mid-19th century some native-born Americans in the East worried that "foreign minds" with little or no appreciation for American traditions, institutions, and religious and political values would come to dominate in the Middle West, threatening the future of the United States if they were not quickly amalgamated.

Who were these dangerous foreigners? They were immigrants from northern Europe, including, among others, the Norwegian immigrants who settled around Decorah and across Iowa's northern counties, the Swedish immigrants in Page, Montgomery, and Webster Counties, the Danish immigrants in Audubon County, and the more numerous German immigrants scattered across the state and the region. In these relatively isolated, culturally defined enclaves, Old World values shaped institutions—family, church, and community—and relationships within them. Especially in these communities, but even when they settled in more mixed communities, immigrants persisted in using their native languages and celebrating native traditions for decades—in some places even for generations. They founded native-language newspapers and musical groups and established separate schools and churches where they taught their children and worshiped in their native language until—in a part of Iowa history that few would point to with pride—harassment and public pressure (official and unofficial) forced them to give up such practices during World War I.

The immigrants' loyalty to their adopted nation was built largely on the freedom it offered them to retain the values they brought with them to their new home. "Indeed," Gjerde argues in The Minds of the West, "a political environment that permitted immigrants to maintain their religious beliefs and converse in their home language worked to augment loyalties to the nation." At the same time, allegiance to the nation that offered the freedom to recreate religious and cultural traditions often came into conflict with the hierarchical and authoritarian religious and family structures that those ethnic communities recreated. It is the resulting "interactions, tensions, and conflicts" that are the main focus of The Minds of the West, as Gjerde traces them in the context of churches, families, and political participation.

The tensions were particularly acute when American individualism and freedoms encountered the demands and structures of immigrants' religious beliefs and institutions. Religious leaders often insisted, for example, that religious freedom meant the freedom to establish religious schools alongside their churches to preserve their religious traditions. Many of their parishioners, however, used their freedom to send their children to public schools, even when it meant that
the children’s ties to traditional religion were weakened under the pressures of the public school environment.

Families faced other pressures to assimilate. For example, native-born neighbors tended to ridicule German families who flouted “Yankee” gender relationships by having women work in the fields along with their husbands and fathers. In three chapters in the middle of the book, Gjerde contrasts relationships within native, “Yankee” families with those in immigrant families. He found that even when European immigrants adopted local farming methods and housing and clothing styles, they retained a distinctive pattern of long-term family relationships for a century or more. “The ambition of the European farmer, epitomized by the German farmer ... was ‘to see his sons on reaching manhood established with their families on farms clustered about his own.’ The American father, on the other hand, made no such effort on behalf of his offspring, for ‘to be a self made man was his ideal.’ Each new generation would create its place in society just as its predecessor had done.” As a result, European immigrant farm families were more likely to keep farms in the family and even extend them over time.

Immigrants’ participation in politics presents a similarly mixed picture. Even as immigrants adapted to pressures from their local communities and national culture, they invented ethnic identities that they shared as an interest group with people in the broader society. In his final chapter, Gjerde shows how ethnic identities coalesced in voting and arguing about three significant issues in 19th-century midwestern politics: public schooling, temperance, and woman suffrage. Despite ethnic associations with certain stances on all of these issues, ethnic groups sharply divided within themselves over each issue.

In every case Gjerde sensitively balances the forces of assimilation and ethnic preservation. It’s not that immigrants did not adapt to American culture; it’s just that it was a complicated process. Over time, a series of complex and dynamic (not just one-way) cultural negotiations integrated immigrants into their host culture. “In the end,” Gjerde concludes, the “interactions, tensions, and conflicts” within ethnic communities as well as between those communities and the larger culture “exemplify the genius of an American tradition that used freedoms of belief to amalgamate its heterogeneous citizenry into a pluralistic whole.”

Politically sensitive readers will note that it was “freedoms of belief,” not coercion, that led to “a pluralistic whole,” not a oneness of mind. And readers with even a basic knowledge of Iowa history and culture will note that the ethnic enclaves that so worried some observers in the 19th century have become an integral and valuable part of Iowa’s cultural and economic landscape; today, ethnic celebrations and ethnic theme towns are important to heritage tourism in Iowa as well as across the nation.

The Minds of the West is a big, important—and demanding—book that deals with big, important ideas and issues. Sometimes those ideas can seem abstract and daunting when Gjerde introduces them—as they must in the way I have summarized them here—but his narratives give life to those ideas by showing how they played out in the lives of real communities and individuals. He tells, for example, of the “aging immigrant” who observed that he had “nothing against the English language, I use it myself every day. But if we don’t teach our children Norwegian, what will they do when they get to heaven?”

The Minds of the West is a book that should be read by immigrants, descendants of immigrants, and those who care about how we continue to respond to new immigrants in our midst.