

Introduction

Bill Silag

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Introduction

The Social Response to Industrialism in Sioux City

BILL SILAG

THE FIVE ESSAYS collected in this issue of the *Annals of Iowa* examine a variety of topics in the social history of Sioux City, an Iowa metropolis whose boom-town experience in the nineteenth century left it with something of a Wild West image in the twentieth. Perhaps because livestock industries rather than milling operations dominated its economic development, Sioux City stands apart from other Iowa cities—characteristically it is a city of cattlemen rather than farmers, though of course the differences among Iowa cities on this score are matters of degree. Waterloo and several other communities in the state are as well known for meatpacking as for processing field crops, and Sioux City has always had a hand in linking the farmers of the upper Missouri region with the corn and wheat markets here and abroad. But ask about Sioux City in Iowa, and the response is likely to include comments about the rough-and-tumble enterprise of the frontier stockyards, as if Sioux City were historically and culturally closer to Cheyenne than to Des Moines.

Thus it is perhaps ironic that the picture emerging from these articles may impress readers as one more akin to familiar portraits of gritty industrial cities of the Atlantic seaboard and the Great Lakes region. For the Sioux City portrayed here is a factory town rent with the racial, ethnic, and labor divisions that have animated the society and politics of twentieth-century urban America. It is also a place that saw significant social change in the first half of the twentieth century—and in

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ways the pioneer businessmen who established the city probably could never have imagined.

STATISTICS show the rise of Sioux City's population occurring relatively late in Iowa's history. It emerged as an urban center in the second wave of regional development, after the Civil War, when the railroads pushed across the prairie and opened the West to trade all the way to the Rockies and beyond. Compared to the first wave of development—in the 1840s and 1850s, when Davenport, Dubuque, and Burlington took their places as centers of trade in the Mississippi River valley—commerce and industry pushed west of the Mississippi after 1865 with unusual urgency. By 1870, Missouri River settlements such as Council Bluffs and Omaha had grown from wilderness outposts to busy steamboat ports and railroad junctions with ten and fifteen thousand residents respectively. Sioux City in the 1860s saw its population rise from a few hundred to nearly four thousand people—with nearly all of the growth occurring after 1865. By contrast, Burlington had thirty years to accommodate a population that grew from fewer than one thousand in 1840 to fifteen thousand in 1870.¹ No wonder nineteenth-century Sioux City strikes us as rough-and-tumble; a lot of history was packed into just a few years of growth.²

From the start, the land speculators and pioneer merchants who set Sioux City's boom in motion sought to dignify their own acquisitiveness in the name of community betterment and the general social welfare. In Sioux City—and throughout the nineteenth-century West—town boomers accepted and promoted the idea that individual quests for fortune were the foundation of social progress for the community as a whole. And perhaps to a greater extent than we believe possible today, the promise of fortune was in fact realized by a large enough proportion of Sioux City's nineteenth-century pioneers to give validity to the town boomers' entrepreneurial ideology. Sioux

1. John A. T. Hull, comp., *Iowa Historical and Comparative Census, 1836-1880* (Des Moines, 1883), 472, 474, 568, 577, 606; James C. Olson, *History of Nebraska* (Lincoln, 1966), 202; Howard P. Chudacoff, "Where Rolls the Dark Missouri Down," *Nebraska History* 52 (Spring 1971), 1-30.

2. John Hyatt Downing, *Sioux City* (New York, 1941) is a splendid fictional account of life in Sioux City during the exciting growth years of the 1880s.

City men—storekeepers, lawyers, builders, cattlemen—made money in the expanding economy of the agricultural frontier. Such success was not guaranteed, of course, but its possibility was manifest in the new homes and business buildings erected each spring along Sioux City's muddy streets. If there were divisions among the people of early Sioux City—ethnic, religious, socioeconomic—they were discounted in public discourse by a general belief in the causal connection between a community's economic growth and the improved welfare of all of its citizens. For four decades—from the 1850s into the 1890s—the hegemony of the town boomers' entrepreneurial ideology was secure in Sioux City.

Richard L. Poole's essay on Sioux City's opera houses reveals the thinking of a few perhaps typical nineteenth-century entrepreneurs. For all the personal ambition and risk evident in the career of Alpheus B. Beall and other local impresarios, what is striking about the whole business of bringing entertainment to Sioux City is the belief that the presence of an opera house or theater—by affecting the image the community presented to outside investors and prospective settlers—would advance the city's economic fortunes. This is not to denigrate the authentic artistic impulses of such business leaders as meatpacker James E. Booge. But Poole shows that from the opening of the Sioux City Academy of Music in 1871 through the turn of the century, local business and political leaders supported artistic enterprises in the belief that their city's "continued growth depended on a positive image." For local entrepreneurs, the Academy of Music was both "a promotional device" and a "symbol of progress."

The more extravagant Peavey Grand Opera House, which opened in 1888, served a similar symbolic function. It showed that "Sioux City had emerged from the frontier, not just economically but culturally as well. . . . Sioux City had arrived." And, writes Poole, "if the city had arrived, then the men who had spearheaded the theater's creation also had arrived. The building of the Peavey Grand embodied this truth and displayed it for all the world to see."

In retrospect, Poole concludes, "culture . . . was never just a matter of esthetics. It always seemed to deal with some combination of power, money, and civic duty." Power, money, and

civic duty—these motivations no doubt spurred the hundreds of upstart entrepreneurs who put Sioux City on the map of nineteenth-century America.

For several years, under Alpheus Beall's leadership, the Peavey Grand Opera House was the hub of an entertainment network reaching out from Sioux City to hinterland towns and villages in much the same manner as the city's industrial firms reached out to the region's farms and businesses. Like the meatpackers and the millers, Beall and his "circuit" were eventually supplanted by larger nationwide theatrical corporations. Such passing of local—and regional—autonomy into the hands of "outside" control in the early twentieth century necessarily brought with it a new perspective on the place of the local community in the larger scheme of things. To understand what happened to the boosterism of the pioneer generation—and to the "Queen City" they created—it is necessary to look at the radical transformation of the national economy that occurred at the close of the nineteenth century.

IN 1893 the dramatic late-century buildup of the nation's corporate holdings exploded, leaving hundreds of America's overcapitalized industrial firms on the brink of ruin. The following years were a period of retrenchment and reorganization, which produced a more streamlined economy featuring a greater concentration of resources in the hands of a smaller number of giant firms. Authority for key business decisions moved decisively toward a more centralized structure of economic power, located in New York, Chicago, and a few other financial centers far removed from regional economic hubs such as Sioux City.³

The immediate social consequence of this economic crisis in Sioux City was a decline of population—from 37,000 in 1890, before the economic crisis, to 33,000 in 1900, a few years after it subsided. State census tabulations in 1895 showed a precipitous population drop of 10,000 since 1890, the bulk of

3. On the economic history of the 1890s, see Robert Higgs, *The Transformation of the American Economy, 1865–1914: An Essay in Interpretation* (New York, 1971), and Robert Heilbroner, *The Making of Economic Society*, 8th ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1985).

the loss occurring in 1893 and 1894.⁴ For the people who remained in Sioux City, the commercial slowdown of the mid-1890s provided a sobering respite from the boosterism that had fueled economic innovation and risk-taking and had brought the upstart city of the upper Missouri so quickly to the forefront of the nation's agricultural economy.

The innocent optimism of local promoters ended at about the same time—coincidentally—that the pioneer generation of the 1850s passed from the Sioux City business scene.⁵ Boosterism continued, of course, but modified by experience it took a pronounced turn toward a more cautious pragmatism with regard to opportunities for community development.⁶ Perhaps the Sioux City Industrial Association best represented the new mood in institutionalized form. The association's key purpose was to bring new business to Sioux City, but its agenda included pressing problems of local management as well. Efforts to promote business growth were now balanced by the need to address social conflicts that threatened to undermine the economic progress the community had already achieved.

Chief among these concerns was the nascent labor movement in the city's industrial plants. Until the turn of the twentieth century, the local press had remarkably little to report on labor-management relations in Sioux City, which is somewhat strange in light of the industrial character of the local economy, at least in comparison with Iowa's other major urban centers. The rise of meatpacking—and to a lesser extent milling—had driven Sioux City's rise to second rank among Iowa cities in value of manufactures by 1890.⁷ A nascent labor movement probably existed for decades, but until the crisis of the 1890s local management seems to have kept the unionization effort in

4. U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Twelfth Census of the United States, 1900: Population*, vol. 1, pt. 1 (Washington, DC, 1901); W. M. McFarland, comp., *Census of Iowa for the Year 1895* (Des Moines, 1896).

5. The biographies of many of the city's pioneer businessmen are included in A. W. Warner, *History of the Counties of Woodbury and Plymouth* (Chicago, 1890).

6. See, for example, the local business forecast printed in the *Sioux City Journal*, 1 January 1900.

7. U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Eleventh Census of the United States, 1890: Manufactures* (Washington, DC, 1891).

check with largely valid promises of worker reward for compliance with company policy. However, as national corporations subsumed local packing operations in the late 1890s, management increasingly found itself caught between labor demands for a larger share of the wealth and increased job security, on the one hand, and strict corporate guidelines on seasonal employment levels and wages, on the other. In other words, plant supervisors—the men who now passed for Sioux City's business and community development elite—functioned as middlemen between local workers and their true employers, now based in Chicago and New York.

LOCAL WORKERS were not slow to respond to the changing character of industrial relations. By the turn of the century, Erling N. Sannes reports, no fewer than fifty labor unions operated in Sioux City. Most were AFL craft organizations, relatively conservative bread-and-butter unions for whom the goal of a cooperative commonwealth ruled by labor was less important than decent pay and job security for their dues-paying memberships.

A 1904 strike at the local Cudahy packing plant signaled the opening of a more serious fissure between labor and management that has appeared repeatedly in Sioux City throughout the twentieth century.⁸ To what extent the 1904 meat-packers strike represents a break with a more placid nineteenth-century local labor history is difficult to determine; much research on Sioux City's pre-1900 union movement remains to be done. What is clear, however, is that the heady growth of the regional livestock industry from the 1870s through the 1890s had created a sizable industrial work force responsible for millions of dollars of annual output. Wage levels that may have been satisfactory before 1900 were increasingly unacceptable to labor, particularly when pay rates were secured by management's insistence on an open-shop policy in the packing plants and throughout the local economy. Though the strikers failed at the Cudahy plant in 1904, and their failure muted unionization efforts in Sioux City until the years of

8. Thomas P. Christiansen, "An Industrial History of Woodbury County," serialized in *Unionist and Public Forum*, 1940.

World War I, the explicit recognition of divergent interests between business and labor during the strike ended any pretense of the cohesive economic community of interests that the pioneer businessmen of nineteenth-century Sioux City had probably enjoyed.

Still, industrial unionism made slow progress in Sioux City, in part because of the vagaries of the agricultural economy—particularly the protracted business slump that followed World War I—but also because of a lingering local tradition of entrepreneurial domination. That tradition was reinforced, as Roger Horowitz shows, by the failed organizing drives of 1904, 1919–1922, and 1933–1934, as well as by a reliance on company unions such as the meatpackers' conference boards. Whenever Sioux City businessmen were threatened by labor demands, they mustered a level of solidarity unknown to Sioux City workers, who, as late as the mid-1930s, lacked the strong, sustained leadership that was essential to inspire and maintain organizing drives. An ambitious union activist of 1935 faced not only the expected resistance of the corporations and the managers, but also more than a half-century of local social tradition in his or her effort to bring about change in Sioux City's industrial work places.

Federal legislation prompted a few activists to take a chance in the late 1930s, and their efforts, documented here for the teamsters by Sannes and for the meatpackers by Horowitz, marked the beginning of a sustained labor movement in Sioux City. Tapping networks of family, neighborhood, and ethnic group that had previously worked to strengthen the hegemony of pro-business forces in local labor showdowns, union militants—encouraged and to some extent protected by the Wagner Act of 1935—began to build that core of pro-union workers who would lead Sioux City's labor force into the modern era of industrial relations.

The union movement would find allies among local political leaders whose belief in community progress accommodated a diversity of interests, and accepted the legitimacy of each interest group's demand for a share of Sioux City's industrial wealth. Some of these political allies subscribed to the pro-labor tradition personified by former mayor Wallace M. Short; others were simply realists who respected the claims of the men

and women who were responsible for producing manufactures valued at more than one hundred million dollars annually on the eve of World War II. Either way, some local politicians finally had come to recognize the social complexities of the industrial economy established decades earlier by pioneer entrepreneurs with little apparent concern for the justice of the technological machinery they had set in motion. The politicians' education in this matter during the 1930s came from sources both within and without the labor movement.

TIES of race, religion, sex, and ethnicity provided a key source of that education. Union activists had discovered ways to use those ties to their advantage in the 1930s, but they were the special province of settlement-house leader Mary Treglia. Her career, from 1921 to 1959, straddled the two eras—before and after the successful organization of Sioux City's industrial unions. Indirectly, Treglia's work with immigrant families in the East Side's "Bottoms" neighborhood bordering the packing-houses facilitated the union movement by encouraging immigrants to participate in the community's social and political institutions. Language and citizenship classes at the settlement house weakened the ethnocentrism of the newcomers and kindled individual and group ambitions to share in the good life promised by Sioux City boosters ever since the frontier era.

Treglia's negotiating skills brought poor East Siders and powerful city leaders together on issues relating to public safety and education; settlement house activities gave immigrants leadership and organizational experience. The result was a heightened sense of the dynamics of community action and mutual respect between the people of the Bottoms and leaders downtown. Likewise, labor organizers of the 1930s and 1940s no doubt found the task of breaking down traditional ethnocentric resistance to unionizing along industry lines much less onerous than had their counterparts a few decades earlier, for the settlement house engendered in its clients a heightened sense of the rights and responsibilities of citizenship, which, in turn, bolstered immigrant workers' commitment to the unions and other lawful methods of activism for social improvement.

Mary Treglia, Suzanne O'Dea Schenken notes, was not a traditional ward boss; instead, she was an agent for social change. And if Treglia's settlement house also "provided a means for wealthier members of the city to influence the lives and activities of people in the agency's neighborhood," such social control benefited both groups by encouraging activities that advanced the intergroup harmony and social stability sought by the majority of people in all parts of the city.

Treglia's social activism embraced the black population of the Bottoms as well as those born in foreign countries. Here again Treglia exhibited a moderate rather than a radical stance toward the issues. Evidence indicates that she shared the prevailing racism of her era; the settlement house subscribed to a separatist approach to race relations.

So too did key leaders of the local black community. According to William L. Hewitt, black Americans arriving in Sioux City to take jobs in local packinghouses after 1900 met a stratified black social order in which an influential leadership group made up of relatively prosperous professional men accepted racial separation. These black leaders cooperated with Sioux City's white business establishment to preserve the status quo, presumably in the interest of discouraging working-class solidarity, maintaining low wage levels, and ensuring the political hegemony of traditional elites. Separation of the races—like separation of the various ethnic groups—kept business leaders dominant in local political and economic affairs.

More explicit than the social boundaries that discouraged ethnic group interaction, the color line in Sioux City survived despite the occasional efforts of men such as black union activist Arthell Shelton. More influential until the 1930s were black leaders such as J. W. Norris, who in 1909 had proclaimed that "the colored people cannot command the respect of whites unless proving themselves worthy . . . and they cannot prove themselves worthy unless they are segregated." Unionization and its political complements would gradually undermine the rationalizations for separatism, but Sioux City's black minority faced an unusually long campaign for social justice when even "friends" like Mary Treglia operated within an ethic of separate but equal.

HISTORIANS risk assigning too much credit to the labor movement for advancing social welfare in Sioux City after 1900. Undoubtedly, we ignore the influence of local partisan politics—particularly during the heyday of social activist Wallace Short—at our own peril. Social workers such as Mary Treglia and philanthropists such as the Sanford family also surely helped to keep social welfare issues on the local agenda. As everywhere in the United States, too, the New Deal programs of the 1930s had a positive impact on the quality of life. But certainly unionism was one of the key social forces working to broaden public participation in the distribution of political power and economic rewards in twentieth-century Sioux City.

Whatever the relative strengths of unionism, settlement-house work, and local politics in shaping public life after 1900, the social forces described in the five essays that follow reveal a significant transformation of community consciousness in Sioux City since the turn of the century. In the nineteenth century Sioux City's commercial expansion fed a pervasive optimism about the city's glorious destiny as an economic and cultural mecca. But the economic reversals of the mid-1890s weakened the booster ethos and brought Sioux City residents face-to-face with the dependent status of their community in a network of national commerce and culture. That dependence had been a fact for some time, as Richard Poole's analysis of the history of Sioux City theater indicates, but the consequences of the economic crisis of the 1890s embedded it in the community's consciousness.

The challenge to the booster ethos was matched by a challenge to the economic and cultural hegemony of those who had promoted it. Prior to the turn of the century, an entrepreneurial consensus linked personal achievement and community development. Here again, Richard Poole's article on Sioux City theater offers a sense of how that worked. Increasingly after the turn of the century, however, particular subcultural groups began to challenge that consensus. The other four essays gathered here show how blacks, immigrants, and industrial workers began to advance their own social, political, and economic agendas in the twentieth century. Their efforts, I would argue, represent not so much the process of fragmentation that many historians see as the main line of development in American

social history in the twentieth century; rather, they suggest an active desire by such groups to be included in a revised, twentieth-century community social order informed by a public ethos that differed markedly from the entrepreneurial faith of the men who dominated local affairs until the 1890s.

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