

James R. Howard and the Farm Bureau

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THE ANNALS OF IOWA

61 maps, 85 tables, 143 photographs, and over 2,000 notes following the chapters.

The scholarly apparatus need not scare readers. This is an exciting book about the people who came to Minnesota and what has become of them since their arrival. It is full of fascinating details, insights, and statistics. The latter are under control. Demographers and quantifiers may consult Jon A. Gjerde's "Appendix on Statistics" for technical points.

Public libraries in at least the northern tier of Iowa counties should purchase this book as should research libraries. By consulting *They Chose Minnesota* genealogists and family historians can clear up many a troublesome point about ethnic terminology and shifting Old World boundaries. Those who teach United States history in Iowa high schools and colleges could freshen up their presentations on immigration by reading Holmquist's twelve-page introduction and dipping into the book for illustrative detail.

Iowa's neighbor to the north has set high standards for state ethnic history.

BETHANY LUTHERAN COLLEGE

PETER T. HARSTAD

James R. Howard and the Farm Bureau, by Robert P. Howard. Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1983. pp. xv, 225. Photographs, bibliographic essay, index. \$18.95 cloth.

This biography represents a significant achievement on several levels. On one level, it could be read for its valuable information about the extension service conducted by our agricultural colleges and the role of extension agents in the founding of farmers' improvement organizations under various names and titles, which eventually took the name of farm bureaus. On another level, it is an account of the internal workings of the American Farm Bureau Federation. Most important of all, it can be read and enjoyed for what it purports to be: a good, solid, unadorned biography of a founder and the first president of the American Farm Bureau Federation. It happens to have been written by that man's son, a matter of some consequence. The result demonstrates that a son or daughter *can* tell the story of his or her father's life and accomplishments in a fair, detached, and trustworthy manner, giving full credit where credit is due and recognizing shortcomings wherever they exist. (In this case, fortunately, very few existed, none pertaining to character.) Of course it is a thing that has been done before and doubtless will be done again, but it is a challenge of a high order to the best of writers.

Book Reviews

James Howard's principal public legacy was the part he played as a founding father and first president of his (Marshall) County Farm Bureau (1916), the twenty-first in the state, which had required three years of preliminary spadework; a founder of the Iowa Farm Bureau Federation (1918), which he served three years as its first president; and a founder of the American Farm Bureau Federation (1919), again serving as the first president before voluntarily stepping down after three years; and, finally, a long stint as an elder statesman not only of the AFBF, but American agriculture as a whole.

In the main the writer achieves his purpose of historical biography by telling a straightforward story of his father's life without adornment and without sentiment, letting the record speak for itself. As a storyteller the son brought a practiced pen to this labor of love. A successful journalist in his own right, he was for many years the state capitol correspondent of the *Chicago Tribune* in Springfield, Illinois, and author of an admirable *History of Illinois*. As biographer, Robert P. Howard was fortunate in that his father had from boyhood been a saver of documents associated with his career, and had even written a fragment of autobiography. Unfortunately, a home fire destroyed some of those documents, but the author has industriously mined the remaining materials plus the personal papers of his father's colleagues, the files of the AFBF, government documents, and a long list of secondary sources. The book lacks footnotes, but is bolstered by a chapter-by-chapter listing and analysis of the sources which were used. Doubt is never created at any point about the authenticity of the account, and few if any will be handicapped by the lack of footnotes.

Among the papers of his father's colleagues which were used, this reviewer would judge the most important to be those of John W. Coverdale, James Howard's *alter ego*, the first executive secretary of the Iowa Farm Bureau Federation, and an active associate, virtually a full partner, with Howard in the founding of the American Farm Bureau Federation, and its first secretary. The two collaborated on a small book, typed but not published, entitled "The Early Days," an invaluable source for much of the present book. This booklet has long been on deposit in the Iowa State University Library, as is now the entire mass of materials used by Robert Howard.

One of the most valuable contributions of the book is the full coverage of the role of John Coverdale, who has long waited for this kind of recognition. Others who are treated at considerable length, throwing new light on the contemporary scene, are Gray Silver, the West Virginia fruit farmer in charge of the Washington office of the AFBF in the crucial formative years, and Aaron Sapiro, the California marketing expert who made the headlines almost daily during the

THE ANNALS OF IOWA

early 1920s as the chief operations officer of the ill-fated effort at running a grain cooperative sales office. Support of Sapiro's grandiose notion was one of James Howard's few mistakes.

The picture of the man that emerges from this book is indeed attractive. This is no "rags-to-riches" Horatio Algeresque story, but rather a detailed lifestory showing that a boy could (and did) grow up on an ordinary Iowa farm (in an extraordinary Quaker family, to be sure), do his share of farm work, attend a country school and village high school, take a degree from a small sectarian Iowa college (William Penn), and then after a bit of graduate work at the University of Chicago, almost decide on a career of college teaching in the field of English, operate a country hardware store and then a country bank for some three years, return to farming for his life's work, develop into a leader of rural education and better farming, and eventually help to organize on three levels—county, state, and national—the most powerful and successful farm organization in the country and become its first president. In this position he could operate from headquarters in Chicago and the Washington office, do business with presidents and cabinet members and with members of Congress, and act as national spokesman for agriculture, yet never lose the common touch or forget that he was first of all an Iowa farmer who must frequently leave all this behind and rush home for a weekend of farm chores during planting season or fall harvest. All this was done naturally, without fanfare or affectation. These things he could do and do well because he never tried to be anyone but himself.

James R. Howard can be understood fully only in relation to the economic environment of his times. Born in the depression year of 1873, he knew at first hand and was marked by the hard times of the 1880s and 1890s, the presumably better times of the Golden Age of Agriculture (1897 to 1914), the heady prosperity of the World War I years, and the Farm Depression of 1919 to 1933. Perhaps an outsider doing this kind of book might have felt freer to make more capital of his Quaker heritage as a means of illustrating his best traits. Above all else, James R. Howard is revealed in this book as a good citizen. Any move to elevate the tone of individual and community life—better roads, better farm practices, better marketing methods, better country schools, better churches, better relations among neighbors—could always count on Howard as an active participant who would carry his share and more of the load. The simple words, "one of the organizers of his county's Farm Bureau," do not render full justice to a man to whom "organizing" meant being the first to subscribe five dollars toward supplementary pay for a county agent and then driving a Ford roadster in the bitter cold of an Iowa winter over unpaved roads until

Book Reviews

the required 199 others had been signed up and paid their dues.

He believed in "education" of all kinds and at all levels, but he was among the first to insist against bitter opposition that it was not enough to "educate" Farm Bureau members to be better corn producers and better livestock producers—production was not the problem. The Farm Bureau had to take the lead in acquiring better marketing methods and facilities, and it must assist in creating a better life for its members. Yet James R. Howard was never a "do-gooder" and, for whatever it is worth in the debate of the 1980s, he was never a believer in the idea that "government" could or should solve the farmers' problems for them. He was never mistaken for a special pleader for agriculture at the nation's expense. He was not a supporter of McNary-Haugenism, for example, when it would have been much easier to ride along on that wave; he simply did not believe that it would "work" and he said so. He was much nearer to the philosophy of the true Herbert Hoover (not the caricature of H. R. Gross's Farmers Union days) than that of Henry A. Wallace. Being the sort of man he was, he was not a frenzied crusader against McNary-Haugenism; in his quiet honest manner he simply pointed out the reasons why that system would not work, and suggested alternatives for farmers to try in their own behalf. If Herbert Hoover placed his main reliance on farmer cooperatives, the same could be said for James R. Howard. Where and how he would line up among farm leaders of the 1980s no one can be sure, but one can well believe that his principles of the 1920s would not have changed one iota.

UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA

LELAND L. SAGE, EMERITUS

Menominee Drums: Tribal Termination and Restoration, 1954-1974, by Nicholas C. Peroff. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1982. pp. xiii, 275. Photographs, appendix, references, index. \$19.95.

Recently scholars from a variety of academic disciplines have produced narrative and analytical works on Indian policy of the last half century. Commissioner John Collier and the "Indian New Deal" are being reevaluated, Eisenhower administration policy surveyed, and modern tribal histories using oral interviews published. Nicholas C. Peroff, associate professor of public affairs at the University of Missouri-Kansas City, continues that trend with a study of congressional policy relating to a specific group, the Menominee of northeastern Wisconsin.

In 1854 the Menominee accepted a reservation west of Green Bay but retained ownership of valuable timber resources. They initiated

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