Waucoma Twilight: Generations of the Farm

ISSN 0003-4827
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Recommended Citation
Available at: https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.9733

Hosted by Iowa Research Online
Hurt uses published histories for most of his data and cites census reports and similar material. He makes limited use of manuscripts from midwestern collections and draws upon many sources for his outstanding illustrations. The book is an excellent introduction to a subject that will draw more attention in coming years.


REVIEWED BY DEBORAH FINK, AMES, IOWA

Rural communities across the country have been losing population, many to the point of dissolution. *Waucoma Twilight* portrays a rural Iowa community undergoing the changes that continue to transform rural culture. Dona Schwartz, a photographer and journalist, took a series of photographs depicting work, civic, and leisure activities in Waucoma and asked the people to reflect on them. The book presents a collection of 220 black-and-white illustrations; much of the text consists of transcripts of taped interviews with members of five farm families with roots of varying length in the area. Some written accounts, old photographs, and census materials are used, but the book’s history comes largely through recollections of young and old adults living in the community in the years from 1985 to 1987 when Schwartz was photographing and interviewing.

Schwartz, linked to a local family by marriage, puts herself in the narrative, clarifying her involvement in shaping the emerging picture. She identifies social institutions—Waucoma itself, families, clubs, churches, and farms—which become chapters of the book. Chapters on auctions, leisure, and the rural-urban continuum document other aspects of the culture. The emphasis throughout the text is on change: how it was when the interviewee was young, how it is now, feelings about the change, and plans for the future.

*Waucoma Twilight* does not project the traumatic farm crisis image that dominated the media in the 1980s. With the contrasting understandings of the generations, the insiders’ views of change become plausible and real to the reader. While older people tend toward nostalgia for the past, the few who are under 40 express more prosaic realities: “I don’t try to attach that much sentiment to anything, because I’m just going to try to survive,” says a 32-year-old Iowa State University graduate who returned to Waucoma to farm (131). The values of the American cultural mainstream have
overtaken the younger adults, and the excitement of shopping trips
to urban malls and the local absorption of media culture lay bare
the dissolution of the contained rural community.

This book presents an authentic, nonromantic rural Iowa that
may be too real for those looking for the comforting agrarian
images of fortitude, independence, and plenty. Although Schwartz
has culled her photographs and interviews to present a coherent
story, it is as close to being the raw data of ethnographic field-
work as we find in published form. The documentary quality of
the book underscores its authenticity. It also limits the analysis,
even as it invites readers to their own understanding—or to
arguments.

And I do argue with some points that seem uncritically pre-

tessed. The common belief that Iowa farmers were once indepen-
dent of the capitalist marketplace does not fit with historical facts.
The material on the rise of external influences is presented as if
there were prior pristine rural sentiments independent of wider
social messages—as if the traditional church, for example, did not
constitute an external influence. While middle-class rural people
tend not to acknowledge the saliency of social class, the omission of
the voices of rural poverty feeds into its own myth.

But my arguments arise out of the richness of the description.
This is a book to think about, to argue with, and to put into various
theoretical frameworks. Anyone who reads it will come away with a
deeper and more active understanding of rural Iowa.

Foreword by Albert E. Stone. Singular Lives: The Iowa Series in
North American Autobiography. Iowa City: University of Iowa

REVIEWED BY FRED MCTAGGART, KALAMAZOO, MICHIGAN

In the early 1970s, when I undertook a study of Mesquakie stories
for my Ph.D. dissertation, Ray Young Bear, a.k.a. Edgar Bearchild,
had just returned from Pomona College and was enrolled as an
undergraduate at the University of Iowa. My somewhat naive goal,
presented many times to Young Bear, was to put the stories of the
Red Earth People in a meaningful context so they could be pre-
served by the Mesquakies and understood by the Euro-American
culture. As Ray politely declined to collaborate officially in my proj-
ject, I was struck by his strong ties to home and family. He seized
every possible opportunity to accompany me on my trips to the