The Metropolitan Frontier: Cities in the Modern American West

Jon C. Teaford

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amalgamation did it in. In Portage County in northeastern Ohio, where Scott Russell Sanders grew up, the destroyer was a dam. Built ostensibly for recreation and flood control, it destroyed the land and the people on it.

Many of these essays rightfully mix nostalgia and anger. Others, however, have a lot of humor, like Mary Swander's tribute to the bootleg whiskey industry in Templeton, Iowa, where production in 1931 was one hundred gallons a day and in droughts the mayor made sure the distilleries got enough water. Deborah Galyan celebrates growing up on the wrong side of the tracks in Bloomington, Indiana. James B. Hall and Ellen Hunnicutt honor their Ohio and Indiana accents. David Foster Wallace evokes the heroics of playing junior tennis in Philo, Illinois, where he learned to beat the kids from suburban country clubs by taking advantage of prairie winds.

Nearly every essay thus dispels the notion that this land of checkerboard townships is monotonous and uniform. Variations of wealth, religion, and previous nationality are enormous. Space and isolation have preserved differences, and a national ethic of tolerance generally allowed people to go their own ways. At least, those are the messages of the memoirs—even those that protest against the obliteration of former township boundaries. The technically superb but somehow predictable photographs project a different image, however: the Midwest of old Life magazines. The conflict here between photos and texts, between a photographer's current universals and the writers' vanished particulars, is the dilemma of the contemporary Middle West.


Reviewed by Jon C. Teaford, Purdue University

In The Metropolitan Frontier, Carl Abbott discusses big cities and rapid growth, two topics not generally associated with twentieth-century Iowa. This volume is, then, an account of what Iowa is not, and it deserves the attention of Iowans interested in placing their state in a broader national context. Focusing on the period from 1940 to 1990, Abbott describes the development of American cities from the Missouri River west to Honolulu. Los Angeles, San Francisco, Houston, and Dallas receive the most coverage, but Abbott demonstrates his knowledge of a broad range of cities, including a number of references
to such lesser metropolises as Butte and Billings. With a sweeping
command of his subject, Abbott offers a first-rate synthesis of the
middle to late twentieth-century urban West, examining its problems
and its achievements.

Abbott begins by discussing the urban growth that resulted from
burgeoning defense industries and military bases during World War II.
The urban West garnered a disproportionate share of defense dollars,
and this federal spending ignited explosive population and economic
growth that continued in many areas throughout the Cold War era.
Accompanying this growth during the 1940s and 1950s was the rise
to power of “neoprogressive reformers.” In a number of cities these
young, dynamic civic leaders ousted do-nothing mayors and council
members and formed ruling cliques dedicated to efficient, effective
government and the aggressive pursuit of economic development.

Their efforts, together with continued defense spending, paid off
during the second half of the twentieth century as one western city
after another shed its provincial status and became a business center
of national significance. Abbott traces this transformation from “re-
gional city” to “national city” and further discusses how the metropo-
lisés of the West were increasingly “gateways to the world,” important
players in the international business of the Pacific Rim and Southwest
borderlands. He also examines the ethnic diversification of these cities
as Latin America and Asia contributed not only trade but millions of
immigrants to the western metropolises.

In the final section of his book, Abbott perceptively discusses
suburbanization and the development of “multi-centered cities” in the
modern West. He also considers the relationship of the booming cities
to the rural hinterland and to the nation as a whole. By the late twenti-
eth century, western cities, according to Abbott, were no longer remote
cultural colonies of the East but instead national pacesetters in style
and taste. Though now determining the flow of the national main-
stream, they remained distinctively western in their character. For
example, Abbott finds the traditional western trait of individualism
evident not only in the free-wheeling entrepreneurship of Texas
capitalists but also in the counterculture of San Francisco’s Haight-
Ashbury.

In less than two hundred pages, Abbott thus offers a superb
summary of the modern urban West. Those who have read his pre-
vious works will find some of the material familiar, but the book is
rich in new and valuable insights. Some may question his definition
of the West as beginning at the Missouri River, a definition that lumps
matronly Omaha incongruously with flashy Las Vegas, countercultural
San Francisco, and exotic Honolulu. A demarcation line somewhere
west of Lincoln may have been more appropriate. But few will be able to fault his account of the trans-Rockies West, and anyone interested in urban development in that area should read Abbott’s work.


REVIEWED BY JEFF ZACHARAKIS-JUTZ, IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY

What is the role of the historian when he or she is a part of the unfolding events that are the subject of the research? Should or can the historian be objective as both activist and scholar? Where is the fine line between historical research and personal account when the historian is an active player? Peter Rachleff’s hard-hitting social history of the P-9 Hormel strike in Austin, Minnesota, in the mid-1980s raises these and other difficult questions.

Rachleff, who chaired the Twin Cities P-9 Support Group while teaching U.S. history at Macalester College, meticulously collected documents and kept notes throughout the strike. His not-too-hidden agenda, though, was to document and report a history favorable to the P-9 strikers. In challenging the perspective of the highly acclaimed, Academy Award–winning documentary on the strike, _American Dream_, Rachleff sides neither with organized labor nor with the meatpacking corporations. Rather, he sides firmly with the strikers, their local leaders, and the thousands of citizens across the country who believed the P-9ers were “victimized” by both Hormel and their international union, the United Food and Commercial Workers.

This book is divided into three sections. The first section contains a brief but well-conceived analysis of labor history, including an overview of the rise and decline of unionism within meatpacking plants. Rachleff argues that organized labor’s influence has declined because of its inability to attract and organize workers, the deindustrialization of the U.S. economy, growing resistance to unions among employers, and the anti-union policies of state and federal governments. Throughout this section, Rachleff successfully connects P-9 to the militant roots of the labor movement.

The second part of the book focuses on the Hormel strike between 1985 and 1986, and in particular on the high level of rank-and-file activism coupled with the web of solidarity strikers experienced with people across the country. This core theme of democratic participation cuts through Rachleff’s analysis of all other social and economic issues.