

tensive travels are indeed impressive and his acquaintances were wide-ranging. This tantalizing glance at his interesting life makes one wish he had also written the more detailed memoirs which he contemplated but never produced.

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Prairie Grass Roots: An Iowa Small Town in the Early Twentieth Century. By Thomas J. Morain. (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1988. Pp. xviii, 287. Maps, illustrations, tables, figures, notes, index. \$24.95.)

The Midwest has long enjoyed a disproportionate share of attention from social scientists and others who seek the typical in America. And although the United States has been a nation of cities for more than half a century, the small town continues to fascinate scholars who seek the typical stage setting for the American drama. The middle is seen as more typical than the periphery, the small community more typical than the metropolis. Taken to an extreme—finding the middle of the middle of the middle—the very essence of American life ought to be found in a small town located in the middle of the state of Iowa. Jefferson, a community of five thousand people sixty miles northwest of Des Moines, meets the requirements admirably. Under the guiding hand of Thomas J. Morain, a social historian as well as a Jefferson native, this small Iowa town comes alive in the pages of *Prairie Grass Roots*.

Morain had a thorough preparation for this book. He grew up in Jefferson among family, friends, and a basement full of bound volumes of the *Jefferson Bee*, the local newspaper that his father edited. Newspaper articles and editorials are the basis for most of Morain's insights into Jefferson's history, but these are fleshed out considerably through interviews with local residents, many of them no doubt lifelong acquaintances of the author. The tacit assumption that editorials offer an accurate glimpse of contemporary public opinion is hard to justify, but the recollections of Jeffersonians about their pasts nearly always ring true as Morain skillfully sets them in the broader context of the world outside.

The textbook version of twentieth century history that seems to have been Morain's guide to studying Jefferson often fails to illuminate local experience, which might have been at least as interesting as the typical Jeffersonian's reaction to the Red Scare, Prohibition, the Ku Klux Klan, or Franklin D. Roosevelt. Jefferson seems to have been only slightly touched by many of the great themes around which national history is written, and when outside events did impinge upon the town, there was always a variety of responses and reactions. No community of like-minded people

marching to a national cadence, Jefferson was typical in the sense that it embraced variety from the start and it dealt with change only when necessary.

The author neatly straddles the insider-outsider problem that often plagues community studies. Of the two perspectives, his insider role is clearly the more valuable because he is able to sense the nuances of meaning in what people wrote and spoke, translating the local language he knows so well into the language of scholarship. The introduction to the book, written by Richard S. Kirkendall, editor of the Henry A. Wallace Series on Agricultural History and Rural Studies, claims that *Prairie Grass Roots* fits the mode of the "new rural history," defined as "the systematic study of human behavior over time in rural environments." Fortunately, this is an overstatement. Morain strives to adopt such a stance though it seems not to capture his attention nearly as much as the real stuff he is writing about. He does not fall into the trap of the scientist with notebook in hand, watching "human behavior in a rural environment." Morain's strategy works best when he concentrates on Jefferson and forgets the methodological strictures of his discipline. He writes with intelligence, rarely holds his subjects up for evaluation, and never chides them. It is a noteworthy approach.

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Spirit Fruit: A Gentle Utopia. By H. Roger Grant. (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1988. Pp. xiv, 203. Illustrations, figures, notes, bibliography, index. \$22.50.)

By generally accepted measures of the success of communitarian ventures, the Spirit Fruit Society triumphed, according to University of Akron historian H. Roger Grant. That it survived and flourished for twenty-nine years, 1901–1930, a durability rare for utopian colonies, is evidence enough of its achievement and may offer lessons to today's seekers of alternate life-styles. Indeed, the heart of the matter is how it managed this longevity. In short, Spirit Fruit had the good fortune to be led by the loving and loveable Jacob Beilhart, who assembled a small and therefore manageable group of hardworking, self-sacrificing, compatible individuals. The "gentle" band, whose diverse talents fostered economic stability, strove for personal improvement in pleasant environments where domestic arrangements, including private living quarters, allowed for total freedom of relationships.

Born in Ohio in 1867 to a Lutheran father and Mennonite mother, Beilhart became a Seventh Day Adventist preacher in Kansas and Michigan, before expulsion because of his New Thoughtist mind cure practices. These influences in addition to the