

REVIEWS

The American Midwest An Interpretive Encyclopedia

Edited by Richard Sisson, Christian Zacher, and Andrew Cayton

(Bloomington: Indiana University Press for Ohio State University, 2007. Pp. 1892. Index, maps, tables, illustrations. \$75.00.)

It is a rare and rewarding experience to read a place-based reference work focused on the entire midwestern region of the United States. Ordinarily, such works deal with the nation as a whole or with an individual state, so that readers encounter either too little sub-national detail or too much inconsistency in coverage from one state to another. *The American Midwest: An Interpretive Encyclopedia* is thus a welcome and instructive volume, which treats the vernacular Midwest—an area covering much of the upper Mississippi–Ohio–Missouri River drainage basin from the Appalachian Plateaus on the east to the Great Plains on the west—as a coherent and unified region.

The front dustjacket reproduces Grant Wood's painting of Herbert Hoover's birthplace in West Branch, Iowa, viewed as though from a low-flying aircraft, beckoning the reader to join an extended and informative

tour of an area far more diverse than even long-time residents may realize. The tour is directed by distinguished leaders—an advisory board of nearly two dozen who in turn assembled as many general and consulting editors, as well as scores of writers and illustrators who have profusely depicted the processes, patterns, and peoples of the American Midwest in prose, poetry, photographs, tables, and maps. Writers and illustrators are bylined at the ends of their entries; editors, advisors, and donors are listed in the opening pages. The important role of the donors is made further apparent in the low price of the volume.

The encyclopedia is organized into five major sections: "Landscapes and Peoples," "Society and Culture," "Community and Social Life," "Economy and Technology," and "Public Life." Each major section is in turn partitioned into between three and nine subsections and begins with one

or two pages of "Section Contents" which list the entries in that section and its subsections. A casual reader who scans the brief "General Contents" listing at the beginning of the book is unlikely to grasp the depth and span of the volume; a detailed three-column index extends over nearly the last 100 pages as an aid to more careful readers. Unfortunately, the editors did not include a list of maps, illustrations, tables, and photographs, and, although the helpful "Reader's Guide" promises a "credits index at the end of the volume" (p. xiii), this reviewer was unable to find a credits list of the 275 photographs and 25 reproductions of paintings and drawings in the volume. Nevertheless, many readers will find familiar sights illustrated in this reference work. This reviewer was delighted to find a photograph showing the Main Street of his wife's hometown of Crawfordsville, Indiana, circa 1930 (p. 1077), and another reproducing an aerial view of Memorial Stadium at his home institution of the University of Nebraska (p. 869). A guide to maps and tables would have been a helpful aid for readers interested in geographical patterns or numerical quantities.

Readers interested in the literature and art of the Midwest will be especially pleased with the work. Indeed, the Society and Culture section—which includes subsections on

language, folklore, literature, arts, sports and recreation, and media and entertainment—comprises nearly four-tenths of the entire volume. But history, political science, and geography are also well represented. The treatments of rural, small town, and metropolitan settlement patterns and lifestyles are rewarding, as are the discussions of labor movements, politics, religious and cultural institutions, and science and technology. By this reviewer's count, there are about 200 longer overview essays and nearly 1500 shorter topical entries in this wonderful volume. *The American Midwest: An Interpretive Encyclopedia* deserves to be included in the collections of public libraries, middle- and high school libraries, and college and university libraries throughout the Midwest. The book's low list price should make it an affordable addition to the private libraries of interested residents of the region it depicts. All of the many people who worked on this fine volume deserve a round of applause from us Midwesterners. In short, this volume warrants an overall rating of "very highly recommended."

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