

*The Crops Look Good: News from a Midwestern Family Farm*

By Sara DeLuca

(St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2015. Pp. viii, 254. Illustrations, notes, index. \$17.95.)

In *The Crops Look Good: News from a Midwestern Family Farm*, Sara DeLuca has brought to life a collection of letters given to her by her Aunt Margaret. In so doing, she produced both a charming memoir and an interesting case study of dairy farming in northwestern Wisconsin from the 1920s through the mid-1950s.

Margaret, born in 1904, was the eldest daughter of a large Norwegian farm family. She moved to Minneapolis to take a job in 1923; then she moved to California with her husband in 1935. Margaret saved the letters her family wrote to her. She also returned to Wisconsin to spend many summers pitching in on the farm, and she saved the letters she wrote home to her husband in California. DeLuca has masterfully transformed this material into an eminently readable story of family farming across the generations in the upper Midwest.

The book has broad appeal and will be enjoyed by scholars and lay readers throughout the Midwest, especially those who love to read old letters. The letters are woven together with just enough context on the business of farming and happenings in the wider world to guide the reader through the decades.

Naturally, a chronicle that follows the lives of a large family over three decades can offer melodrama to

move the story along. This book does that; it is a page-turner, with stories of good marriages, bad marriages, successful lives, and relative failures. DeLuca exercises excellent judgment in choosing what to include and what to omit.

But this book also affords the scholar the opportunity to meet a real dairy farmer who launched four sons in farming during the Great Depression. In addition to the letters, written reflections from DeLuca's family members round out the story. Her grandfather Willie Williamson tells of his struggles during the 1930s, nearly losing his farm to foreclosure in 1932, but still managing to buy two farms at attractive prices before the Depression was over. He and his four farming sons all reflect on key farming decisions. One son tells of the opportunity to buy cheap grain scorched in an elevator fire. Another reflects on his father's decision to switch to Holstein cows.

The elder Williamson bought his first automobile in 1917, but waited to buy his first tractor until 1940. He recalls, "I had been chasing tractor salesmen off the farm nearly every other day for five or six years. I wasn't broke all that time, like I claimed to be, but if I'd have bought a tractor, that might have finished me" (p.128). His sons, nevertheless, had "rigged

up” a homemade tractor “from an old truck and odd machinery” during the Depression years (p. 115). Williamson was more enthusiastic about electric power than he was about automobiles and tractors. His barns and house were wired for electricity from a Delco battery system by 1924. He thought it made financial sense on his dairy farm.

Each farmer faced different circumstances, had different skills and preferences, and experienced varied outcomes. This slim volume offers

real insight on how farming evolved through the mid-twentieth century and how farmers made it work. Willie Williamson sums up it up this way, “Timing is so important. So is hard work and common sense. You have to have all three to make a go of things. A little luck helps too” (p. 70).

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### *The Neighborhood Outfit: Organized Crime in Chicago Heights*

By Louis Corsino

(Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014. Pp. 176. Notes, index. Clothbound, \$85.00; paperbound, \$25.00.)

Organized crime’s historic foothold in the city of Chicago, Illinois, is well-documented in both popular culture and scholarly literature. What is less well-known is that an organized crime crew operated in the suburb of Chicago Heights from the 1900s to the 1950s, playing a vital role in the Italian community there and holding strong links to the larger Chicago “Outfit.” This lesser-known crew—the Chicago Heights “boys”—is unveiled in *The Neighborhood Outfit*, written by sociologist and Chicago Heights native, Louis Corsino. The book is a brief, well-organized case study of organized crime in this small suburban city from the early 1900s to the post-World War II period.

Corsino sets out to show how organized crime in Chicago Heights was a product of the relationship between structural opportunities (or the lack of them) and the local Italian community. He argues that cultural or group characteristics and structural inequalities encouraged Chicago Heights Italians to pursue a number of nontraditional occupations—including organized crime—in order to obtain economic success. More important, he stresses that neither group characteristics nor structural inequalities explain the emergence of organized crime in Chicago Heights. Instead, both factors must “be joined by relevant social capital processes such as networks of social trust, community support or acquiesce,