

STUDIES IN MIDWESTERN HISTORY

VOL. I, No. 1

March, 2015

CENTRIFUGAL AND CENTRIPETAL FORCES SHAPING THE AMERICAN MIDWEST

By John E. Miller¹

Images of home pervade our understanding of the American Midwest. Think of Garrison Keillor and his “Prairie Home Companion,” Laura Ingalls Wilder and her little houses, Grant Wood and his north Iowa landscapes, John Cougar Mellencamp and his Indiana-inspired “Small Town.” At the same time, over the course of its history the Midwest has been nothing if not a continuous site of movement and flux, beginning with migrating tribes of Native Americans across millennia; continuing with European settlers who traveled on foot, in Conestoga wagons, and eventually by train, as they extended their zone of occupation across the region from Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois to Michigan, Iowa, Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Missouri and on to the Dakotas, Kansas, and Nebraska. From Johnny Appleseed’s peregrinations along the prairie frontier and Mark Twain’s navigations on the Mississippi to Jack Kerouac’s hitch-hiking across the region on the road to Denver and San Francisco and Charles Starkweather’s crime spree across Nebraska, the urge to roam has been endemic and variously motivated.

It is no coincidence that Chicago gained status as the railroad hub of the nation; that Detroit, Flint, and their neighbors emerged at the center of the automobile industry; and that Minnesotan Charles Lindbergh, the first person to fly solo across the Atlantic, grew up in and was viewed as

¹ John E. Miller is Professor of History Emeritus, South Dakota State University. His most recent book is *Small Town Dreams: Stories of Midwestern Boys Who Shaped America* (Lawrence, University Press of Kansas, 2014).

the quintessential representative of Midwestern values and attitudes as he worked out of his base in St. Louis. The Midwest certainly has no exclusive purchase on the notions of “home” and “movement.” But any attempt to identify or define the Midwest as a region must necessarily encompass both poles—home and mobility; fixedness and fluidity; establishmentarian and contrarian; stability and change. The late historian Michael Kammen wrote a great book on American culture entitled *The Contrapuntal Civilization* (1971), aiming to characterize the entire nation by that phrase, but certainly it can be applied to the Midwest as a region just as well.²

To employ another metaphor, centrifugal and centripetal forces constantly intersect within the regional culture both to drive people apart and subsequently to bring them back together. This makes for a lubricious mix of contrary and often contradictory impulses, motives, dreams, goals, and passions. This all came home to me once again after putting to bed my manuscript for and then receiving my first hard-bound copy of a book published in March 2014—*Small-Town Dreams: Stories of Midwestern Boys Who Shaped America*.³ My purpose in writing the book was neither to ponder the “essential nature” of the region nor to discuss regionalism in general. Nor was it to define what makes the Midwest what it is and what makes it unique, although many readers will triangulate the evidence presented with regard to the characters and personalities of each of these twenty-two small-town boys and make their own inferences about what might define and set the Midwest apart from other regions.

As stated in the introduction to the book, I had a story to tell—actually, many stories—about a number of young men who had grown up in small towns or on farms in the Midwest, and I wanted to show how those experiences and the memories deriving from them often became the basis for establishing their personal identities. At the very least, these men’s recollections remained of special importance in their lives and careers. My central purpose in writing the book was to cast light on small towns and the important role they have played in our culture. For several centuries of American history, they were the major loci of activity, the foundation of society, and the place

² Michael G. Kammen, *The Contrapuntal Civilization: Essays Toward a New Understanding of the American Experience* (New York, Crowell, 1971).

³ The twenty-two individuals singled out for attention in the book cut across a century of time, from the late nineteenth to the late twentieth centuries; derive from a variety of different occupations; and represent all twelve states in the region (with at least one individual from each one): Ohio: William McKinley; Indiana: James Dean, Ernie Pyle, and John Wooden; Michigan: Henry Ford; Illinois: Ronald Reagan, Carl Sandburg, William Jennings Bryan, and Oscar Micheaux; Wisconsin: Frederick Jackson Turner; Minnesota: Sinclair Lewis; Iowa: Meredith Willson, Grant Wood, and Bob Feller; Missouri: Walt Disney, Sam Walton, George Washington Carver, and Thomas Hart Benton; North Dakota: Lawrence Welk; South Dakota: Alvin Hansen; Nebraska: Johnny Carson; and Kansas: John Steuart Curry.

from which culture emanated. I wanted to tell these stories and suggest to readers that small towns had evolved into places that we no longer much honor or venerate. Rather, we denigrate them much of the time, not so much by directly criticizing or attacking them (although that we do often enough), but rather by simply too easily forgetting about them or by keeping them at a distance.

I wanted to remind us of how even up to the present time small towns still do count. In our memories and contemplations, they remain potent in the associations they conjure up, the values and habits they undergird, and the goals and dreams they inspire. In a sense, my focus upon the Midwest in the book was accidental, deriving from my instinct that endeavoring to write a book covering towns in every section of the country would quickly make it unmanageably lengthy. But, of course, being a “small-town boy” myself who grew up in six small communities in the Middle West and one rapidly emerging suburb of Chicago—Rolling Meadows—and having lived for the past forty-one years in Brookings, South Dakota—a town of 22,500 people and the fourth largest city in the state—I believed that the region was being slighted by scholars and being undervalued in the national memory. This is the region I feel personally connected to, am more conversant with as a scholar, and am especially interested in learning more about. Having lived here all my life (except for thirteen months as a U.S. Army court reporter in Vietnam) I feel a special closeness to it, and certainly derive a substantial part of my self-identity from it.⁴

Beyond that, however, similar to the situation with small towns, historians in recent decades have gotten into the habit of neglecting the Midwest relative to other regions of the country. In 1907, meetings in Lincoln, Nebraska, and Madison, Wisconsin, had given birth to the Mississippi Valley Historical Association, which spawned a professional journal called the *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*. During the 1960s, organizational leaders, observing that theirs was the major national organization devoted to American history, decided to go national and transform their group into the Organization of American Historians, while simultaneously rechristening their publication as the *Journal of American History*. What was a major gain for American history at the time, however, turned out to be a distinct loss for the regional history of the Midwest, as one-by-one major institutional resources dried up or disappeared, and those institutions found themselves floundering and starving for lack of funds. For example, three Midwestern history journals—*Mid-*

⁴ Editor’s note: on the author’s personal history, see Jon K. Lauck, “An Interview with John E. Miller, Historian of the American Midwest,” *South Dakota History* vol. 44, no. 2 (Summer 2014), 103-39.

America, *Upper Midwest History*, and *The Old Northwest*—have all disappeared in recent years. Jon Lauck's *The Lost Region: Toward a Revival of Midwestern History* (2013) tells the story well.⁵

All of this is merely to say that in writing this book my major goal was to tell the compelling stories of these remarkable individuals for an audience of both professional historians and “readers on the street,” while at the same time I wanted to promote the histories of two relatively neglected subfields of American history—those of small towns and the American Midwest. I never intended the book to be a systematic or even casual treatment of the “central identity,” the historical evolution, or the basic properties of the Midwest and its people.

But now with the rapid emergence of the Midwestern History Association, the creation of the new journal *Middle West Review*, and the opportunity to reflect on the nature of the Midwest and its history created by the *Studies in Midwestern History* series, I have begun to rethink and to put into a different light the thoughts, feelings, ambitions, goals, and actions of this small sample of twenty-two men who all achieved major success in their separate fields of endeavor.

Around the age ten or twelve, many, if not most, of them experienced some sort of epiphany that captured their imaginations and impassioned them to pursue a dream of discovery and achievement. For Henry Ford it was self-propelled vehicles, for Johnny Carson it was magic and performance, for Lawrence Welk and Meredith Willson it was music, for Walt Disney it was drawing, for John Wooden it was basketball and baseball, for Sam Walton it was selling and selling himself. After that, it did not take too long for them and others to intuit that to pursue their passion and make a mark, they would have to be ready to leave home and go where their ambitions took them. Welk, whose father agreed to buy him an expensive accordion if he would stay on their North Dakota farm until he turned twenty-one to pay it off, packed his suitcase, pinned three dollars in the lining of his coat, and took off from home on his twenty-first birthday. He played local venues for a while, then operated out of Yankton, South Dakota, settled down for ten years working out of Chicago, all while he criss-crossed much of the continent with his bandsmen, and eventually wound up in Southern California.

Oscar Micheaux, the first great black American filmmaker, left his family behind in Metropolis, Illinois, heading north toward Chicago when he was seventeen. Meredith Willson graduated from high school in Mason City, Iowa, and immediately decamped to New York City, where he studied at what later became the Juilliard School of Music, and soon began touring the country with John

⁵ Lauck, *The Lost Region: Toward a Revival of Midwestern History* (Iowa City, University of Iowa Press, 2013).

Philip Sousa. The Midwestern regionalist painters Thomas Hart Benton, John Steuart Curry, and Grant Wood all made the customary pilgrimage to Europe to absorb what they could in Parisian art circles before returning home and trying to figure out what kind of artists they wanted to become. By the time they were middle-aged, they had all wound up back in the Midwest—Benton in Kansas City, Curry in Madison, and Wood in Iowa City.

Johnny Carson, having spent three years in the Navy during World War II, moved down the road from Norfolk, Nebraska, to Lincoln, where he picked up his college degree in three years' time. He immediately plunged into the brand-new arena of television broadcasting in Omaha in 1949. Within a couple of years, he was off to Los Angeles, thanks to a boyhood friend who was able to offer him a job. He was unwilling to remain in and become a permanent fixture of the largest city in Nebraska, and instead tried his luck at a higher level of competition where the sky was the limit.

Only two of this admittedly unrepresentative sample of “small-town boys” from the Midwest rose to the heights of prominence while staying close to home: Henry Ford and Grant Wood. Ford, who was born on a farm near Dearborn, Michigan, emerged as an early billionaire—the most prominent, powerful automobile magnate in Detroit, ten miles away—during the early 1900s. He died in his mansion in Dearborn, just a few miles from where he had been born. Wood's journey (including his brief foray in France) took him a bit farther. Having grown up on a farm near Anamosa in northeastern Iowa, he spent most of his young adulthood twenty miles away in Cedar Rapids, before moving thirty miles farther down the road to Iowa City to teach art to college students and continue his own artistic endeavors. These two men, however, were the exceptions to the rule. All of the rest moved sizable distances from their home bases, sometimes crossing from east to west and back again, or vice versa.

This is what success has generally meant in America. The first European settlers who landed in Jamestown, Plymouth Bay, and Boston during the early 1600s were brave voyageurs heading off to unknown destinations. If one wants to fulfill his or her dreams to rise in society and to achieve success, one has to be ready to pack up and go—not just ready but willing, able, and determined to leave family and friends behind and to face perilous challenges along the “yellow brick road” on the way to the Emerald City. To get to America in the first place was a risky and fraught decision that separated the seekers from the stayers. Once settled around Boston and other towns in New England, the early Puritans quickly hived out and spread into the forests, hills, and mountains on

their “errand into the wilderness.” By the late 1700s, with independence achieved and with a new nation developing, land in New England had become relatively scarce, worked out, and increasingly expensive. Young men of ambition naturally looked west to find the elbow room they needed and wanted and the economic opportunities that would offer them advancement. At this early stage, women had few choices but to stick with their menfolk and to simply live more settled lives within the confines of family and kin.

Historians have referred to the strong tendency of Americans to move around and migrate to new places as the “M-Factor” in American history. No one explicated and elaborated upon this notion of mobility with more effect than one of the United States’ most popular and influential historians, Frederick Jackson Turner of the University of Wisconsin. He was only 31 years old in 1893 when, speaking at the annual convention of the American Historical Association held that year in conjunction with the Chicago World’s Fair, he presented his classic paper, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History.” During the first three or four decades of the twentieth century, the Frontier—or Turner—Thesis, around which that paper was built, became the most popular and influential interpretation of American historical development. The image suggested by Turner’s frontier was one of movement, slow or rapid depending on your perspective. The movement westward across the continent that continually ground forward, decade by decade, and which today is encapsulated in progressive lines of settlement on maps in history textbooks, provided, in Turner’s view, the best explanation for American democracy, individualism, nationalism, and a host of other positive and some negative characteristics of human behavior. (Historian George W. Pierson’s classic 1962 *American Quarterly* article on the “M-Factor” in American history extended the notion of mobility to the kinds occurring both before and after the frontier period of the nation.⁶)

If movement seemed to embody the essence of this frontier interpretation, Turner’s approach left plenty of room for immobility or stasis, too. For what was left behind, as the edge of the frontier moved constantly forward, was also significant. What was left behind were farms, highways, railroads, towns, and cities, where increasing numbers of people worked, played, and resided, building up communities and culture on a permanent basis. So the frontier and the world that it made consisted of a dynamic mixture of change and stability, movement and permanence.

⁶ George W. Pierson, “The M-Factor in American History,” *American Quarterly* vol. 14, no. 2 (Summer 1962), 275-89.

Turner's frontier thesis was highly teleological, and the direction in which it moved was toward the West. So, as important as the term "frontier" was to Turner's interpretation, "the West" was equally important. But when Turner spoke about the West, to a large degree what he had in mind was his own native Midwest, where he had grown up, pursued his education through the acquisition of a BA and a Master's degree from the University of Wisconsin, and where, after having obtained his Ph.D. degree in history from Johns Hopkins University, he returned to teach in Madison for another two decades before heeding the siren call of Harvard in 1910. Even after retiring to California, however, Turner remained committed to his home region.

Ronald Reagan, upon graduating from little Eureka College in Eureka, Illinois, in 1932, drove to Davenport, Iowa, seeking a job, succeeded at the task, and soon was transferred to the larger city of Des Moines, where he became an on-air celebrity by his mid-twenties. As with Johnny Carson, the bright lights of Hollywood and Los Angeles held a high allure for him, and, again with help from a friend back home, Reagan landed a seven-year deal with Warner Brothers studio, launching him on his path to the White House. But he always retained a special place in his heart for Eureka, visiting it a dozen times after he graduated (including two times as President), and he likewise frequently reminisced nostalgically about his hometown of Dixon to friends, co-workers, and others. Meanwhile, he rapidly adjusted to the western lifestyle after moving to Hollywood, owning a succession of four different ranches over time, learning how to ride, and effecting a pose as a cowboy. No wonder the curators at the Reagan Presidential Library, in placing a statue of him on the grounds, chose to clothe him in cowboy togs.

No one remembered his hometown with greater affection and effusion than Meredith Willson, who spoke quite frequently and with great sincerity, both in public and in private, about the wonderful years he had enjoyed growing up in Mason City, Iowa. One evening in New York City among a group of his friends, Willson once again waxed nostalgic about those earlier days, prompting his friend Frank Loesser, who wrote "Guys and Dolls" and other great musicals, to exclaim, "What an idea! Why don't you write a musical about it?" So Willson, who had never written a musical play, went ahead and did it, although it took eight more years to bring "The Music Man" to the stage on Broadway. At the end of the first performance, the entire audience rose spontaneously and clapped enthusiastically in unison to the sound of "Seventy-Six Trombones," and they did it every night thereafter for 1,375 performances. Even today, the American public remains in thrall to Meredith Willson's musical bouquet to his hometown (even

if he threw in a few references to Iowans' "stubbornness," political pomposity, and social pretentiousness).

This kind of story repeats itself over and over again. William Jennings Bryan in the historic, hard-fought election of 1896 spoke so eloquently about the presumed superiority of the rural way of life, as compared to the failures and temptations of city living, that his words have been emblazoned in American history textbooks ever since: "Burn down your cities and leave our farms, and your cities will spring up again as if by magic; but destroy our farms, and the grass will grow in the streets of every city in the country."

Famed UCLA basketball coach John Wooden wound up in Los Angeles somewhat to his bewilderment, since he had been ready to go to Minnesota if the school's executives had been a bit timelier in proffering him a job in 1948. But instead of building his basketball dynasty in the Big 10 conference, he did it on the Pacific coast. Several years after settling in there, agitated by the wild traffic on the L.A. freeways, he blurted out, "What are we doing here, anyway?" Though in many ways he felt like a fish out of water on the West coast, Wooden brought along with him his Midwestern values, personal habits, and preacherly advice, and into his late nineties he consistently expounded on the same philosophy that had been drilled into him by his pious father, his Sunday School teachers, and all of the other cultural arbiters who had surrounded him in Indiana as an adolescent and young man.

Even Sinclair Lewis, that scourge of small-town banality and provincialism, the man whose *Main Street* (1920) rocked the United States like a bomb when it appeared in 1920, reserved a soft spot in his heart for the Midwestern way of life as he observed and remembered it. When invited to write something for his old high school yearbook in 1931, at age 45, he offered the following sentimental encomium: "If I seem to have criticized prairie villages, I have certainly criticized them no more than I have New York, or Paris, or the great universities. I am quite certain that I could have been born and reared no place in the world where I would have had more friendliness." All in all, he concluded, "It was a good time, a good place, and a good preparation for life." Was Lewis being sincere? Was this a practical joke? Was his memory playing tricks with him? Had *Main Street* simply been written to make money? Had he changed his mind? Who can say for sure? One must presume that he indeed harbored tender thoughts about his hometown, despite all the abuse his classmates had showered upon him for being so different from them while he was growing up

there, under the spell of the small-town upbringing that he had been so quick to reject but so unable to throw off.⁷

My argument here is not that these men's Midwestern upbringing constituted a Procrustean bed demanding that everybody who grew up in the region remain volubly supportive of and determinedly enthusiastic about it. One can cite counter-examples. Ernie Pyle harbored no ill will toward his native region and returned frequently to visit family and kin, but he felt no special attachment to the Midwest. He and his wife, Jerry, preferred to live in the Southwest and built a house for themselves in Albuquerque shortly before the U.S. entered World War II. Carl Sandburg retained fond feelings for his youth in Galesburg, Illinois, and his working years in Chicago, but he did not hesitate to move from Harbert, Michigan, to live the last two decades of his life in Flat Rock, North Carolina. Eight of the twenty-two men featured in the book wound up in the Los Angeles area, indicating that one's behavior often trumps one's sentimental memories and feelings. Even Benton, Wood, and Curry insisted that their advocacy of regionalism in art and culture did not mean that they favored any particular region, including the Midwest (it is true, however, that they all did settle down in the Midwest by the time they were middle-aged).

It is safe to say that there was a lot of ambivalence in the feelings and attitudes of Midwesterners regarding their own region. Sentiment alone was a weak reed to rely upon when people were confronted with hard decisions about where to work and to pursue their careers. Almost as soon as the first towns were established in the region, as the frontier pushed constantly westward during the late nineteenth century, concerns were voiced about the lure of the city and particularly the siren call of the East for their young people. "Boys, Stay at Home" were words not only frequently gracing newspaper editorials but also inspiring popular songs. Outmigration from the farms and small towns of the Midwest and from the region itself became a major social and economic problem by the 1920s and has remained so ever since. The effort to retain their youth at home (and, beyond that, to attract outsiders to move in) has been one of the most important dilemmas on the agenda of towns all over the region for decades. Several models have been advanced to describe and explain the migratory pattern. Here again, however, it is not simply a one-way road, because there is always out-migration, in-migration, and stasis.

⁷ For a recent rethinking of Lewis and other alleged Midwestern "rebels," see Jon K. Lauck, "The Myth of the Midwestern 'Revolt from the Village,'" *Mid-America* vol. 40 (2013), 39-85.

A number of models, metaphors, analytic concepts, and causal interpretations have been advanced to help Midwesterners interpret their current situation and think about new pathways and solutions. Like many other commentators, Richard Longworth, in *Caught in the Middle: America's Heartland in the Age of Globalism* (2008), places special emphasis on the impact of globalization. "In truth, the best and the brightest have always gone to cities," he observes. "Skilled and hardworking people with some secondary education could lead a middle-class life back in the old hometown, working in the local factories. That's what's gone now, and it dooms these towns, just as surely as it has doomed the old rusting mill down by the tracks."⁸ Many analysts have put their major emphases upon technology and the impact of the new media. Others cite the effects of education, government policy, changes in family life, generational change, cultural attitudes, and other factors, many of which are interlinked.

A study of northeastern Iowa by Patrick J. Carr and Maria J. Kefalas and reported on in *Hollowing Out the Middle* (2009) has attracted considerable attention for positing four alternate paths usually taken by recent high school graduates: (1) "Stayers"—who remain at or near home and try to make a go of it without going on for higher education; (2) "Achievers"—ambitious, college-educated, and often permanent out-migrants; (3) "Seekers"—who join the military to get away and see what the world beyond is like; (4) "Returners"—ones who left home for a time and eventually return to their hometowns.⁹

These analyses all incorporate in one way or another the notions of centrifugal and centripetal forces, as they are discussed in this essay. What was important historically continues to be significant as we proceed further into the twenty-first century. The lure and comfort of home hold out strong appeal to people, while at the same time they appreciate the excitement and promise of the journey. Staying or leaving: these two complementary impulses will always remain to some degree in tension with each other, enlivening and enriching the culture of the Midwest.

⁸ Richard C. Longworth, *Caught in the Middle: America's Heartland in the Age of Globalism* (New York, Bloomsbury USA, 2008), 44.

⁹ Patrick J. Carr and Maria J. Kefalas, *Hollowing Out the Middle: The Rural Brain Drain and What It Means for America* (Boston, Beacon Press, 2009).