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**“You Really Ought to Give Iowa a Try:”
Tourism, Community Identity, and the Impact
of Popular Culture in Iowa**

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Abstract

This paper examines how representations of Iowa in popular culture have led to tourism development in three small communities – Eldon, Mason City and Dyersville. It squarely situates Iowa within the framework of America’s mythic heartland and then analyzes three enduring artifacts of American popular culture – the painting *American Gothic*, the musical *The Music Man*, and the film *The Field of Dreams*. While these popular images of Iowa have significantly helped the economies of these small communities, I contend that Iowa’s wider state identity has ultimately been hindered by these representations because of their strong resonance in the American imagination.

Introduction

“You Really Ought to Give Iowa a Try,” sing the townsfolk of fictional River City in “Iowa Stubborn,” the opening number in Meredith Willson’s *The Music Man*. The song perfectly conveys how the American Midwest is often constructed and perceived as a place filled with simple folks, wholesome values, and bright-eyed and bushy-tailed optimism. From Willson’s cheery tale of a reformed bandleader in River City, Iowa, in *The Music Man* to Laura Ingalls Wilder’s reflections on frontier childhood in the *Little House* book series, to more contemporary representations of rural life embodied by television shows like *Smallville*, and *The Simple Life*, this nostalgic image is frequently circulated and looms large in the popular American imagination. The state of Iowa has long been a part of this pastoral, unwavering vision – a focal point in the construction of America’s heartland. This is due in part to the state’s rich agricultural history and lack of a truly urban center. Indeed, one authority on agricultural development in the United States claimed that the “state’s success when it came to farming created so much competition for labor that manufacturing was inhibited.”¹ In fact, Iowa has long been mythologized as the nation’s agricultural breadbasket – where family, community and civic life centers on the familiar cycles of farming. Much of this mythologization is based in reality. The state tops the nation in hog and corn production and ranks third, only behind California and Texas in total agricultural production.²

This essay focuses however on the impact of popular culture representations of Iowa and how they too have reinforced a state cultural identity closely linked to pastoralism and rurality. I contend that tourist sites associated with popular culture are particularly interesting because they are imbued with cultural memory informed by their representation's historic background, notably the conditions that led to its creation, and the relevance or "staying power" of that representation in America's collective imagination. These two elements are important not only from the perspective of the traditional tourist, but also for residents of the community in question. If a representation remains relevant, it will continue to impact a tourist site economically in terms of dollars spent. In turn, it instills the surrounding community with a sense of worth and pride of place. In addition, scholarly perspectives that link rurality and tourism are also useful to understanding why visitors engage in the "gaze consumption of the rural" and idealize rural places as unchanging, quaint, and as somehow more authentic than suburban or urban landscapes.³

This paper examines three artifacts of popular culture that have not only generated real economic impact through tourism but also are significant contributions to Iowa's pastoral status as "America's heartland." The towns of Eldon in southeastern Iowa, Mason City in north Iowa, and Dyersville in central Iowa, have all benefited from a popular representation associated with their respective communities. These representations include the painting *American Gothic* by Grant Wood, the musical *The Music Man* written by Meredith Willson, and the film *Field of Dreams* starring Kevin Costner.

Rurality, Consumption, and the Changing Landscapes of Rural America

Before discussing each representation in depth, it is useful to contextualize their significance by examining the complex relationship between rurality and consumption. Rural life has increasingly become an artifact of consumption and representation in an era where the majority of Americans live in urban or suburban areas. Selling a rural image based on the promise of an idyllic and wholesome existence has become a prominent strategy for economic development across the country, from Branson, Missouri to Celebration, Florida. Indeed, the increase in America's rural populations is due chiefly to growing numbers of ex-urbanites who "want it all" – a prosperous career in the big city and a rural retreat they can call home. In fact, the great majority of rural people are now perimetropolitan, meaning that they live and work within fifty miles of a city with a population of 50,000 or more people.⁴ As geographer John Fraser Hart observes, because the traditional link between rural America and agriculture is growing more tenuous, "contemporary rural America is being transformed by people whose occupations, outlooks, and values are decidedly nonagricultural." He also writes that the greatest change in rural America during the twentieth century, even greater than the decimation of the farm population, has been the massive influx of city people.⁵ Sociologist Robert Riley also touches this trend when he wrote that the new rural landscape is "a residence and occasional workplace for people whose livelihood depends not at all upon the land per se."⁶ Instead, the rural landscape has become essentially an amenity – a "stage set" constructed as an escape from the everyday. Indeed, this shift in the utilization of rural land from a largely production oriented function (agricultural) to a consumption oriented function (sprawling ex-urban developments) signifies a major transformation in the nation's relationship to its rural and agrarian roots.

As rural sociologists David Brown and Louis Swanson observe, “The American public tends to see its rural population as a repository of almost sacred values and as a stable anchor during times of rapid social change.”⁷ Consequently, the desire to consume rurality – to connect with a tangible rural place or a regional culture can in some ways be linked to the postmodern condition marked by a sense of instability, fragmentation and indeterminacy, feelings many individuals encounter in twenty first century American daily life. In their own ways, *American Gothic*, *The Music Man*, and *Field of Dreams* represent a consumable rurality that begins with a cultural product (a painting, musical, and film) and extends to merchandise associated with that product. One form of that merchandise is place and the “gaze consumption” associated with tourism. As David Crouch argues, “The power of the culturally mediated versions of the rural through tourism and other forms is articulated through their sign value. The tourist specializes in ‘the gaze’ upon the cultural artifacts he or she encounters.”⁸ Civic boosters in Eldon, Mason City, and Dyersville have worked to construct a particular vision of their communities that are closely linked to tourists’ preconceived notions of how rural and small town Iowa has been configured in American history and popular culture.

Iowa as America’s Heartland

Iowa’s identity has long been connected to pastoralism, and it useful to explore the meaning of the pastoral within the American imagination. Leo Marx’s *The Machine in the Garden* is a useful starting point for analyzing the meaning and relevance of the pastoral in American culture. He writes of a “middle landscape,” a cultivated land that falls somewhere in between an untamed primitive wilderness and a cosmopolitan, industrial society ultimately “created by mediation between art and nature.” Marx traces America’s relationship to the pastoral back to the writings and observations of Thomas Jefferson: “Beginning in Jefferson’s time, the cardinal image of American aspirations was a rural landscape, a well-ordered green garden magnified to continental size.”⁹ It is Jefferson who also writes of the virtues of rural life and agrarian tradition while condemning the complexities and moral corruptness of urban life, particularly in Europe.

Marx’s “middle landscape” is elaborated on and more specifically defined in relation to the state of Iowa in *The Middle West: Its Meaning in American Culture*. Geographer James Shortbridge writes that “with the combination of prosperous agriculture, a relatively homogeneous population, and an absence of major cities, Iowans virtually defined yeoman society....Its rural image stays intact right up to present time and its popular literature mirrors the changing perceptions of that image.”¹⁰

Shortbridge writes of the many iconic heartland symbols which hail from Iowa. Grant Wood’s painting of the rolling Iowa landscape in *Stone City* is perhaps the most idyllic with its depiction of well-maintained farms and bountiful crops, the perfect vision of agricultural abundance. “Iowa continues to epitomize both rural prosperity and other perceived regional traits better than does any state in the Great Plains,” notes Shortbridge.¹¹

More broadly, the idea of “America’s heartland” has often been constructed as the site of strong tradition and family values, and geographically it has always focused on the center of the country. It is physically the “heart” of America and traditionally viewed as a static and fixed place. It is an image that has been popularized in film and television throughout the twentieth

century, even as the turn of the twenty-first century approached. In her article concerning the CBS television network's appropriation of heartlandesque values in its mid-1990s "Welcome Home" campaign, Victoria Johnson argues that everyday life as portrayed in many popular depictions of the heartland is characterized by "pre-modern, Norman Rockwellian American ideals of local continuity, family, a clear Protestant work ethic, and a staunch religious faith."¹² As more people move to suburban and urban areas and away from areas of the country that may be defined as "the heartland," television, literature, and film representations of the region become all the more significant. As David Crouch argues, "visiting rural spaces and cultures continues to be framed by cultural worlds in which individuals live. Television, literature, film and artwork interpenetrate other fields of knowledge of the imagined, material, and sensuous character of cultures and the physical contours of geography outside cities and towns – a shorthand for the complexity and paradox around which rurality may be understood."¹³

To better understand the power of the heartland as a popular representation, the work of theorist Roland Barthes is helpful in exploring the links between myth and image. "Myth does not deny things; its function is to talk about them; it purifies them, it makes them innocent," he writes.¹⁴ Barthes continues, "What the world supplies to myth is an historical reality, defined, even if this goes back quite a while, by the way in which men have produced and used it; and what myth gives in return is a natural image of this reality."¹⁵ In this regard, the constructed heartland easily fits into Barthes' mythic context. "A heartland America," Johnson writes, is "distanced from the 'world of things' for the priority of the 'human' world of church, family, and in face-to-face community, the heartland is triumphantly mundane. In the context of a hectic modern era, it represents a sanctified last refuge – "a spatial place outside of and independent of the destructiveness of [modern American] society...the middle landscape, the zone of peace and harmony."¹⁶

Baudrillard's work *Simulacra and Simulation* can also be applied to the myth of heartland because of its ubiquity in popular culture. Baudrillard fundamentally argues that postmodern culture is dictated by conceptual or mythological models. This leads to homes, relationships, fashion, or art – all become dictated by their ideal models presented through the media. In this regard, the heartland myth and the heartland region of the United States becomes a simulation of familial and moral ideals.¹⁷

In many ways, the Midwest is seen the most typically "American" region. Kent Ryden observes, "The Midwest is not marked by the perpetually refracting presence of a dramatic, southern-scale past; instead it is defined by the absence of past, a sort of temporal emptiness. Lacking the historical touchstone of identity so readily available to other regions, Midwesterners are required to do a different sort of imaginative work."¹⁸ Perhaps this "absence" as Ryden defines it, enables Midwesterners to buy into a heartland infused image that as Johnson argues, is a presumed "commonsense" norm:

Middle America becomes a preferred place – the core, authentically American locus of genuine affect and of the presence of divinity... the mythic American Pastoral, site of time-bound values of expressed belief in God, pioneering self-sufficiency, "knowable" community and heterosexual/nuclear-familial ideals.¹⁹

As the geographic center of the upper Midwest, Iowa has come to embody these nostalgically infused ideas for a wide swath of the American public. The following popular culture representations of Iowa work in specific ways to convey messages about small town life, agriculture, individualism, and community boosterism. Each representation in its own way has also thrust Iowa into the national spotlight and contributed to a heartland mystique that in turn has ushered in community and tourism development.

American Gothic

American Gothic (1930), a brilliant illustration of rural life simply embodied by a stoic farmer holding a pitchfork next to his rather homely daughter, remains one of the most recognizable paintings in the history of American art. It is a primary example of the Regionalist art movement, typified by an emphasis on rural landscape and a deep connection to place and local identity particularly popular in the 1930s. The work itself was first exhibited at a contest held at the Art Institute of Chicago in 1930. The painting won the Institute's \$300 purchase prize for its artist, native Iowan Grant Wood. He had been inspired by a Gothic revival farmhouse he saw in the small town of Eldon in the southeastern part of the state.²⁰

James Dennis, author of *Renegade Regionalists*, writes that the popularity of this painting and Wood's work in general can be explained by a growing urban nostalgia for the rural way of life in the 1930s. Wood's paintings in particular captured pastoral landscapes (as in his work *Stone City*) and at times, glorified the outwardly simplistic Midwestern way of life. The distinctiveness of Wood's style became increasingly important in the 1930s. As Dennis argues, because of the Great Depression Wood's art, along with his contemporaries Thomas Hart Benton and John Steuart Curry, worked to reinforce local identity at a confusing time in America's collective consciousness.²¹ Other scholars have noted that Wood used *American Gothic* to satirize the narrow-mindedness and repression that has been said to characterize Midwestern culture, an accusation he fervently denied. The painting may also be read as a glorification of the moral virtue of rural America or even as an ambiguous mixture of praise and satire.²²

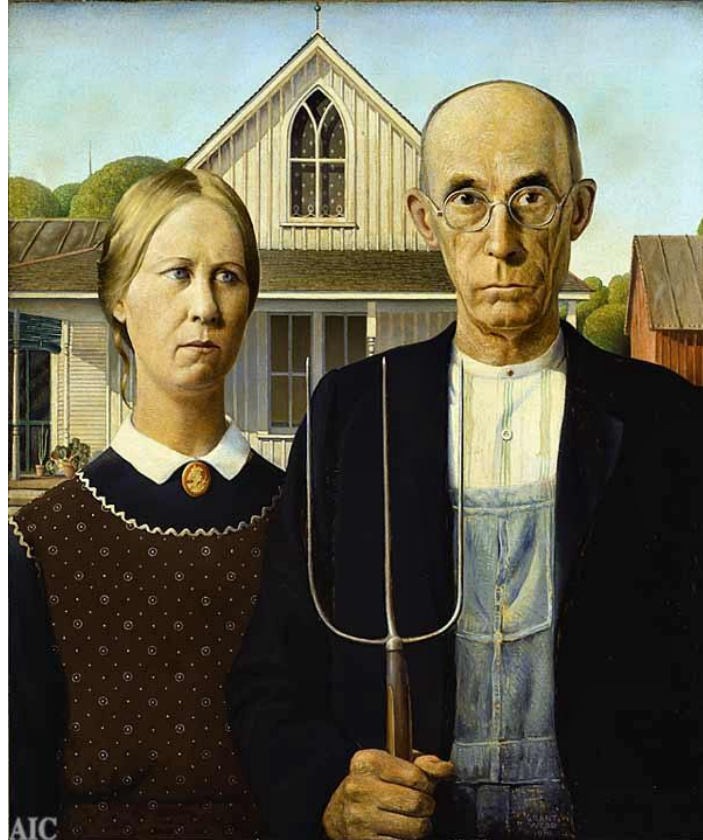


Figure 1 - Grant Wood's *American Gothic*, courtesy The Art Institute of Chicago

Wood himself explained that *American Gothic* was never meant to be a realistic portrait of Iowa farmers. “The people in *American Gothic* are not farmers but are small-town, as the shirt on the man indicates...it is unfair to localize them to Iowa.”²³ In a sense, the work has been stripped of its Iowanness and has instead come to represent the entire region of the Midwest. Some art critics also write of the painting’s double-edged quality. “It honors such staunchly held American values as hard work and family, even as it is critical of narrow-mindedness,” wrote one journalist. The painting has become part of popular culture and in fact, has earned the dubious distinction of America’s most parodied painting.²⁴

The Music Man

Meredith Willson’s *The Music Man*, first performed on Broadway in 1957 and later adapted as a film in 1962, tells the story of Harold Hill, a con-man who descends on a small Iowa town circa-1912 to outfit the community with marching band equipment. He intends to skip town with the money since he has no musical skills, but things go awry when he falls in love with local librarian Marion Paroo. He inadvertently enriches the town with a love of music and eventually changes his scheming ways.²⁵

Many reviewers noted that the key to the musical's success lay in its wholesome, innocent portrayal of small town life at a time when other productions on stage began to tackle more controversial topics. In its 1958 review, *Time* magazine commented, "In a fat Broadway season whose successes deal so clinically with such subjects as marital frustration, alcoholism, dope addiction, juvenile delinquency and abortion, *The Music Man* is a monument to golden unpretentiousness and wholesome fun."²⁶ In fact, the musical's popularity endures into the twenty-first century. It was revived on Broadway in 2000 and a television remake aired on ABC in 2003 starring Matthew Broderick.

Perhaps more than any other musical, *The Music Man* is an idealized slice of Americana, a popular representation of a turn-of-the century community with powerful connections to geography, language and behavior of a resolutely American place – small town Iowa. It is common knowledge that Willson based *The Music Man* on his nostalgic reflections of his hometown, Mason City, a small but thriving town in north central Iowa. To understand the musical's popularity within a contextual framework, it is helpful to examine the popularity of another "heartlandesque" representation from late 1950s America.



Figure 2 - Closing scene from 1962 film version of *The Music Man*, courtesy Music Man Square

"The Lawrence Welk Show" was popular from the 1950s to the 1980s and continues to run in syndication to this day. A variety show that featured bandleader Welk presiding over various wholesome musical acts and corny comical skits, "The Lawrence Welk Show" largely appealed to white, middle class television viewers. Johnson examines Welk's place bound identity as a

Midwestern “farm boy” and how he successfully marketed this image to millions of television viewers. Welk positively defined Midwestern values and ideals in spite of network television and popular press reservations about appealing to the “typical Midwestern” audience. She argues that Welk suggests “residual cultural ideals in the post-World War II American consumer landscape” while program content often featured “folk tunes, historic dance steps and promotes a family atmosphere with rural, Midwestern, and church-going ties.”²⁷ Indeed, as Johnson points out, the program’s emphasis on heritage and tradition is prioritized over progress. The program sometimes took contemporary songs and presented them in traditional formats often highlighting quartets or duets between singers. Older generations of artists often used instruments like accordions and honky-tonk piano while musical selections seldom made a “statement.” Even technically, the program utilized old-fashioned camera techniques well in to the 1980s.²⁸ The program’s popularity, particularly in the late 1950s and early 1960s runs in tandem with *The Music Man*’s appeal because it catered to a nostalgic vision of popular culture closely affiliated with the Midwest.

Field of Dreams

More than thirty years after *The Music Man* debuted on Broadway, the film *Field of Dreams* was released in 1989. Based on the 1982 novel *Shoeless Joe* by W.P. Kinsella, the film version starred Kevin Costner as an Iowa farmer who hears the mysterious words "If you build it, they will come," and is compelled to build a baseball diamond in the middle of his cornfield. The idealistic farmer’s persistence is rewarded when spirits from baseball's past begin appearing on the landscape. The film struck it big at the box office as millions of moviegoers found themselves caught up in a nostalgic rural fantasy that highlighted the redemption not only of an Iowa corn farmer, but also of the disgraced ghosts of the Shoeless Joe Jackson and the other Chicago White Sox banned from the game for throwing the 1919 World Series.²⁹



Figure 3 - Kevin Costner as Iowa farmer Ray Kinsella in *Field of Dreams*

Field of Dreams fed into the romantic image of the farmer struggling against all odds to make a go of things, a popular theme in literature and popular culture throughout the 1980s, from the Farm Aid movement to films like *Country* and *The River*. Yet despite the pastoral nostalgia present in these films of the 1980s that seek rural redemption in the age-old Jeffersonian myth of the small yeoman farmer, the harsh reality for most American farmers was much different.

In Iowa as in much of the country, corporate farming remains one of largest threats against the small family farm. Growth of mega-farms first began in the 1970s and sparked a boom in America's agricultural output. It enabled the U.S. farming industry to compete more fully in the global marketplace and ultimately pass on low costs to consumers. This corporatization of agriculture, however, has negatively impacted many smaller scale farms. In his seminal 1977 work, *The Unsettling of America*, Wendell Berry warned that the rise of corporate farming and the disappearance of the family farm were destroying local communities and economies. Berry also claimed that these developments brought adverse environmental consequences that reduced food quality.³⁰

Less than three percent of Americans make their living from agriculture today. This change is significant when one considers the dramatic reversal of this same statistic a century ago. In 1900, 97 percent of Americans lived in small towns, rural areas or on a farm. Over the last 100 years, though, the number of farmers has dropped so low that by 1993, the U.S. Census stopped counting the number of people living on farms.³¹ In the twenty-first century, the rate at which farms in Iowa (and across the United States) have either consolidated or disappeared shows no sign of slowing down. If current trends of farm consolidation and agricultural corporatization continue, only 140 farms will exist in the entire state of Iowa by the middle of the twenty-first century, notes Fred Kirsehemann, director of the Aldo Leopold Center at Iowa State University.³²

Most Americans who live in non-rural settings would be surprised to learn Kirsehemann's alarming statistic. Many smaller-scale farming operations will disappear in a matter of years. Yet the public's perception of the agricultural industry remains closely tied to these popular representations of pastoral, unchanging landscapes like *Field of Dreams* or *American Gothic*. These imaginary visions reinforce nostalgia for a seemingly uncomplicated past and mask the harsh economic reality.

Tourism and Popular Culture

In one sense, each of these representations has turned the tourist sites associated with it into landscapes of the imagination, models for pastoral tranquility and common sense rural sensibility. The farmer and his daughter in *American Gothic* have become iconic representations of Midwestern values. Tourists who visit the home with the painting's gothic window often feel compelled to pose in front of the structure just as Wood depicted the stoic pair. *The Music Man* has come to symbolize small town innocence and "can-do" spirit and sentimentality and the community of Mason City has embraced this image, while the *Fields* (there are two, as will be explained a bit later) of *Dreams* fulfill nostalgic baseball fantasies for 65,000 visitors annually.³³

All three of the tourist sites associated with the representations discussed here, have been established in the 1990s or in one case, are in the process of being further developed. One theory that may explain recent interest in these sites may lie in the parallel growth of heritage tourism in the later half of the twentieth century, a form of tourism predicated on the vernacular history of a place or region. Through the celebration of these popular representations, Iowans are celebrating those creative individuals and hometown heroes (Wood, Willson, & Kinsella) that have positively contributed to the identity and heritage formation of their state.

Heritage tourism became travel's fastest growing sector in the early 1990s.³⁴ Geographer Karen Till argues that growth in heritage tourism can be explained by "larger trends that relate to the isolation and dislocation of individuals from the family, families from neighborhoods, neighborhoods from nation and ultimately, self from former selves."³⁵ Gaynor Bagnell writes that while heritage is more often thought of as a physical, material object, it can also include more abstract ideas about culture, values and inheritance. "Heritage is not an abstract idea" Bagnell writes, "it is associated with, and articulated through, emotions, memories and imagination."³⁶ Heritage tourist sites that evoke nostalgia and sentimental ideas about a seemingly simpler time and place can effectively tap into the emotional yearnings of individuals who seek connections to the very places associated with the values embodied by specific popular culture representations. This has long been the case in Great Britain where tourist sites associated with rural life as well as great works of literature have found enduring popularity.

However, there are some problematic issues that arise along with the promotion and growing popularity of heritage tourism. Robert Hewison calls heritage "bogus history" and argues that the "heritage industry" has taken over real industry by absorbing considerable public and private resources. The manufacture of heritage has led to a different kind of consumption linked to nostalgia and tourism.³⁷ Other critics of heritage tourism point out that as an industry, it is particularly harmful to the culture of the present. The more complex realities of daily life are simply not addressed. In the case of Iowa, one could argue that by promoting nostalgic and pastoral visions of the state's identity to the public (and potential tourists), more challenging contemporary issues related to rural poverty, immigration, and increasing racial tensions in communities with a significant migrant worker population become invisible to the outside world.

Unlike heritage tourism, an area of study that has been extensively researched within the Midwest, the relationship between popular culture and tourist sites, has been largely ignored. Noted historian Daniel Boorstin's discussion of popular culture representation and the impact of those representations on sites is somewhat negative. He writes that Americans' impressions of foreign countries for example, often come from celebrity images and films such as *Three Coins in a Fountain* (1954) or *Roman Holiday* (1953) shape American images of Rome. Most of the time, tourists are left unfulfilled by the real thing. Ultimately, Boorstin writes that "travel adventure today thus inevitably acquires a factitious, make-believe, unreal quality."³⁸

Yet, for some individuals, these places become meaningful precisely because they are represented. As tourism scholar Chris Rojek points out, "Myth and fantasy play an unusually large role in the social construction of *all* travel and tourist sites." And, he adds, "It should not be assumed that either the fictional or the factual have priority in framing [a given] site."³⁹ Rojek's argument illustrates just why tourist sites related to film, television and literature have

the potential to hold powerful meanings for visitors. Tourists often bring expectations to a particular place that are bound directly to what level of emotional investment they've made in a popular representation. For the sites discussed in this paper, the level of emotional investment for most tourists likely wavers between mere curiosity to casual amusement to deep nostalgia and sentimentality depending on what meaning that representation has for a visitor.

Booster Dreams: Mason City and Eldon

Numerous scholars have explored how boosterism contributed to the development of the American Midwest. Growth and development potential of small towns across the upper Midwest seemed boundless during the boom years of boosterism, roughly around the turn of the twentieth century when every community leader across the region envisioned their town as the next Chicago. This optimistic outlook is nostalgically portrayed in *The Music Man*, set during Meredith Willson's childhood years.

Although Meredith Willson retained his connections to Mason City throughout his life, his rosy portrait of small town Iowa faded a bit from memory after he died in the early 1980s. It was not until the late 1990's that Willson's contributions to Mason City became a much bigger point of civic pride. A booster mindset re-emerged in the community. His boyhood home was purchased by the Mason City Foundation from private owners and restored to its 1912 look. The Foundation also raised \$10 million to build "Music Man Square," a museum complete with recreated pool hall, soda fountain and barbershop. Music Man Square opened in 2002, a year that also marked what would have been Willson's 100th birthday.⁴⁰



Figure 4 - A group taking a tour of "Music Man Square," courtesy Music Man Square

Developing the *American Gothic* tourist site in Eldon has also been a relatively recent project. Between 15,000 and 25,000 tourists descend on this small town every year to visit the small wooden farmhouse made famous in Wood's painting. According to Priscilla Koffman, member of the American Gothic Visitor's Center Committee, the tourist brochure for the American

Gothic home is the most requested by visitors at state border welcome centers.⁴¹ Despite the popular ubiquity of this painting or precisely because of America's overwhelming familiarity with the image, a strong desire to see the real-life house exists for many tourists who visit Iowa.

The house itself was built in 1881 opposite a bustling stockyard. For years, it sat unoccupied. The 1960s and 1970s were especially harsh on the structure, as it endured shattered windows and even bullet holes. Residents of the town and the Iowa Historical Society realized the economic tourist potential the house possessed in early 1990s and developed a three-phase plan for refurbishing the site.⁴²

Phase one restored and stabilized the Gothic House and was completed in the mid-1990s. Eventually the building was listed on the National Register of Historic Places and Eldon's postmaster was persuaded to move in full-time. Phase two developed "American Gothic Park South," a greenbelt and rest area for road-weary tourists. Plans for a new visitor center became the focus of the final phase, and the community worked together to make this goal a reality. In December of 2004, the Eldon City Council passed a resolution to cover the last several thousand dollars needed to match other grants obtained from the Iowa Historical Society and money raised from the community through fundraising, encompassing everything from raffles to bake sales, to hawking t-shirts and commemorative Christmas ornaments. In June of 2007, the third phase was finally completed with the opening of a new visitor center.⁴³ The center contains a variety of exhibits on the significance of the painting, the career of Grant Wood, his relationship to his sister, Nan Wood Graham and his connection to the community of Eldon. One section is devoted entirely to parodies of the iconic painting and perhaps most amusingly, visitors have the opportunity to "borrow a costume and pitchfork to make your own American Gothic portrait in front of the original house."⁴⁴



Figure 5 - The caretaker of the American Gothic House photographed in 2002, courtesy NPR

In an essay devoted to an examination of the Wisconsin-Swiss community of New Glarus, geographer Steven Hoelscher writes about the notion of “other-directed place” and explains that it is produced for outsiders (tourists) and is meant to lure the gaze of the outsider. He argues that a second purpose for creating the other directed place is for community members to represent themselves as otherized exotics – to give themselves a meaning of importance or exoticism.⁴⁵ When Grant Wood made his initial sketch of this small, unassuming house a little ways off Eldon’s Main Street, residents of the community or even Wood himself could hardly have imagined the extent to which his painting would be embraced and appropriated by American popular culture. And although it has taken some time, Eldon has realized just how important this artistic work has become to the town’s civic identity, not only as a means of attracting tourists, but also as a way to boost community pride. As committee member Priscilla Koffman noted, “We have a lot of plans [for the future]. We’re big dreamers.”⁴⁶

Baseball Fantasy and a Fight over Authenticity

The *Field of Dreams*’ baseball sites have likely been the most celebrated of Iowa tourist attractions by mainstream media. In one sense both have taken on a mythic “Shangri-La” qualities for many baseball fans and remain remarkably pastoral despite their designations as a tourist sites. The town of Dyersville is a relatively small community with a population just under 5,000 and development in and around the attractions has moved at a slow pace.⁴⁷

The two farms used in the film were specifically scouted by the Iowa Film Commission who looked at 250 sites in search of a location for the film. Since the film premiered in 1989, the sites associated with the film have seen a steady and even increasing number of visitors. As recently as March of 2005, CNN reported that 65,000 visitors each year make pilgrimages to Dyersville to see the ball park Kevin Costner’s character “built” out of a cornfield. In the last fifteen years, over a million people have visited the sites.⁴⁸

“I really believe the *Field of Dreams*, over this length of time, has become a part of American culture,” said Keith Rahe, who manages the Ghost Players, a community baseball team who dress in period costume and portray characters from the film. The team shows up at one of the farm locations – the “Left and Center Field of Dreams” every Sunday from June to September, emerging from the cornfield to host hour-long games with visitors.⁴⁹



Figure 6 - The 2004 Ghost Players Team, courtesy Left and Center Field of Dreams

Both sites became places of commemoration as tourists celebrated birthdays and wedding anniversaries. One man sprinkled his father's ashes on the pitcher's mound, and during the 1992 Presidential campaign, Pat Buchanan gave a speech in right field.⁵⁰ At the same time, a battle of authenticity existed between the two farm owners whose land is joined. For several years, the baseball field as depicted in the film was divided. It was split between Don and Becky Lansing, who own the house and infield, and Rita Ameskamp, who owns the left and center field. The different owners hold opposing views of what a visitor's experience should be. The Ameskamp side staged the period ball games with the Ghost Players. The Lansing side by contrast, prohibits games and commemorative events, preferring instead to emphasize the pastoral, contemplative elements of the landscape. "We want the field to be simple and serene just like it was depicted in the movie," Becky Lansing once said.⁵¹

Lansing was interviewed multiple times about her anti-commercial stance regarding the property. "If people come a long way to see the field and it's being used for something, that's not fair for those who traveled long distances to be here," she once explained. "It's not about commercialism. When people come here, we don't want to tell them what to look for or what to see. We want them to see what comes naturally to them. We claim to be at the intersection of fantasy and reality."⁵²

The Lansings first objected in 1996 when the Ameskamps leased their property and made a profit-sharing arrangement with a group called Left and Center Field of Dreams, financed by four out-of-state investors and run by Keith Rahe. The group manages the gift shop, a corn maze and the Ghost Players.⁵³

The battle over these competing visions escalated in 1999. The Lansings sued the Ameskamp's for what they viewed as over-commercialization of the site. To be fair, each side has a gift shop. The Lansings sell white pickets from the movie fence for \$25 apiece while the Ameskamp's

hawk \$2 vials of “dream dirt” from the field, complete with an “affidavit of authenticity” signed by the family.⁵⁴

In 1999, for the film’s tenth anniversary, the Ameskamp’s wanted to attract tourists with a cornfield maze shaped like Shoeless Joe at bat with trivia questions along the way. They rezoned their property for the maze and charged visitors \$6 to walk through. To the Lansings however, this was the last straw. The couple filed suit to try and prevent attractions like the maze in the future. Rita Ameskamp couldn’t understand why her neighbors brought the suit. “Everything we want to do, they say no,” she said. “Sometimes it brings tears to your eyes. We love our *Field of Dreams*.”⁵⁵

Apparently, so do all the tourists who have visited these competing baseball sites. Yet these struggles speak to the larger question of how authenticity is defined and the role that commoditization should play (if any) at tourist sites. Noted tourism scholar Erik Cohen offers a discussion of the impact of commoditization on authenticity:

Commoditization is said to destroy the authenticity of local cultural products and human relations; instead a surrogate, covert ‘staged authenticity’ emerges. As cultural products lose their meaning for locals, and as the need to present the tourist with ever more spectacular, exotic and titillating attractions grows, contrived cultural products are increasingly ‘staged’ for tourists and decorated to look to authentic.⁵⁶

Despite feuding between the neighbors however, these sites are by far the most popular of the three I have discussed and may be the single most popular tourist site in Iowa. Perhaps it is because the sites and their origin are a bit more alive in the memories of today’s contemporary tourist. Perhaps the appeal of a good baseball game never goes out of style. In some ways, the fields have taken on a kind of “emergent authenticity.” Cohen again offers a definition of this concept when he writes that it is “at one point generally judged as contrived or inauthentic, and in the course of time, may become generally recognized as authentic, even by experts.”⁵⁷ This may be the case with the “fields”. Sports journalists have helped to legitimize the sites as pastoral, nostalgic destinations for baseball fans while travel writers have picked up on the “kitsch appeal” for the average road-tripper.

Conclusion

Have these towns successfully developed an opportunity for genuine sustainability or are they at risk of exploiting their community’s representation and not the reality? The uneasy peace between the owners of the opposing *Fields of Dreams* – commercialization versus quiet preservation illustrates this tension. Additional questions revolve around the issue of economic development. Have the “booster dreams” of Eldon and Mason City translated to real economic benefits for the communities by drawing in more visitors? And how are communities impacted when they reap the economic benefits from tourism associated with these representations? For example, did Mason City’s relationship to *The Music Man* eventually transform the town’s landscape to make it less like Mason City and more like River City?

There can be no doubt that tourism associated with *American Gothic*, *The Music Man* and *The Field of Dreams* has led to job creation, notoriety, and pride of place for Eldon, Mason City and Dyersville. At the same time, the resonance and staying power of these representations reinforces a state identity that hinges on an unchanging pastoral vision. Iowa's reputation as a bastion of wholesome values and a thoroughly white bread middle class is kept firmly alive by popular culture and has perhaps even hindered the dissemination of stories in the mass media that seek to tell the story of a more progressive, diverse and even cosmopolitan Iowa. This became all the more clear in the 2007 film *King Corn*. In this contemporary documentary, Iowa's identity as a site of agricultural abundance was again firmly established, but the terrific abundance on display in the film was tempered by the pair of Boston based filmmakers who questioned the long held conventional wisdom behind "bigger is better" commodity farming practices that have led to Iowa's status as a site of agricultural supremacy. The forces that have led to corporate mega-farms, corn subsidies, and ultimately the filmmakers argue, a nation addicted to fast food and high fructose corn syrup are portrayed as highly negative aspects of Iowa's state identity.⁵⁸

Frankly, it is doubtful that Iowa, with its many hog farms and infinite cornfields will ever shake its strongly agrarian image. And yet, the unique popular appeal of *American Gothic*, *The Music Man*, and *Field of Dreams* hinges on Iowa's agrarian identity. Ultimately, each of these representations has for better or worse, thrown Iowa into the national spotlight and in doing so, forged a link between these tourist sites and America's popular imagination.

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