

STATE HISTORICAL
SOCIETY OF IOWA

IOWA DEPARTMENT OF CULTURAL AFFAIRS

The Annals of Iowa

Volume 65 | Number 1 (Winter 2006)

pps. 80-82

Soldiers Back Home: The American Legion in Illinois, 1919–1939

Christopher Nehls

ISSN 0003-4827

Copyright © 2006 State Historical Society of Iowa. This article is posted here for personal use, not for redistribution.

Recommended Citation

Nehls, Christopher. "Soldiers Back Home: The American Legion in Illinois, 1919–1939." *The Annals of Iowa* 65 (2006), 80-82.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.1014>

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](https://iowa-research-online.org/)

national economic and political context in broad strokes, and he demonstrates the importance of railroads to local economic development within the state, but important aspects of social and cultural history are left untouched. For instance, he says very little about labor except in the larger context of railroad operating expenses and revenue; racial discrimination and the roles of women are not addressed at all. The relative lack of thematic development is reflected in the index, which emphasizes the names of towns and railroad lines. These criticisms aside, Hofsommer has delivered a handsome book that will provide a satisfying context for those who are interested in the complex minutiae of railroad history, and it will appeal to those with an interest in Iowa's local history. For the next generation of railroad history scholars, it provides a much needed statewide context on which to build.

Soldiers Back Home: The American Legion in Illinois, 1919–1939, by Thomas B. Littlewood. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2004. xvi, 187 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$40.00 cloth.

Reviewer Christopher Nehls recently earned a Ph.D. in history at the University of Virginia with a dissertation on the American Legion and nationalism between the world wars. His article on post-World War I attempts by members of the American Legion to enforce patriotism in Iowa will appear in the *Annals of Iowa*.

Since the late nineteenth century, veterans have played a vital role in American political and civic life. Despite their importance, veterans and veterans' organizations remain woefully understudied in historical scholarship. Thomas B. Littlewood's *Soldiers Back Home: The American Legion in Illinois, 1919–1939* provides a valuable examination of the largest and most influential veterans' organization of the twentieth century. Littlewood focuses on the organization's founding generation of World War I veterans, whose ideologically conservative patriotism shaped American political culture for the remainder of the century. His focus on Illinois enriches a slim literature by offering insight into how the Legion organized and operated at the grassroots, where its impact on politics and political culture was the greatest.

Littlewood, professor emeritus of journalism at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, became interested in the Legion after observing its political influence in Illinois, first as a reporter in Springfield after World War II and then while writing a biography of former Illinois governor Henry Horner. Propelled by that interest, he sought to understand how an organization dedicated to becoming a nonpartisan yet powerful political force integrated itself into state-level politics. Littlewood delves into the many personalities who peddled their Le-

gion connections into greater political prominence without relying on a stable "soldiers' vote." His detailed biographical sketches provide insight into how military service both shaped some members' political and ideological perspectives and validated the established opinions of others. Littlewood's attention to the tension between Chicago and downstate and between rural and urban communities should inform future studies of the Legion's efforts in state-level politics, particularly in midwestern states with similar demographic divisions.

Soldiers Back Home also elucidates how the Legion grew a base of strength in the Midwest in its early years of existence. The Legion's success in Illinois (it attracted between 60,000 and 85,000 Illinois veterans during the interwar era) mirrored the organization's similar success in other midwestern states, such as Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Iowa. As in those states, the Illinois Legion successfully attracted members not only in Chicago and other urban areas, but in smaller cities and towns, where posts became focal points of civic life. Littlewood provides insight into how Chicago industrialists bankrolled early Legion organization efforts and members organized posts by common occupation within the growing middle class. He also uncovers rare source materials on the formation of African American posts in Illinois and details African American members' struggles to find a place within the segregated organization.

Given the class backgrounds of its supporters and the bulk of its membership base, the Legion looked upon labor organization with a skepticism that led some posts to engage in antiradical vigilantism. Although national headquarters encouraged posts to remain vigilant against radical influence, the decision to engage in vigilante action against radical or union organizers to preserve "law and order" was a local one. Local posts' authority to intervene to break strikes or quell radical speech, Littlewood argues, stemmed from a legitimacy "that seemed to flow from 'the people,' from the force of public opinion at the local level in Illinois" (90). Littlewood's focus on Legion vigilantism at the grassroots level facilitates understanding of similar actions Legionnaires perpetrated in Iowa and throughout the nation in this period. He settles, however, for unsatisfying and dated psychological explanations for why Legionnaires felt the need to engage in such activism in their communities and for the organization's conservative outlook.

Soldiers Back Home is a reminder of the importance that state- and community-level activism plays in the functioning of large voluntary associations. Littlewood's efforts to bring the stories of individual Legionnaires and posts to the fore are commendable and can serve as a worthy example for much-needed studies of other states and localities.

Unfortunately, Littlewood fails to integrate the episodes or examples he describes into a greater understanding of the ideals and values the Legion stood for. Although the class background and connections to big business of several prominent Illinois Legion leaders—particularly Milton Forman and Robert McCormick—explain their personal conservatism, Littlewood too often lets personal biography speak for the organization and misses opportunities to use local history to explain the ideological trajectory of the national organization. Greater attention to how the local informed the national, and vice versa, within the Legion in its patriotic and political endeavors would have made Littlewood's more narrow focus all the more valuable.

The Greatest Generation Grows Up: American Childhood in the 1930s, by Kriste Lindenmeyer. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, Publisher, 2005. xiii, 304 pp. Illustrations, notes, note on sources, index. \$27.50 cloth.

Reviewer Pamela Riney-Kehrberg is professor of history and director of the Agricultural History and Rural Studies program at Iowa State University. She is the author of *Childhood on the Farm: Work, Play, and Coming of Age in the Midwest* (2005).

In *The Greatest Generation Grows Up: American Childhood in the 1930s*, Kriste Lindenmeyer covers the experience of childhood during hard times. She views the decade from a variety of racial, ethnic, and socio-economic viewpoints, attempting to tell the story from the perspective of the relatively well-to-do as well as the desperately poor. She begins with a discussion of the vast differences in childhoods experienced by the young of the 1930s, then moves systematically through a discussion of the many facets of child life in that decade. Chapters focus on the topics of work, transiency, education, play and popular culture, and government intervention into the lives of the young. As much as possible, she tells her story from the point of view of the children themselves.

It is a fascinating book, offering readers a wealth of information they may not previously have known, or even pondered. Particularly useful is her comprehensive treatment of government programs for children under the New Deal. “She-she-she” programs for young women and Emergency Day Nurseries for impoverished preschoolers receive little treatment in other discussions of the New Deal and Great Depression. Lindenmeyer's discussion of how these programs were made palatable to Congress and the larger public is also useful. Her overriding conclusion is that the 1930s transformed child life in the United States, ushering in a “modern” conception of childhood, valuing education over work, and instituting governmental protection for