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The Bellevue War: Mandate of Justice or Murder by Mob: A True — and Still Controversial — Story of Iowa as the Wild West

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This book is a labor of love in both the best and the worst sense of that overused phrase. It is a biography of a Dominican researched and written by a Dominican, and there is little question that the author admires Father Mazzuchelli's life and legacy. In fact, one of the implied purposes of the book is to advance the cause for Mazzuchelli's canonization as a Catholic saint. In that effort, the author was assisted by many other Dominicans who diligently searched for any and all documents related to Mazzuchelli's life and career.

The book is limited, therefore, by its hagiographical tone. It will be of modest value to general readers who are interested in the early history of the Catholic church in the upper Midwest, but it offers little to the scholarly study of the history of religion in the Midwest in general or in the state of Iowa in particular.

The Bellevue War: Mandate of Justice or Murder by Mob: A True – and Still Controversial – Story of Iowa as the Wild West, by Susan K. Lucke. Ames: McMillen Publishing, 2002. x, 414 pp. Illustrations, maps, appendixes, notes, bibliography, index. \$22.95 cloth.

Reviewer Michael J. Pfeifer teaches American history at the University of Western Ontario. He is the author of *Rough Justice: Lynching and American Society, 1874–1947* (2004) and “Law, Society, and Violence in the Antebellum Midwest: The 1857 Eastern Iowa Vigilante Movement” (*Annals of Iowa*, 2005).

The collective violence that erupted in Bellevue, Jackson County, in April 1840 has long interested historians of early Iowa. Popularly known as “The Bellevue War” and picturesquely characterized in a 1920 *Palimpsest* article titled “White Beans for Hanging,” the affair has conventionally been interpreted as the recourse of pioneer settlers to vigilantism in the face of frontier lawlessness. The actual details of the event are more complicated. On April 1, a posse led by territorial legislator Colonel Thomas Cox, and a Whig sheriff, William A. Warren, attempted to serve warrants against W. W. Brown and his associates. Brown operated a hotel and grocery in Bellevue. Cox's group accused him of leading a gang of thieves and counterfeiters. In January, James Mitchell, affiliated with Cox, had murdered James Thompson, an associate of Brown's. As the large group led by Cox sought to serve the warrants on Brown, a gun battle erupted. Cox's faction sustained four fatalities, while Brown and two of his men were killed and six of Brown's affiliates fled. The following morning, Cox's faction led a large crowd that placed Brown's remaining men on trial. In a vote, 42 men voted red beans in favor of flogging and 38 cast white beans for hanging. The vigilantes administered 39 lashes to Brown's associates and dispatched them on a boat headed down the Mississippi River.

Susan K. Lucke has compiled and analyzed what must be virtually all of the extant sources on the Jackson County hostilities. Her publication of these sources under one cover will be greatly appreciated by historians of antebellum Iowa and of antebellum midwestern vigilantism. The book's analysis is less persuasive. Commendably, Lucke analyzes the evidence thoroughly and includes all points of view on the Bellevue events, including the perspectives of eastern Iowans who criticized the actions of the Cox faction. Moreover, Lucke seeks to place the Bellevue violence in the context of early to mid-nineteenth-century midwestern and western vigilantism, and she draws profitably from the scholarly literature on those topics. Yet ultimately Lucke takes sides. She argues that the posse's irregular methods were justified by the circumstances, namely that Brown and his cohort would have inevitably found ways to manipulate and evade the legal process. Expressing hope that her book has "resolved" the "controversy" surrounding the Bellevue events, Lucke exonerates the vigilantes, finding "accusations of premeditated murder and mob behavior concerning the Bellevue War to be unfounded" (318). On shaky and unconvincing ground, she makes a dicey distinction between mob behavior and the "spontaneous vigilantism" that she asserts occurred in Bellevue: "A true mob would have lacked the organization, instruction, and control that characterized group behavior during and after the Bellevue War" (281). Finally, she asserts that the vigilantes' resort to a ballot, flogging, and forced exile of Brown's men from Bellevue was actually an act of "remarkable restraint and effort at fairness" (280).

Yet none of these distinctions, which simply reinforce an older, simplistic narrative in which righteous pioneer vigilantes prepared the way for law and order by taking out the lawless element, are necessary. The meaning of the Bellevue War was contested in 1840 and throughout the nineteenth century because it was a complex event, a contest for cultural authority and political and economic power in a recently settled and socially unstable locale. As in many places in the early Midwest and West, combatants employed collective violence as they sought to settle the contest. Then the victors wrote the local history as a triumphalist narrative, albeit one that was challenged by other old settlers and some local historians who pointed out the political, cultural, and pecuniary motives of the vigilantes (217, 221, 239, 245). Lucke acknowledges the Bellevue War as "complex" and "controversial" (1), but her analysis would have been richer and more satisfying if she had been satisfied with complexity and multiple perspectives. This book will not be the last word on the Bellevue War, but anyone interested in the Jackson County vigilantes will need to read it.