

Growing Up Iowan – Sort Of!

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Growing Up Iowan—Sort Of!

JOHN D. BUENKER

TOO YOUNG to be part of the Greatest Generation and too old to be a Baby Boomer, I was born in Dubuque, Iowa, on August 11, 1937, and lived there for the first 22 years of my life. That confluence of time and place left indelible marks on my psyche that nearly a half-century of living and working east of the Mississippi has altered but not erased. Although I have been a faculty member in the University of Wisconsin system for the past 37 years, I still root for the Hawkeyes. As my wife says, you can take the boy out of Iowa, but you can't take Iowa out of the boy.

I suppose that the circumstances of my birth and upbringing make me a member of the Silent Generation, so-called because there were relatively few of us and we were seemingly quiescent compared to those who preceded and followed us. Coming of age during one of the biggest and longest growth spurts in American history (and largely shielded from competition by racial and gender boundaries), we enjoyed unprecedented—and since unequalled—opportunities for social mobility. Thanks largely to the efforts and motivation of working-class parents with high school educations, my brother and I were able to earn Ph.D.s at two of the nation's most prestigious universities and live the lives of academics and professionals.

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THE ANNALS OF IOWA 67 (Spring-Summer 2008). © The State Historical Society of Iowa, 2008.

In fairness, though, I should point out that mine was the first generation to experience the pervasive tensions of the Cold War and to grow up under the threat of nuclear annihilation. In the midst of apparent peace and prosperity, we practiced “duck and cover” drills in our schoolrooms and watched some of our neighbors dig and provision underground atomic bomb shelters. We puzzled over the Korean War and worried that we might be drafted during the Suez and Berlin crises. We also watched as our elders attacked each other’s loyalty and patriotism during the anticommunist hysteria that accompanied the early Cold War. One of my most vivid teenage memories is that of people glued to their primitive television sets watching the Army-McCarthy hearings during workday hours. Like many of my contemporary co-religionists, I initially believed that “Red-hunting” Senator Joseph R. McCarthy of Wisconsin was saving the country from communism and that he was being attacked because he was a Catholic. I was gradually disabused of such beliefs by two high school teachers who were also Catholic priests and by reading a satire of McCarthyism published in *Mad Magazine*.

Although Dubuque is definitely in Iowa, it is not entirely of it. Even though its citizens are proud that it is the oldest city in the Hawkeye State, they are at least equally proud of its reputation as “the state of Dubuque,” situated as it is on the west bank of the Mississippi, directly across the river from southwestern Wisconsin and northwestern Illinois. If it were possible to extend the borderline of those two adjacent states, the resultant line would effectively bisect the city. Accordingly, Dubuque styles itself “the key city” of the tri-state area. Dubuquers seeking to partake of the amenities of big city life are far more likely to travel to Chicago or Milwaukee than to Des Moines or the Twin Cities. Several locations, such as the Fourth Street Elevator and Eagle Point Park, boast of having the most panoramic view of the tri-state area.

For a relatively small city in an overwhelmingly agricultural state, Dubuque had more than its fair share of manufacturing establishments, chiefly the Dubuque Packing Company, the John Deere Implement Company, and a variety of woodworking firms. It also had more than the usual array of institutions of



Eagle Point Park offers panoramic views of the Mississippi River and the tri-state area. Photo from the State Historical Society of Iowa, Iowa City.

higher learning, including Loras and Clarke colleges, the University of Dubuque, and Wartburg and St. Bernard seminaries. For the majority who did not pursue higher education, working at “the Pack,” “Deere’s,” or other unionized shops was the zenith of blue-collar employment, providing wages that lifted thousands into a middle-class standard of living.

The Dubuque of my youth was one of the most Catholic cities in the country, if not the entire world. According to popular belief, the city was built upon seven hills—just like Rome—with a Catholic church, school, convent, or hospital crowning each one. The bulk of the population descended from northern and western European immigrants, chiefly German and Irish, at a time when the church was sponsoring settlement by old-stock newcomers in order to protect its dogmas and rituals from being Americanized. Although there was an influential non-Catholic elite, the middle and working classes were overwhelmingly Catholic. What we did not have were “Negroes,” as African

Americans were then called in polite conversation. There was supposedly a single black family of several members living in the "flats" near the river, but I never saw them. We did have one "Negro" student, a boarder from Chicago, in my high school class at Loras Academy, and we encountered others in athletic contests. (Imagine my initial culture shock when I moved to Washington, DC, to attend graduate school.) *Fortune* magazine once quipped that a mixed marriage in Dubuque was one between an Irish Catholic and a German Catholic. That was certainly an exaggeration, but it rang true to me because I was the product of such a union between my maternal grandfather, Pete Ferring, and my grandmother, Katie McCann.

A city of just over 40,000 people in 1940, Dubuque boasted nine Catholic churches and grade schools, five Catholic high schools, two Catholic colleges, a major seminary, and the motherhouses of three orders of nuns. So far as I know, Dubuque is the only city in the country to have elected a Catholic nun mayor. The most influential person in the city was probably the archbishop. His pronouncements on matters of faith and morals, backed by the threat of excommunication for those who dissented, generally carried the day. Once a year in each Catholic church, parishioners had to take a public oath to support the Legion of Decency, which rated movies on a scale ranging from acceptable for school kids to "condemned." (By the time we became teenagers, my brother and I remained seated and silent during that part of the mass.) The opposition of the Catholic hierarchy to such movies as *Luther*, *The Moon Is Blue*, and *The Outlaw* convinced theater owners to refuse to exhibit them. Whether one regarded this Catholic hegemony as nurturing or stifling depended largely on the individual. I learned from my grade-school teachers that Dubuque had been safe from tornadoes because its first bishop, French immigrant Mathias Loras, had blessed the city and continued to watch over it. His memory is venerated in the form of his statue overlooking the city from Loras Boulevard, one of its steepest hills.

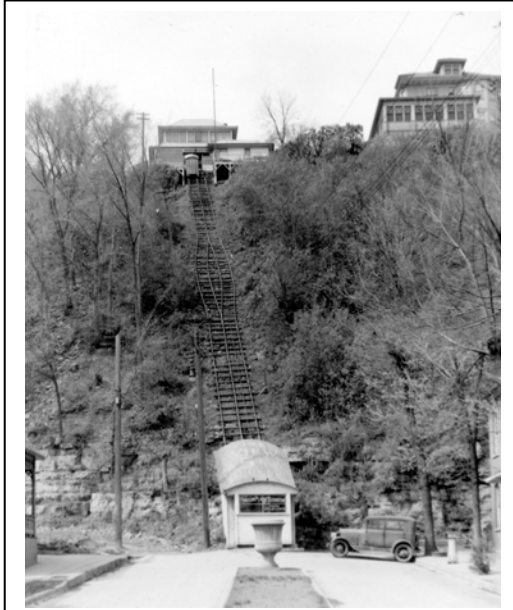
Perhaps the biggest anomaly about Dubuque in those days was its allegiance to the Democratic Party in an overwhelmingly Republican state. A large part of the reason for that deviation lay in the city's heavily Catholic character. Part of it was



This statue of Archbishop Mathias Loras, the first Catholic archbishop west of the Mississippi River, blesses Dubuque from the apex of the boulevard that bears his name. Photo from Purgold, the Loras College yearbook.

also due to the widespread conviction that Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal had ameliorated the harsher aspects of the Great Depression. Part of it, too, was attributable to the fact that Dubuque's workforce in the 1930s, '40s, and '50s was heavily unionized, also a legacy of the National Labor Relations (Wagner) Act and other pro-labor New Deal policies. My father was a shop steward for the Teamsters Union local at the Dubuque Star Brewing Company, and my mother was fired from her job for supporting a unionization drive at Woolworth's five-and-dime store.

By all odds, the most contentious issue between "the state of Dubuque" and mainstream Iowa had to do with the enforcement of the state's strict liquor laws. Although Dubuque's aversion to prohibition was shared by large numbers of people in other river towns and in the state's larger inland cities, its clashes with Iowa and federal enforcement authorities were particularly belligerent. The numerous islands in the middle of the Mississippi provided cover for bootleggers and rumrunners. Conventional wisdom had it that the key to being elected sheriff



The Fourth Street (Fenelon Place) Elevator, one of several that provide access from the riverfront to the bluffs. Photo from SHSI, IC.

of Dubuque County was open refusal to cooperate with the state liquor control authorities when they staged tavern raids. Liquor and gambling were also readily available just across the bridge in East Dubuque, Illinois, although the Dubuque police periodically stopped cars with Iowa license plates as soon as they exited the bridge.

I was born in St. Joseph's Mercy Hospital on a brutally hot and humid day in the pre-air conditioning era. Contrary to current practice, my mother and I spent my first week in the hospital before I was taken home to our Third Street flat. We lived halfway up one of the steepest streets in the city, which, unlike Fourth Street, had no elevator. My uncle Gil, my mother, and I narrowly escaped serious injury when the brakes on his car failed and we went several blocks in free fall. My widowed maternal grandfather, devastated by the loss of his Chevy dealership during the Great Depression, lived with us until he remarried. Most mornings, he would take me for a walk that usually

ended up at one of the numerous taverns on the south side. While Grandpa schmoozed with his friends over a beer or two, I sat on a barstool and drank orange soda from a bottle. I was easily the best-known little kid in the neighborhood, a condition that always amazed my mother when local merchants called me by my first name. Perhaps my most vivid impression from those early days occurred on an unusually balmy December 7, 1941, when my parents and I learned about the attack on Pearl Harbor from a radio bulletin while standing in line to see a movie. I don't remember whether we stayed for the show.

My parents were the grandchildren of immigrants from Germany and Ireland who settled on farms and small towns near Dubuque in the mid- to late nineteenth century. My mother was born in the crossroads hamlet of Bankston, where her family operated a general store for more than 50 years. Early in the twentieth century her father and mother had moved to the larger town of Dyersville, where my grandfather owned and operated a prosperous automobile and farm implement dealership. My father was born in 1909 in nearby New Vienna, a town so monolithically German Catholic that it did not even have a public school, and where his father owned both a farm and a tavern/general store. (Fittingly enough, my parents are buried next to her parents in Dyersville's St. Francis Xavier Cemetery, less than a mile from *The Field of Dreams* movie location.) My mother graduated from St. Francis Xavier High School and was groomed for higher education until her mother died and her father lost his business during the Great Depression. My father had to leave school after the eighth grade, despite having won a countywide competitive scholarship to Dubuque Senior High School, because the parish priest, a German immigrant, refused to allow him to attend a "non-Catholic" school. My parents met at a series of small-town dances, most likely attracted by the similarity of their frustrated ambitions, a condition that later steeled their determination to provide as much education as possible for their sons.

They settled in Dubuque. My dad went to work for the Dubuque Star Brewing Company and remained there, except for a three-year hiatus during World War II, until his retirement. My mom kept house, except for the few years when she worked in

restaurants, bakeries, or dime stores in order to facilitate our education and buying their own home. They finally achieved the latter goal the same year that I graduated from Loras College and went off to graduate school at Georgetown. My mom also was very active in the Democratic Party, as well as in numerous parent organizations affiliated with the schools attended by her sons. Like many parents with frustrated ambitions, she lived much of her life vicariously through her children.

My "Summer of '42" was not as dramatic as the one portrayed in the movie of the same name, but it was an important watershed in my young life for several reasons. For one thing, my brother Bob was born on May 6, meaning that my days as the sole apple of my parents' eye came to a screeching halt. Like most only brothers, Bob and I had a volatile relationship that ran the gamut from love and loyalty to jealousy and hostility. Like the Smothers Brothers, we argued a lot over whom mother liked best. I often resented his tagging along when my friends and I played baseball or basketball, but I was always secretly proud when he was allowed to join in. The low point of our relationship probably came when I broke his arm during a one-on-one basketball game. The high point came when he attacked a bunch of older boys who were trying to steal my bike, chasing them up the street with a board from which a nail protruded. (Or maybe it was our last city league basketball game just before I left for graduate school when we combined for more than 50 points.)

Bob traced my footsteps through St. Patrick's Grade School, Loras Academy, and Loras College, making comparisons all but impossible to resist. I was always near the top of my class in grade point average; Bob was always first in his. I "played at" a variety of sports; he concentrated mostly on tennis, becoming the number one man on both his high school and college teams. I got a graduate fellowship from Georgetown; he got one from Princeton. Over the past half-century—during which time I have lived in the District of Columbia, Maryland, Illinois, and Wisconsin, and he has resided in New Jersey, Nebraska, Germany, and North Carolina—we have been the one constant in each other's lives and the most enduring link to our Dubuque roots.



The 1955 Loras Academy baseball team ranked first in the state, with a record of 23–0 before losing the state championship game in extra innings. John Buenker is on the lower left. Photo from The Log.

Almost as significant as Bob's appearance in our household was our move to a duplex on Kaufmann Avenue, in the north-western hinterlands of the city, where we lived in the closest thing to a real neighborhood that we ever experienced. At the risk of being deceived by what Mario Puzo has called "retrospective falsification," I remember that neighborhood of about a dozen working-class families as a place where adults generally took responsibility for each other's children and where older kids watched out for younger ones. In an age before television and computers, we spent most of our playtime outside, making our own recreation and entertainment. Mostly, we chose up sides for one of several competitive games, such as kickball, dodgeball, hide and seek, kick the can, capture the flag, king of the hill, and red rover. Some nights we tried to see who could capture the most lightning bugs in a jar. My favorite game was "statues," in which one person swung another around several

times before letting go, and the “throwee” froze in whatever position he or she landed. The two then agreed on a name for the “statue,” which people from the other side tried to identify. In wintertime, we had snow sculpture contests, built snow forts, and had massive snowball battles. Then there were the “rubber gun wars,” in which the two sides fired thick rubber bands at one another from wooden guns that the older boys had constructed. If you were hit, you were out of the battle, which continued until one side gave up or was annihilated. Shooting anyone above the waist resulted in automatic disqualification.

Sometimes we just climbed and explored the hills behind our houses or the quarry several blocks away. On hot summer days, the highlight was the arrival of the ice delivery truck. Until the end of World War II, many of the people in the neighborhood still had iceboxes instead of electric refrigerators. When the ice truck was due, people would put cards in their windows designating how much ice they needed, usually anywhere from 25 to 100 pounds. The iceman, whose name was “Red” Clapper, was a good friend of my parents and so he would let us climb on board the truck and ride around as he made his tour of the neighborhood. We were allowed to pick up all the loose pieces and ingest them—a real treat on a hot summer’s day! Sometimes Red would chip off some ice, if there wasn’t enough lying loose. I am sure that, in this age of seatbelts and airbags, it was dangerous to ride on the back of the truck, but we loved doing it and our parents trusted Red to watch out for us. To us, he was one of nature’s noblemen. Come to think of it, many necessities, such as milk, bread, and groceries, were delivered to us. There was even a Fuller Brush man who went door-to-door selling household cleaning products.

Indoor entertainment revolved around the big radio that stood on the floor in the living room. We used to rush home from school to listen to such kids’ programs as *The Lone Ranger*, *Superman*, and *Jack Armstrong, the All American Boy*. These were generally 15-minute shows akin to movie serials that ended each day with the hero or his girlfriend in some kind of horrible danger and the announcer breathlessly urging us to “tune in tomorrow” to find out how he or she managed to survive. On a rational level, we knew that the characters were reading the

dialogue from scripts in a studio somewhere, accompanied by sound effects, but in our vivid imaginations they were whatever we chose to make them. The announcers also urged us to save the boxtops from the sponsoring product and send in for decoders, signet rings, and cardboard walkie talkies. During the daytime, our mothers listened to soap operas as they did their household chores. In the evening, the whole family usually gathered around the radio to listen to comedy shows such as *Fibber McGee and Molly* or *Jack Benny*, mysteries such as *Suspense* or *Inner Sanctum*, science fiction such as *Dimension X* or *The Twilight Zone*, or dramatic programs such as the *Lux Radio Theatre* or *Grand Central Station*. We didn't get our first television set until my junior year in high school (1954)—a small black-and-white set whose reception was enhanced by “rabbit ears” with pieces of tinfoil attached. In the beginning we could (under perfect weather conditions) pull in NBC from the Quad Cities or CBS from Madison, but they only transmitted from 7 a.m. to midnight. (Because of its distance from places with television stations, Dubuque was one of the first cities in Iowa to get cable television, thereby upping the number of channels to a dozen or so.) A rabid sports fan, I couldn't wait until the weekend for a telecast of a single “game of the week” of baseball, basketball, or football. These were generally overshadowed by such sports as wrestling, bowling, and roller derby. In those early days, people would watch almost anything—including test patterns and the playing of the national anthem at the conclusion of the broadcast day. The first house on the block to get a TV suddenly became the neighborhood gathering spot.

When we ventured outside the neighborhood without adults, we almost always went in small groups, with the older children charged—under threat of severe penalty—with the welfare of the younger ones. A frequent destination was Torreys, a “mom and pop” grocery store several blocks away that had a cornucopia of candy and ice cream. Another was Sacred Heart School, a distance of close to a mile from home. (I know this because my own children later made me measure it on the odometer in order to disprove my claims of walking several miles—uphill—both ways.) On Friday nights and Sunday afternoons, we frequently hiked to the Capitol Theater on the

corner of Kaufmann and Central Avenues. The “Cap” was a typical neighborhood movie theater of the times. Unlike the movie “palaces” downtown, it showed second run or “B” films made especially for such venues, and changed the bill frequently. “Going to the show” was usually a four- or five-hour experience that included two feature films, a couple of cartoons, a newsreel, a short subject, a serial, and previews of coming attractions. The cost of this extravaganza was 14 cents for children under 12 and 25 cents for those over that age.¹ Since I was tall for my age, my mother gave me a copy of my birth certificate to prove my age. Even then we sometimes conspired to help some of our number to sneak in through the exit door, a transgression that we were expected to include in our list of sins at our next confession.

At the end of the “Summer of ‘42,” I began kindergarten at Sacred Heart School, where I came under the tutelage of the Sisters of the Blessed Virgin Mary. (You could say that I entered school at age five and did not leave until I retired from the University of Wisconsin–Parkside faculty 60 years later.) I wish that I could say that school and I were an instant love match, but things were much more rocky than that. For one thing, my kindergarten teacher, Sister Mary Hermilinda, seemed ancient to me, especially when she boasted that she had taught the parents—and even grandparents—of some of my classmates. She scared me half out of my wits, with an occasional rap on the knuckles with a ruler or pointer. For the first nine years of my academic career, I was taught exclusively by nuns. When we entered high school, however, boys and girls went to separate schools. Then I was taught almost exclusively by priests or laymen.

The grade-school curriculum of course consisted of a great deal of religious instruction, supplemented by daily mass and communion. (I almost blew my first Holy Communion by trying to sneak a glass of water from the kitchen sink while my mother and my aunt put the finishing touches on my all-white outfit. Fortunately, my Aunt Marian knocked the offending glass out of my hand before I could imbibe.) The good sisters

1. This is relatively cheap even when adjusted for inflation; 14 cents in the late 1940s is equivalent to about \$1.20–\$1.60 today. —Ed.

were particularly bent upon constant drilling in “reading, writing, and ‘rithmetic.” We spent seemingly endless hours drilling addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division tables, diagramming sentences, identifying parts of speech, working problems on the blackboard, reading out loud, conducting spelling bees, and the like. We hated almost every minute of it, but I later realized that those boring drills provided me with a solid grasp of the fundamentals and building blocks of acquiring knowledge. In addition, the nuns included generous helpings of art and music in our curriculum, which awakened an abiding appreciation for the aesthetic side of human existence. (This even though I almost always flunked art because of my ineptitude at drawing, painting, and sculpting; I boasted that I had invented soap powder in my abortive attempts to carve the *Santa Maria* out of a bar of the stuff.)

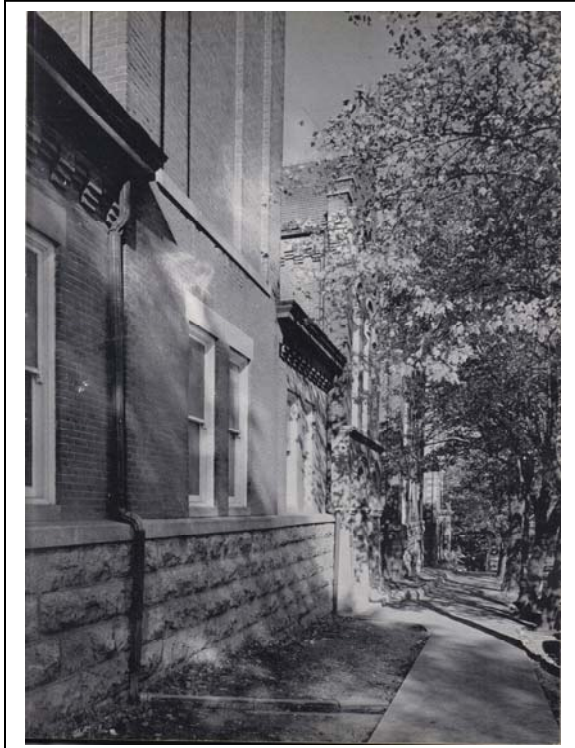
The year 1942 was also the first full year of American participation in World War II, popularly referred to as “The Good War” because our country was clearly responding to the “unprovoked and dastardly attack” at Pearl Harbor and because we and our allies were so obviously engaged in a life-and-death struggle against a genuine “axis of evil” in Nazi Germany, Imperial Japan, and Fascist Italy. (Ironically, our strongest military ally was the Soviet Union, which had been miraculously transformed into a Western-style democracy for the duration of the war, only to become the new “evil empire” during the ensuing Cold War.)

Unlike recent conflicts, World War II involved the total mobilization of American society on the home front, one that even enlisted the contributions of elementary school children. There were price, wage, and rent controls and rationing of nearly all of the necessities of life. (Ration books became more important than cash, and campaigns against black marketeering and hoarding took on the aura of patriotic crusades.) Inspired by the government’s “Rosie the Riveter” campaign, millions of women entered the workforce in defense-related industries (only to be told, once the war was over, to stay home and contribute to the Baby Boom). My dad went to work at “the Pack,” preparing meat for shipment to the armed forces. He also served as the neighborhood air raid warden, making sure that no light shone

anywhere during mock air raids. (Even at our tender ages, my friends and I thought it unlikely that a residential area in Dubuque was a realistic target for Nazi bombers.) Since gasoline and rubber tires were prohibitively rationed, most families put their cars up on blocks for the duration. I helped my parents till their Victory Garden in order to have fresh fruits and vegetables, and my mother canned or preserved them for later usage. Many homes displayed "blue star" emblems in the windows to show that a family member was in the armed services. ("Gold star" emblems signified that someone in the household had already made the "supreme sacrifice for his country.")

Like millions of other youngsters, I did what I could to contribute to the war effort. Every Monday, we would bring a dime to school and purchase a stamp that we carefully pasted in our savings bond books. When we had accumulated \$18.75, we exchanged the book for a bond that would mature at \$25.00 in ten years. My dad also had money withheld from his paycheck to buy war bonds. Several times per month, we pulled our little red wagons around the neighborhood to collect newspapers, scrap metal, and rubber that were recycled into war materials. Inspired by the ubiquitous propaganda messages that we received in school, comic books, movies, and radio programs, we were constantly on the lookout for hoarders, black marketeers, saboteurs and, above all, Nazi spies. I was convinced that my parents' landlord, who spoke with a heavy German accent (as did several of my older relatives), was a spy because he made my parents pay him a little extra under the table along with their rent-controlled monthly payments. Although just about everyone violated the price controls and rationing quotas in small ways, the degree of compliance with these rules "in pursuit of victory" and for the "protection of our freedoms" was extraordinary. Whether or not my parents and their contemporaries were really the "greatest generation" is certainly debatable, but the extent to which they strove together to combat economic depression and war was truly remarkable and inspirational.

Nearly every evening, families gathered around their radios to listen to the latest war news as delivered by Edward R. Murrow, William Shirer, or my particular favorite, Gabriel Heatter, who always began his broadcast by proclaiming either, "Ah,



Loras Academy, halfway up the hill on the way to Loras College. Photo from The Log.

there is good news tonight” or “Ah, there is bad news tonight.” Even more awe-inspiring were the “fireside chats” given by President Franklin D. Roosevelt, who had an uncanny knack for talking directly to each listener in language that brought world-shaking developments down to a personal level. My favorite memories of World War II are the spontaneous parades down Main Street on VE and VJ days. Total strangers hugged and kissed one another, and people sang and danced in the streets in a state of near euphoria.

I spent most of my last eight years in Dubuque (1951–1959) on Loras Boulevard, because Loras Academy was on a plateau halfway up the steep incline, while Loras College gazed down from its apex. The academy was an all-male Catholic boarding school with compulsory Reserve Officers’ Training Corps (ROTC)



The commanding officers of the Loras Academy Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) battalion pose in 1959, with John Buenker, the second-in-command, on the front row left. Photo from The Log.

and seemed to be a universe unto itself. There was a clear division between “boarders” and “day hops,” but that bifurcation grew less obvious over time due to the mixing that took place in classes, intramural sports, extracurricular activities, and interscholastic athletics. The curriculum was almost entirely liberal arts and college prep, at least in the “A track” where I spent all four years.

Most of my classmates—both boarders and “day hops”—moved, literally and figuratively, up the boulevard to complete their college educations, so that we formed a tightly knit cohort during the decade of our emergence. We worked on the school newspaper and yearbook; played together on intramural, city league, and varsity athletic teams; and were the chief movers and shakers in most student organizations. The highlight of the year was the Military Ball, at which we received our ROTC commissions, and the Homecoming Dance, for which we “bor-

rowed” students from the three Catholic girls’ schools. My biggest thrill was being a member of the varsity baseball team that won 23 straight games. My biggest disappointment was losing the state championship final in extra innings.

Growing up in Dubuque in the 1940s and 50s instilled in me a passionate love of history that enriched my life and laid the groundwork for my career as a historian. As the oldest city in Iowa, Dubuque was awash with historical artifacts going back into the early nineteenth century. I remember being tremendously impressed with the events of the state’s centennial celebration in 1946, especially with the elaborate pageant held in the football stadium at Senior High School when I was nine years old. Trips to nearby Galena, Illinois, a living historical museum that included the home of U. S. Grant, reinforced my interest, as did a visit to Spillville, Iowa, where we toured the home where Czech composer Antonin Dvořák stayed during his sojourn in the United States. I recall my mother frequently remarking that I always picked nonfiction books over fiction on our frequent visits to the Carnegie Stout Public Library. Perhaps even more inspiring was listening to the stories told by my great-grandmother, a German immigrant, mother of 11, and a pioneer on the Iowa frontier. She died just months short of her 100th birthday, a living link to the immigrant experience on which I have focused much of my research and teaching. I was 12 years old at the time of her death and have always wished that I had asked her better questions and that I had recorded her recollections.

My abiding interest in history was nurtured and cultivated by several of my teachers, especially Sister Mary Robertelle in the sixth grade at St. Patrick School, Tom Hurm and Cliff Lorenz at Loras Academy (the latter held frequent “history downs,” which I usually won), and Tom Auge and Bob Brady at the college level. In fact, it was Professor Brady who constructed my bridge from Dubuque to Washington, D.C.—and to my professional life—by helping me secure a teaching assistantship at Georgetown University.

Reading the other four autobiographical essays in this collection makes me realize, even more than before, how atypical my experience of “Growing Up Iowan” really was. When I first

enrolled in the history department at Georgetown University in 1959, the professor who was to become my mentor immediately assumed that—being from Iowa—I must be fresh off the farm and a conservative Republican. That was hardly a promising background for someone who wanted to work under the tutelage of a scholar who grew up in New Jersey, received his Ph.D. at Harvard under Oscar Handlin, was writing a biography of Senator Robert F. Wagner Sr., was founder of the “urban liberalism” school of American political history, and whose book, *Massachusetts People and Politics, 1919–1933*, had just been reviewed in the *New York Times* by Senator John F. Kennedy. That impression was also shared by most of my fellow graduate students, who were predominantly Irish and Italian Catholics and Jews who had been brought up in the “Boswash” megalopolis. It didn’t take me long, however, to convince J. Joseph Huthmacher and my colleagues that, in spite of their stereotypes about Iowans, my urban, ethnic, working-class, Democratic origins made me a kindred spirit. By the time I published *Urban Liberalism and Progressive Reform*, my mentor was quoted as saying that he wished that he had written it. During my professional career of forty-plus years, the focus of my research and teaching has been on immigration, ethnic, urban, state, and local history and political culture.

While I was busy earning my spurs as a historian of urban liberalism, Herschel Loveless, Harold Hughes, John Culver, and Richard Clark and their supporters were significantly altering both the image and the substance of Iowa’s social and political landscape. By the mid-1960s, my brand of Iowan no longer seemed quite so atypical.