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The Death and Life of Main Street: Small Towns in American Memory, Space, and Community

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have appeared earlier in the work as well. As a whole, however, the book recaptures the details of a by-gone era in Iowa history, along with the resourcefulness of its people and communities, and makes us wonder exactly what we have left behind.

Lisa L. Ossian won the State Historical Society of Iowa's Benjamin F. Shambaugh Award, recognizing *The Depression Dilemmas of Rural Iowa, 1929-1933* as the most significant book on Iowa history published in 2011. — Ed.

The Death and Life of Main Street: Small Towns in American Memory, Space, and Community, by Miles Orvell. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012. xiii, 286 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$39.95 hardcover.

Reviewer Jan Olive Full is principal at Tallgrass Historians L.C. Her dissertation (Loyola University Chicago, 2006) was "Hinterland or Heartland: The Survival of Small-Town Lake Mills, Iowa, 1850-1950."

Far from being any sort of history of small towns or of small-town Main Streets, *The Death and Life of Main Street* is a broad study of the *idea* of Main Street—acknowledged symbol of small towns—using a classic myth-and-symbol approach. The short title is purposefully crafted to suggest that while "real small towns" (235) may be dead or moribund, the *idea* of the small town survives on a vastly greater scale through popular culture, planning theories, architects' drawing boards, and developers' business plans. Miles Orvell's small towns are not limited to any particular size or place, however, and are not confined by historic definitions or geographic borders. And Orvell argues that Main Street is no longer strictly a town center or marketplace but a set of paradoxes and contradictions to be navigated in order to understand today's cultural landscape. The "real small towns" of our past and the values they held have given way to the power of idealized Main Streets starting in the 1930s and culminating in Disneyland's mythical Main Street of the 1950s. Disneyland's Main Street USA has become the physical model encapsulating the values and aspirations of today's American public, often employed by those who plan our newest communities, especially the New Urbanist movement.

Early on, Orvell explores the persistent cultural dichotomy of attitudes about small towns as paradoxical places that both sustain ideal American values and stifle individual vitality. He then develops his thesis—that the reality-turned-myth of Main Street has become the vehicle representing our desire for safe and happy communal life—over eight chapters. Orvell draws on a wide range of evidentiary

sources, including literature, plays and movies, television shows, recreations such as Henry Ford's Greenfield Village, and an extravagant model railroad exhibit as well as Disney's perfect Main Street. Orvell establishes the historical basis for the myth of Main Street in chapter one and describes actual small-town decline in chapter two using a 1950s Philadelphia suburban town (Chestnut Hill, where he lives) as his main example. In chapter three, Orvell places small towns at a cultural low point with the 1920s publication of Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street*, a condemning satire of "Gopher Prairie," Lewis's thinly camouflaged hometown of Sauk Center, Minnesota.

Drawing on just one side of the cultural dichotomy, Orvell argues in chapter four that the myth of small towns began to grow in the 1930s and, "in a dramatic reversal of symbolic meaning, began to acquire a new magical glow, replacing the jaundice of the village virus" (99). He sees this transformation in how the work of Depression-era documentary photographers like Dorothea Lange, which preserved the bleakness of small-town life, evolved into nostalgic dramas like Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*, the "definitive representation of small-town life during the 1930s" (114). By the end of the '30s, Orvell argues, Americans wanted to believe that the perceived community harmony of simpler times was still possible. He sees evidence for this in wistful movies such as Frank Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946).

This restoration of the "mythic image of Main Street as a place of communal harmony" (130) would persist through the 1970s and the advent of the New Urbanist movement's efforts to plan communities that could actually generate such harmony. Orvell's last three chapters explore decades of experiments with planned communities, from the gated East Coast nineteenth-century developments designed by architect Alexander Davis (a sometime colleague of landscape architect Alexander Downing) through the vast post-World War II Levittown developments of slab bungalows to the spectacularly unsuccessful housing projects of the 1960s and '70s.

In the end, Orvell returns to his main argument, that current efforts by urban planners, commercial developers, and New Urbanist designers alike are geared to creating communities they perceive Americans want to live in—places of harmony and symbols of democracy and community, but likewise places of "social homogeneity" (240) where residents of similar backgrounds and economic situations are safe and happy.

For those new to the subject, *Death and Life of Main Street* may be an eye-opening exploration of the mythology and culturally laden concepts behind small towns and Main Street. Despite its suggestive

title, however, the book is not grounded in the history of small towns, their change over time, or their economic and social struggle to survive. Nor is it intended to be. Geographically focused on the region around the author's home near Philadelphia and in other coastal regions both east and west, the book is useful to understanding midwestern Main Streets only in a general and somewhat esoteric way. Readers may pick up this book because of its title and tinted picture postcard dust-jacket, but those wanting more grounding in real Main Streets and real small towns will set it down again.

Creating Consumers: Home Economists in Twentieth-Century America, by Carolyn M. Goldstein. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012. xi, 412 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$49.95 hard-cover.

Reviewer Gwen Kay is associate professor of history at the State University of New York at Oswego. She is the author of *Dying to be Beautiful: The Fight for Safe Cosmetics* (2005) and "'If it did not exist, it would have to be invented': Home Economics in Transition at Iowa's Regents Institutions" (*Annals of Iowa*, 2011).

In *Creating Consumers*, Carolyn M. Goldstein argues that home economics, and the professionals who practiced it, had a profound impact on American culture. By creating a professional niche for women, particularly in government and business, home economists fostered a culture of smart consumption, economical and healthful meal planning, and sanitary home environments. Arranged chronologically, and parallel within time periods, the book details the careers of women in this burgeoning field. By focusing on two key arenas in which home economics was visible in the twentieth century, she illustrates women's agency within the agencies of their employment.

This history of a discipline and its practitioners examines organizations and the individuals in them. The focus on the federal government minimizes state variation or extension work. The businesses, with varied locations and headquarters, are not particularly focused in the Midwest, although a food purveyor in Minneapolis and a utility in Chicago are among the many surveyed. The scope of research is impressive, and there are enough connections to Iowa State University to warrant future research into its faculty and graduates, particularly because education is not the focus of this book.

Home economics, organized into a discipline in 1908, fostered Progressive Era ideals of efficiency and sanitation. Arriving on the scene as the nexus of production was shifting from home to factory, home economists gave much attention to consumption. Just as these