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Main Street Ready-Made: the New Deal Community of Greendale, Wisconsin

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Main Street Ready-Made: The New Deal Community of Greendale, Wisconsin, by Arnold R. Alanen and Joseph A. Eden. Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1987. x, 156 pp. Illustrations, notes, tables, bibliography, index. \$20.00 cloth.

REVIEWED BY JOSEPH L. ARNOLD, UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND, BALTIMORE COUNTY

Greendale, Wisconsin, was begun in 1936 by the Resettlement Administration as part of its "greenbelt town" program. Located on the southwestern edge of the Milwaukee metropolitan region, it is one of the most famous planned communities in the Middle West. Arnold Alanen, chairman of the School of Landscape Architecture at the University of Wisconsin, and Joseph Eden, a geographer, have written an excellent scholarly history of Greendale from 1936 to 1980, providing a detailed analysis of the town as an experiment in physical planning and community development.

The majority of the book deals with the planning and development of the original part of the town in 1936-1938. Its chief planner was the well-known architect Elbert Peets, and its residential architect was Harry H. Bentley. Together they created what must be the most attractive and charming public housing project ever built by the federal government. The houses are very small by 1980s standards because they were designed for moderate-income residents in a far less affluent era than we now enjoy. Nevertheless, the total town plan achieved a level of sophistication and livability that is rare even in contemporary high-priced developments.

As an experiment in community development, Greendale, like the other two greenbelt towns, was largely a failure. This stemmed not from the local administration, but from the basic anomaly of attempting to create a local suburban community of moderate (not low) income families within a federal structure and bureaucracy that was often forced to treat it as a public housing project. The idealists such as Rex Tugwell, chief of the Resettlement Administration, were almost all gone by 1940, and relations deteriorated between the townspeople and the Washington administrators who ultimately set the rents and other policies for the town. Conflict climaxed in 1943 when the federal government raised Greendale rents by as much as 30 percent and a number of residents staged a rent strike. Many others simply moved out. Finally, in 1955 the federal government sold Greendale and the other greenbelt towns to private groups.

Since almost three-fourths of Greendale's land was still vacant, deciding who would come into possession of that property was crucial to the future of the town. Several disreputable real estate developers

eagerly sought to grab this choice piece of federal land; but with the aid of Milwaukee's socialist mayor, Frank Zeidler, and one of the city's businessman-philanthropists, the vacant land was purchased and developed by the Milwaukee Community Development Corporation, which later sold out to a company that also agreed to continue building along the same general lines Elbert Peets had in mind in 1936 and which he had updated in 1948. The result to date is a beautifully planned suburban community that is one of the most sought-after suburbs of Milwaukee.

Sadly, the Resettlement Administration's socioeconomic goal of providing a suburban haven for moderate-income residents was almost totally abandoned after 1955. The houses being built on the last few remaining acres of residential land in the town are selling for two hundred thousand dollars and up. *Main Street Ready-Made* provides a carefully researched, clearly written, and thoughtful analysis of this delightful federal community that has been privately "upscaled" far beyond the reach of those for whom it was originally intended.

Prairie Grass Roots: An Iowa Small Town in the Early Twentieth Century, by Thomas J. Morain. The Henry A. Wallace Series on Agricultural History and Rural Studies. Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1988. xviii, 287 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$24.95 cloth.

Thomas J. Morain earned the 1989 Benjamin Shambaugh Award from the State Historical Society of Iowa. The award recognized *Prairie Grass Roots: An Iowa Small Town in the Early Twentieth Century* as the most important book on Iowa history published in 1988.—Ed.

REVIEWED BY JOHN E. MILLER, SOUTH DAKOTA STATE UNIVERSITY

Everyone interested in Iowa history, midwestern history, small-town history, rural history, social history and twentieth-century American history will want to read *Prairie Grass Roots*. It is about a small town in Iowa which grew to 3,431 residents during the period under discussion (it recorded 4,854 in the 1980 census). The significance of this book is much wider than the locality itself, for Thomas Morain uses Jefferson, Iowa, as a case study to illuminate the fundamental transformation that occurred in similar small towns all over the Midwest during the first three decades of the twentieth century.

Morain admits that "typical" is a slippery term, but nevertheless he is willing to apply it to Jefferson, a county-seat town lying sixty

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