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The Rural Midwest since World War II ed. by J. L. Anderson
(review)

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1920s and 1930s Midwest. While his enthusiasm for and commitment to midwestern literature should be commended, his study generalizes too much and fails to truly articulate valuable differences and nuance that can illustrate the complexity of emotions and ideas that these writers bring to the region.

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J. L. Anderson, ed., *The Rural Midwest since World War II*. DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2014. 335 pp. \$28.95, paper.

This outstanding collection of essays provides a comprehensive survey of an area that is often overlooked by scholars. The rural Midwest is a region of idealized innocence, where the sentimental notions of American culture have created a society that produces Superman and Garrison Keillor's Lake Wobegon. The mythology of the modern Midwest—that of a peaceful rural place where community values remain in the face of a materialistic and selfish world—stands in stark contrast to the images of excess that often define places such as Southern California and New York City. This bucolic world is mostly gone, if it ever existed at all, and the forces of globalization, deindustrialization, agricultural consolidation, and demographic change have transformed the most American of all regions.

This book, edited by J. L. Anderson, provides a much needed historical correction to the stereotypes of an agricultural utopia populated by white Americans driving pickup trucks. Today's rural Midwest is a highly diverse place, rapidly evolving due to immigration and economic modernization and increasingly dependent on the federal government. Most of the Midwest's population is urban, and less than ten percent of rural people live on farms. Most farm income does not even come from agriculture, but from off-farm employment.

The Rural Midwest since World War II contains a rich variety of essays exploring how this region has changed in the past seven decades. Useful chapters on ecology and environmental history open the book, followed by essays on manufacturing, government policy, women, children and ethnic and religious minorities. A brief introduction and a concluding overview put the region in its historical and sociological context. There is not a weak chapter in

this book, and its authors—Pamela Riney-Kehrberg, Debra Reid, and David Danbom, among others—are all noted scholars in their fields.

J. L. Anderson's introduction makes clear that the recent history of the rural Midwest contradicts the supposedly static world of small towns and farms. Serious challenges, such as depopulation, have joined with social and economic divisions to endanger the survival of key aspects of midwestern life. The wrenching farm crisis of the 1980s demonstrated the dangers of farming. Shuttered small town Main Streets provided stark reminders of the negative consequences of capitalism's creative destruction. As the rural world of the mid-twentieth century faded, the federal government became increasingly important. Rural life also became more like that of the nation overall, thanks to improved transportation and communication. Suburbs and exurbs have transformed the countryside, as urban workers chose to live away from cities and commute to work. The distinctiveness of rural life has faded since the 1940s.

Chapters clearly summarize recent scholarship, while keeping historical debates limited. Each chapter is about twenty-five pages and would supply plenty of material for undergraduate discussion. The book is also a great place for historians to mine information for lecture material; detailed footnotes offer fruitful ideas for further research. Chapters on the environment lay an excellent foundation for later essays. While midwestern society has become less homogenous since World War II, the land has become more so. The countryside became more simplified, James Pritchard argues, and widespread agriculture has modified the geography. River improvements and habitat destruction have transformed the region. Other changes have influenced the ecology, including crop monoculture, regular antibiotic use in animals, and a pervasive reliance on fertilizers. Even as many farmers turned to corn or soybeans, others grew new crops, from cherries to vegetables to sugar beets. The demand for workers helped pull nonwhite laborers into the Midwest and changed the demography of rural areas.

The Midwest experienced great economic change after World War II. While the phrase "Rust Belt" suggests the departure of industry from urban areas, some industry moved into rural spaces. Meatpacking and ethanol production partially replaced traditional agricultural-related industry. Improved highways and the growth of trucking helped shift manufacturing away from cities. Wilson Warren's essay "Beyond the Rust Belt" sprawls across several centuries and is less focused on the post-1945 period, but it places industrialization in its long-term context. Cornelia and Jan Flora

deftly survey the impact of social and economic change on rural communities, tracing the effects of a shrinking and aging population. Cultural homogeneity declined along with many Main Streets, and the acceptance of ethnic diversity increased.

Anderson explains the important role of the government in rural areas in his essay on the subject. The New Deal and the Second World War expanded its reach and power. Federal farm policy has had a major role in agriculture and farmers have debated the merits of subsidies for decades, accepting them in hard times and discussing their demise in boom times. In addition to the Farm Bill, electrification, road construction, educational assistance, research and other programs have helped sustain communities.

Essays by Jenny Barker Devine on farmwomen and Pamela Riney-Kehrberg on children explain how life for these groups changed after World War II. Women's work, on and off the farm, helped support families. They took on roles as farm operators and managers, just as the lives of their children changed as well. Rural childhood increasingly came to mirror that of their suburban counterparts. Farm kids worked for their parents, but they gained access to a national youth culture of sports, television, film, and scouting.

The final chapters trace the postwar history of various ethnic and religious groups—African Americans, Latinos, and the Amish. The black population of the Midwest was limited, at only about one percent of total population. Debra Reid explains how rural black midwesterners faced the same challenges that African Americans faced nationwide. Black migrants usually bypassed the rural Midwest and headed to northern cities. White landowners were usually not interested in selling or leasing land to African Americans. White supremacy also left blacks facing economic disadvantage and cultural isolation. In 1990, for example, there were forty-seven black farmers in Iowa. Farming was the “whitest of occupations,” Reid contends. The Latino population of the Midwest has boomed in the past several decades, pushed away from border states by poor education systems, dangerous barrios, and racial intolerance. In some midwestern states Latino numbers doubled in the 1990s. Meatpacking and farm labor brought thousands to the region. Widespread “white flight” from areas of Latino settlement proves that this group was not easily folded into the region, historian Jim Norris insists. A final chapter on the Amish ably documents the historical experience of this oft-romanticized group.

The Rural Midwest since World War II is a superb collection of essays that

smartly reviews the history and culture of this neglected region. It helps to fill a historiographical gap and gives scholars a starting point for future research. It is also one of the best written and most comprehensive edited works that this reviewer has read. Anyone who studies, or cares about, this region will want to have a copy on his or her bookshelf.

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Wilfred M. McClay and Ted V. McAllister, eds., *Why Place Matters: Geography, Identity, and Civic Life in Modern America*. New York: Encounter Books, 2014. 296 pp. \$25.99.

The essays in this volume edited by Wilfred M. McClay, a historian at the University of Oklahoma, and Ted V. McAllister, a professor of public policy at Pepperdine University, emerged out of conferences on the subject of place in March 2011 and March 2012 at Pepperdine's School of Public Policy in Malibu, California. A book focusing upon the importance of place in people's lives will be of special interest to readers of a journal devoted to Middle Western history and culture.

Although the only reference to the Midwest in the index is to Andrew R. L. Cayton and Peter S. Onuf's *The Midwest and the Nation* (1990), several of the sixteen authors whose essays appear in the volume hail from the region: Joseph A. Amato, whose essay focuses on local history; Philip Bess, who writes on urban design and the built environment; and Yi-Fu Tuan, who focuses on place, space, identity, and the home. Amato is the only one to directly address the theme of regional history, which he fixes firmly within a spatial matrix starting with family and local history and proceeding to regional, national, and even global levels of analysis. Drawing upon his extensive research and previous books on local and regional history and concentrating especially upon southwestern Minnesota and the area around the town of Marshall, his essay crackles and sparks with fertile ideas that help to illuminate matters of place, environment, region, and associated matters.

Students of midwestern history and culture will gain much, too, from the other essays included in this wide-ranging collection. Former chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts Dana Gioia's exuberant de-