

STUDIES IN MIDWESTERN HISTORY

VOL. I, No. 3

April, 2015

OUR MIDWESTS

By Mark Vinz¹

A number of years ago, a university colleague asked me to take over an American Studies course called “The Midwest,” assuring me that I could pretty much teach whatever I wanted. The idea of the course was to explore the region from several different perspectives—literature and the arts, history, politics, and even popular mythology. There was plenty of material from which I might choose or use as background, from chestnuts such as *Huckleberry Finn*, *Giants in the Earth*, *Main Street*, *My Antonia*, *Winesburg, Ohio*, and *Black Elk Speaks* to the paintings of Thomas Hart Benton and Grant Wood; from resource books such as Bruce Nelson’s *Land of the Dakotas* or Walter Prescott Webb’s *The Great Plains* to films such as *Northern Lights* or just about any of Garrison Keillor’s “News from Lake Wobegon” monologues or Ted Kooser’s poems. Even when I eventually turned the course into “Literature of the Midwest,” finding material was never a problem—like the landscape itself, it is quietly there, too often taken for granted, waiting patiently to be discovered, or rediscovered. One of the most interesting things about that material is the variety of attitudes it embodies—often contradictory ones, as are the images most outsiders have of the Midwest and its people.

To stimulate class discussion, the first thing I pursued was to define the idea of the Midwest by conducting a survey which asked the students where exactly they thought Midwest is, and then, to

¹ Mark Vinz is a Professor of English Emeritus at Minnesota State University-Moorhead. Vinz founded and edited the journal *Dacotah Territory*, edited *Dakota Arts Quarterly* from 1977 to 1984, co-edited *Imagining Home: Writing from the Midwest* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2000), and is the author of several books of poems.

list things that best characterize Midwesterners. Both questions produced surprisingly diverse responses.

To the first question, *Where is the Midwest*, responses ranged from the inclusion of Montana and Wyoming to the west, Pennsylvania to the east, and Oklahoma to the south. More legitimately, a few students even included Manitoba and Saskatchewan, the “Midwest” of Canada. But since most of the students in those classes came from eastern North Dakota and western Minnesota, the most typical response was to include those two states, along with Iowa (to most, the quintessential Midwestern state), Kansas (because of Dorothy, no doubt) and Illinois (a few had visited Chicago). Surprisingly, many did not include South Dakota (seen as part of “the West”), Wisconsin, and Nebraska, and almost no one included Michigan, Ohio, Indiana, or Missouri. To the students, Midwest tended to mean *Upper* Midwest—“God’s country,” as a few like to call it; just as many others like to suggest who else but God would have it?

To most of these students, the Midwest also meant *rural*—farm and small town—not urban, in spite of the Twin Cities and their suburbs, its *de facto* capital. They tended to feel a far greater kinship with remote regions of Kansas than with Chicago or Detroit. Indeed, they are probably justified, for the greatest diversity in the Midwest is not between the far-flung extremities of the 12-state region, as it is traditionally defined, but between large urban areas and the “outstate.” Likewise, one thing the students were particularly aware of was the diversity of the Midwestern landscape—from prairies to forests, from lakes and river bluff country to ever-growing suburban sprawls. They were aware, too, of the vulnerability rural Midwesterners tend to feel—to the harshness and unpredictability of weather, the fragility of the agricultural economy, and the ever-present possibility of natural disasters such as floods, blizzards, and tornados.

In the times that I taught the Midwest class there was a similar kind of diversity in response to the second question, *What characterizes Midwesterners?* A universal “truth” generally perceives Midwesterners as hard-working and industrious, polite, moral, honest, family-oriented, out of the so-called mainstream, tough, and preoccupied with weather. Where the splits develop is within a series of familiar dualities: friendly vs. clannish (even xenophobic), conservative vs. progressive, laconic vs. garrulous, independent thinkers vs. followers, in pursuit of the “latest” vs. living in the past, insider vs. outsider, homogeneous vs. diverse, to name a few. It is very hard, for instance, for North Dakota students to make sense of their state’s visibly conservative Republicanism as opposed to its tradition of populists, mavericks, and radicals, going back to the Non-Partisan League and

the still-existing state-owned mill and elevator that it fostered. It is hard, too, for them to deal with notions of being isolated and behind the times, for even though most of them are fairly certain they will be moving away from the region soon enough, they are fiercely defensive of its moral superiority, quick to point out its low crime and divorce rate statistics and national surveys citing this region as one of the safest, cleanest, and least stressful places to live in the United States.

No matter what surveys might show, stereotypes are indeed dominant when it comes to popular images of the Midwest, from paintings such as Grant Woods' *American Gothic* to countless photographs of old barns, windmills, and desolate roads lined with telephone poles. I have never been as aware of this iconography as during the 1976 Bi-Centennial and the PBS series of hour-long programs on all 50 states called "Portrait of America." During the "Salute to North Dakota" program, the televised images seemed confined to those that expressed remoteness, barrenness, extremes of harsh weather, and a raft of "down home" clichés, all underscored with painfully inappropriate Appalachian banjo music. Watching the program, an outsider would have to conclude that North Dakota was devoid of anything resembling culture, cities, or even up-to-date farm equipment. Eric Sevareid's statement about North Dakota can easily apply to the region itself: that to most Americans it remains but a large "blank on the nation's mind."²

If we who live here know that the region is "simple" only to the outsider passing through quickly, we also know that we are inescapably defined by stereotypes, which are often at odds with each other. At one extreme, for example, the aura of Norman Rockwell persists, locating the Midwest in a romantic past of fishin' holes, bib overalls, and families reverently gathered around the dining room table—i.e., as the seat of all those good old American virtues. At the other extreme lurks the ghost of Sinclair Lewis and his "Main Street virus" of smug provincialism and isolationism, rampant know-nothingness, and suffocating conformity. I know that these perspectives are over-generalized, but they can prove useful for the sake of discussion, for the truth is mostly what lies between those extremes, partaking of each yet depending on neither. What I have stressed to students is what countless Midwestern writers and artists have dealt with for decades: it is all a matter of what you're able to *see*, and that takes both awareness and patience. Just as Midwestern landscapes have far less picture postcard scenery than many other regions, one can still learn to appreciate their beauties and its subtleties. What is flat and boring to some is diverse and exciting

² Eric Sevareid, *Not So Wild a Dream* (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1946), 5.

to others (the noted playwright William Inge, who was from Kansas, insists on calling the landscape *even!*).³ As William Least Heat Moon so aptly put it in the passage of his book *Blue Highways* where he drove into North Dakota from the west, “Boredom lies only with the traveler’s limited perception and his failure to explore deeply enough.”⁴ That kind of exploration needs to extend far beyond landscape, as well—to the pioneer past, for example, the Indian past, the past of one’s family.

To most of its writers, the Midwest has remained anything but boring, even—or perhaps especially—to the expatriates. “If Midwestern places are so grim and gray, why do writers keep recalling them, sometimes after decades of living far away?” Scott Russell Sanders has so aptly written. “What draws the imagination back across the miles and years? The chief lure is the country itself. . . . By turns cruel and comforting, the land holds them, haunts them, lingers in their memory and bones.”⁵

The late John R. Milton, a native Minnesotan and founding editor of *South Dakota Review*, emphasized that the truest sense of the Midwest comes from probing the “tensions” between the region’s many extremes, such as “the harsh and the beautiful,” and reactions that can reflect both loving and hating simultaneously.⁶ As a number of writers and artists of the past have shown, without some measure of loving, one can simply become a cynic, blind to possibilities. Likewise, without a degree of hating—or at least a healthy skepticism—one runs the risk of sentimentalism, or worse, of becoming a mere booster.

I believe, as Milton did, that it is the job of contemporary Midwestern writers and artists (or anyone who studies the Midwest) to be aware of the region’s extremes and the tensions between them, confronting the false stereotypes, especially as our region continues to change—losing some of its fabled homogeneity with new waves of immigration, for example, and a continuing movement from rural to urban. And it is the job of all of us who consider ourselves Midwesterners to realize what lies beyond the popular images, to understand the complex ways we have been shaped by the places where we have lived. It is especially that process of *marking* that I asked my students to try to appreciate in their own lives. If, as for countless others before them, the Midwest will *finally* be what they look back on from an increasing distance, they should also understand

³ William Inge, “Introduction,” *The Plains States* (New York, Time-Life Library of America, 1968), 8.

⁴ William Least Heat Moon, *Blue Highways* (New York, Fawcett Crest, 1982), 283-4.

⁵ Scott Russell Sanders, *Writing from the Center* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1995), 31-2.

⁶ John R. Milton, “The Dakota Image,” *South Dakota Review* vol. 8 (Autumn 1970), 21.

what Bob Dylan once said in an interview, that in spite the immense changes he has gone through in his life, he emphasizes, “I’m not a New Yorker. I’m North Dakota-Minnesota—Midwestern. I’m that color. I speak that way. . . . My brains and feelings come from there.”⁷ They’ll also know there’s finally no such thing as *the* Midwest but many Midwests. Perhaps even Sinclair Lewis and Norman Rockwell could agree with that.

⁷ Dylan quoted in Chester A. Anderson, “Introduction,” *Growing Up in Minnesota: Ten Writers Remember Their Childhoods* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1976), 8-9.