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JON K. LAUCK

Historian of the Midwest

An Interview with John E. Miller

In the spring of 2014, historian John E. Miller published his eighth book. He ended his twenty-nine-year career at South Dakota State University (SDSU) early in part so he could finish this book, which encapsulates much of his thinking about the history of the rural and small-town Midwest and its people. In the runup to the release of Miller's book, entitled Small-Town Dreams: Stories of Midwestern Boys Who Shaped America *(University Press of Kansas), I conducted a lengthy interview with Miller in which we discussed his career, his approach to history, his books, and his future goals. From 1989 to 1993, it should be noted at the outset, I was one of the many fortunate souls to have studied history with Miller at SDSU and to have learned a great deal about the importance of the history of the American Midwest along the way.*

In keeping with the research interests that have driven his long career of active scholarship, Miller is a product of the small midwestern towns he has studied. The son of a Lutheran pastor who frequently moved between churches in Kansas, Missouri, Illinois, and Minnesota, Miller attended college at the University of Missouri-Columbia and then earned his Ph.D. in history at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. After a short teaching stint at the University of Tulsa, Miller moved to Brookings and joined SDSU, where he became one of the most active members of its academic community and a highly energetic scholar. Soon after publishing his Ph.D. dissertation about Wisconsin politics as a book, Miller quickly turned to studying the small towns of South Dakota while simultaneously maintaining his interest in the broader history of the American Midwest. South Dakotans are probably most familiar with Miller due to his well-known book about history on

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Highway 14 and for his three books about Laura Ingalls Wilder,[1] in addition to his many public speeches, radio appearances, and quotations in the state's newspapers.

Miller's soft-spoken, friendly manner and his fierce dedication to research and writing yielded a long and praiseworthy career that has been widely recognized. Miller's undergraduate advisor at the University of Missouri, Richard S. Kirkendall, praises Miller's "enormously creative, productive and rewarding life with history" and says he is "proud to have contributed to Miller's work when both of us were young and I too was a midwesterner. Miller is clearly on a roll right now and has a head full of topics he would like to develop, so we can reasonably hope and expect to get much more from him."[2] Miller's graduate school advisor at the University of Wisconsin, Paul W. Glad, remembers Miller's "inquiring mind" and how he was an "active participant in seminar discussions [and] a reliable source of important ideas. During the years since receiving his doctorate, Professor Miller has exerted a continuing influence in the profession. He is a good friend to those who know him and to all who make use of his ideas, and he has contributed significantly to the interpretation of American regional and political history."[3] Miller's long-time colleague to the north at North Dakota State University, David B. Danbom, noted that for "forty years John Miller has brought a level of intellectual curiosity, rigor, and complexity to the study of rural and small-town life that is rare among scholars. South Dakotans particularly and midwesterners generally have been fortunate to be the subjects of his attention and affection."[4] Miller's colleague Paula M. Nelson of the University of Wisconsin-Platteville noted that there are "many things that I admire about John Miller and his work. He came to South Dakota State

1. Miller, *Looking for History on Highway 14* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1993; new ed., Pierre: South Dakota State Historical Society Press, 2001); Miller, *Laura Ingalls Wilder's Little Town: Where History and Literature Meet* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1994); Miller, *Becoming Laura Ingalls Wilder: The Woman behind the Legend* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1998); Miller, *Laura Ingalls Wilder and Rose Wilder Lane: Authorship, Place, Time, and Culture* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2008).

2. Kirkendall to Lauck, email, 16 Jan. 2014.

3. Glad to Lauck, email, 15 Jan. 2014.

4. Danbom to Lauck, email, 16 Jan. 2014.

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University with no particular interest in the history of the state but quickly found a rich field for research. He embraced the people, the culture, and the stories of his adopted home and created a body of literature about them that will stand the test of time. John is also a great friend to other scholars. He has attended countless conference sessions over the years, notebook and pen in hand. He asks great questions. His active interest in the research of others and his warm and friendly demeanor are an example of the best academic collegiality."[5]

In addition to his colleagues around the country, Miller is also recognized at his home institution for outpacing other professors with his many publications and dedication to the life of research and scholarship. South Dakota State University Provost Laurie Stenberg Nichols recognized that "John was ahead of his time because he was a true scholar before SDSU fully acknowledged research and scholarship as an integral role of the faculty. Despite being given little time to conduct his research and write, he became a highly regarded scholar and contributed many good works on the history of particular individuals, the state and region. Today we hold John Miller up as one of SDSU's finest scholars and authors."[6]

The interview presented here is compiled from interviews I conducted with John Miller in October, November, and December 2010 and January 2013. Copies of the complete, unedited version reside in the State Archives Collection, South Dakota State Historical Society, Pierre, and at the Center for Western Studies, Augustana College, Sioux Falls.

Where were you born?

In Beloit, Kansas, on March 28, 1945.

What did your parents do for a living?

My mother, Mildred Behrens Miller (born in 1918), was a housewife. She grew up on a truck farm near Arlington Heights, Illinois, about thirty miles northwest of downtown Chicago, with nine siblings. She

5. Nelson to Lauck, email, 16 Jan. 2014.
6. Nichols to Lauck, email, 15 Jan. 2014.

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worked in Chicago during World War II for the Army-Navy Commission, which was a liaison for Missouri Synod Lutheran soldiers to help maintain contact between them and people on the home front. My father, Channing E. Miller (born in 1915), was a Missouri Synod Lutheran pastor. He grew up in Saint Louis and graduated from seminary in the spring of 1944. He got married to my mother in June and immediately went out to his first parish in Hunter, Kansas, in the north-central part of the state. I came along nine months later.

How did your father happen to go into the ministry?

He grew up in Saint Louis in a family of two children. His mother was a strong Missouri Synod Lutheran churchgoer, and he and his sister regularly attended church and Sunday School with her. His father, who had an important job as secretary of the Saint Louis school board, seldom went to church and was a Unitarian, a situation that greatly distressed my father. It helped push him to decide at a very young age to be a minister. He spent some time at Washington University in Saint Louis before entering a synodical seminary at Springfield, Illinois, which he graduated from in the spring of 1944, proceeding to his first parish in Hunter, Kansas.

At the various churches where your father served as pastor, was he ever active on any social or political issues?

He was very interested in political issues, but I don't think he was ever active politically. The Missouri Synod generally shunned active involvement in politics. He listened to a number of conservative or right-wing radio preachers like Carl MacIntyre (New Jersey), Billy James Hargis (Tulsa), and *Life Lines* (funded by H. L. Hunt) and sometimes subscribed to their newsletters or magazines. He was a staunch conservative politically, but I never heard him talk or preach politics. On social issues, he certainly was not involved actively in controversies like the current debates over abortion. The places he served were mostly highly rural and didn't have many political or service groups. My father, however, was highly vocal about issues regarding the church and the Missouri Synod and spoke out against what he considered to be

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liberal tendencies in it. This trait, I am sure, made him somewhat controversial in some of the places we lived and may help to explain why we never stayed in a place for more than five years.

Miller is often an English name. Do you know much about your ancestors and how they came to the United States?

I actually know little about them. The name Miller *is* English, but I am, in fact, three-quarters German in ancestry. I'm half English on my father's side. His father was English and his mother was German. The English side arrived in Massachusetts in the 1630s. My mother's parents both came from families that immigrated from Germany to the United States during the late 1800s. She went to a parochial grade school in Arlington Heights and, although being the second-youngest child, she was the first one to graduate from high school, although several of the others did later on. She and her siblings all worked hard as kids in the fields of the family's eighty-acre truck farm.

Where did you grow up and how many siblings did you have?

Besides living between the ages of twelve and fifteen in Rolling Meadows, Illinois (a brand-new, rapidly growing suburb of Chicago), I grew up in six midwestern small towns: Hunter, Kansas; Gordonville, Cuba, and Augusta, Missouri; Osman, Illinois; and finally Monett, Missouri, before heading off to college at the University of Missouri in 1962. In 1966, the year I graduated from college, my father temporarily transferred into the Wisconsin Synod (a more conservative group), taking a parish in Morgan, Minnesota. After five years there, he returned to the Missouri Synod, finishing his ministry back in his home state in the town of Stover in the central Missouri Ozarks.

My father taught me how to read *Dick and Jane* books before I started school, and education was a high priority in our home. Lois (born in 1946) and Mary (born in 1948) became elementary and middle school teachers and Dan (born in 1952) a high school math teacher. Tim (born 1954) followed in his father's footsteps as a pastor, but that involves a lot of teaching, too.

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The Miller family posed for this studio portrait in August 1957, shortly before moving to Rolling Meadows, Illinois. From left are Mary, Tim, Mildred, John, Channing, Dan, and Lois.

Is it safe to say that one of the reasons that you have written so much about the history of midwestern small towns is that you are a product of these small towns and usually lived in a small town growing up?

Yes, I think that's fair to say. I am familiar with small towns and the Midwest, having traveled all over it and living in a substantial part of it, and thus feel comfortable talking about them. I think the subject of small towns is an interesting and important one and has been relatively neglected, so there is both reason and opportunity to go into it. Also, my experience of living in small towns was a generally good one, although I think that my personality would dictate that I'd be happy just about anywhere.

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Where did you attend college?

I attended the University of Missouri-Columbia from 1962 to 1966. It was the state university, our family had no money to send me anywhere else, and I never spent a minute thinking of the possibility of attending any other place. I majored in political science my first two years and then switched to history at the start of my junior year. I also took a lot of English. I was fortunate to be in the university's Honors Program. I also debated and did extemporaneous speaking and a little bit of original oratory all four years in college, just as I had done all through high school. These activities colored my whole educational experience, since I sometimes spent as much time working on debate and extemp as I did on my coursework.

My history adviser at Missouri was Richard Kirkendall, a Merle Curti Ph.D. from the University of Wisconsin.[7] Kirkendall was the recent United States history guy. He had written on Henry Wallace and at Missouri became a Truman scholar. Many of the books on Truman were written by his graduate students who did their dissertations on him. At Missouri, I took Kirkendall's course on United States history from 1929 to 1964, which had about two hundred students in the class. I was aware of the presence of Lewis Atherton in the department but never took any of his classes, and I really had no idea what he taught and had no idea of his 1954 book on small-town history.

Did Atherton's work on the history of small towns influence you in later years?

Yes, in the sense that when I read *Main Street on the Middle Border*[8] many years later, its contents seemed very familiar to me. I thought

7. Merle E. Curti was a social and intellectual historian who served as Frederick Jackson Turner Professor of History at the University of Wisconsin beginning in 1947. A Nebraska native, he had been a student of Turner at Harvard University. Howard R. Lamar, ed., *The New Encyclopedia of the American West* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1998), p. 278.

8. Lewis E. Atherton, *Main Street on the Middle Border* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1954).

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Atherton did an excellent job of describing the general characteristics of midwestern small towns. His heavy reliance upon newspaper research resonated with me. He reinforced some of the tendencies that came to me intuitively.

What was Kirkendall like as a person and professor?

I certainly greatly liked and admired him and considered him to be a great role model. I was fortunate to get him as an advisor. I made the decision to switch to history at the end of my sophomore year, by which time I had only taken one history course. In those days, we students sort of put our professors on a pedestal, admired them, and would never have thought of calling them by their first names or getting familiar with them. They always wore sport coats and ties and generally acted very formally. Teachers like him made the University of Missouri experience an excellent foundation and a real inspiration for someone like me.

What sparked your interest in history?

Around the time I was in the third through fifth grades in a one-room parochial school in Augusta, Missouri, my dad signed me up to receive Landmark books (aimed at a grade-school audience) once a month. Almost all of them were history or biography, with titles like *The Erie Canal*; *Sam Houston*; *The Pony Express*; or *The Transcontinental Railroad*. That got me going on history.

Then I discovered baseball in 1954–1955 between the ages of nine and ten, while still in Augusta. It started with playing the game and beginning to collect baseball cards and reading about the Saint Louis Cardinals in the *Saint Louis Post-Dispatch* and listening to the games on radio broadcasts featuring Harry Caray. By 1955–1956, I was buying two or three baseball magazines a year, which I read cover to cover. When you get interested in baseball, you immediately get involved in studying the history of the game.

We also learned a little bit about debate in eighth grade from our homeroom and history teacher. As a high school freshman, I got heavily into debate and extemp. That meant subscribing to *Time*, *Newsweek*,

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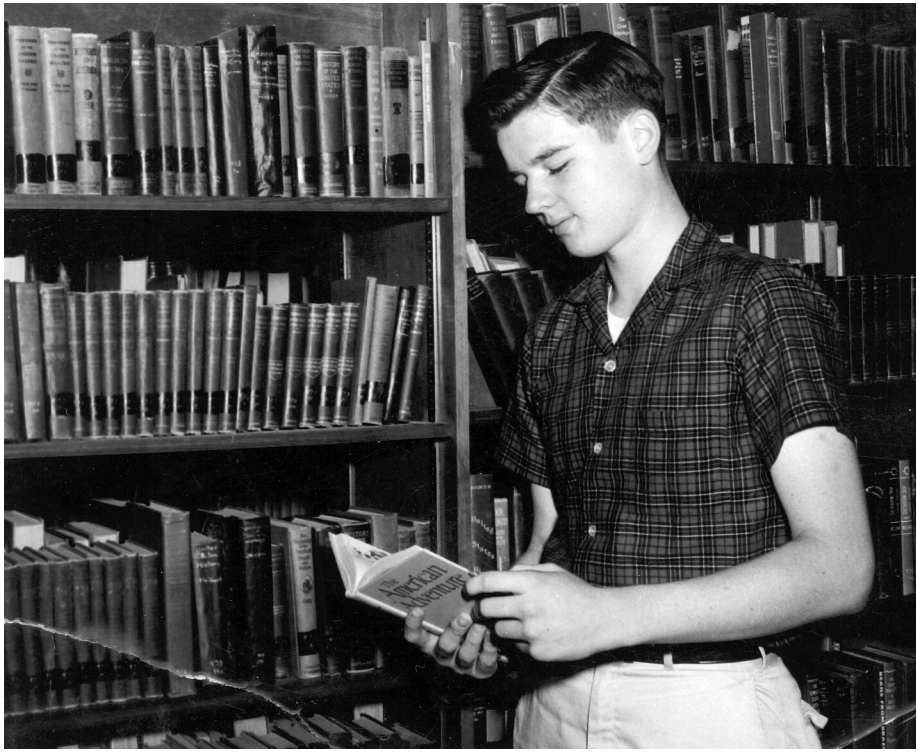
and *U.S. News & World Report* and carrying the magazines around in little suitcases for extemp. The Chicago suburban schools—especially New Trier, which had a national reputation—constituted prime debate territory. I started out, in effect, as a current events and politics guy and slowly worked my way back, very slowly, toward earlier brands of history.

Our five-hour American history survey class at Missouri, taught by James Watts, was a major factor in my deciding to switch majors from political science to history at the end of my sophomore year. By that time, I had concluded that history offered a wider array of subjects to investigate than if I stayed focused on politics and government.



When the Monett High School newspaper did a story on the new student at school in March 1961, it included a photograph of him holding an American history textbook in the school library.

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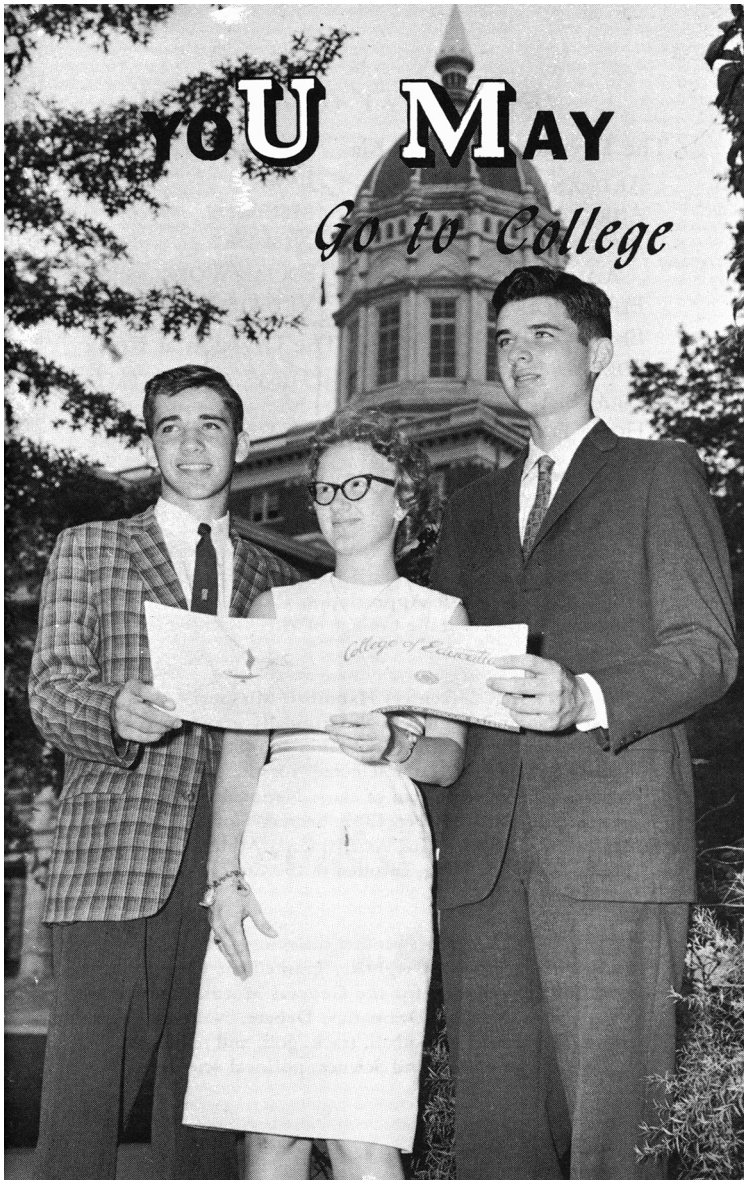

During the summer of 1962, the University of Missouri invited three of its incoming scholarship students to Columbia to pose for publicity materials. Miller is on the right.

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Did you like the University of Missouri?

Missouri was a great school to attend from many angles, including the debate program. Our debate coach for the first two years was Robert Friedman, who later moved to Washington State and was editor of the *Quarterly Journal of Speech*. I was also in intramural athletics, always playing football in the fall, basketball in the winter, and softball in the spring. Once or twice I coached our teams. To show how much athletics and life have changed in the past fifty years, I actually showed up with about sixty other guys in the fall of 1962 as a walk-on prospect for the varsity basketball team at Missouri.

Where did you attend graduate school?

As a senior at Missouri, I applied to Harvard, Yale, and Columbia, where I was rejected, and to Wisconsin, Missouri, and the University of Chicago, where I was accepted. So it came down to a choice of Wisconsin or Chicago. I just had an intuitive sense that Wisconsin would be a more democratic place and that being in a smaller city probably would be a more comfortable environment. At Wisconsin, there were something like ten thousand graduate students in all fields out of a thirty-five thousand total student body, with something like five hundred graduate students in history, many of them just going for a master's degree. But the history department did turn out several dozen Ph.D.s a semester, so it was a big place! I got drafted into the army in the summer of 1968 (I lost my student deferment upon completing the master's degree), two years after arriving at Madison.

How did you meet the woman who became your wife?

I met Kathy Rahdert about the second day I was back on campus in September 1970, after returning from Vietnam in May, and we started dating a few weeks later. We met while attending activities at Luther Memorial Church on University Avenue. She was just new to campus, beginning a master's degree in elementary-school counseling. Her second year in the program, she spent most of her time as an intern in Stoughton, Wisconsin, twenty miles south of Madison, and lived in a

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rented room in a house there. We got married in June 1972 and then got an apartment in a house the following year in Stoughton, as Kathy got a regular job as a counselor there (she had impressed them as an intern). My last year at Wisconsin (1972–1973), I wrote my dissertation and just went in to Madison on a bus once or twice a week.

Who were your major professors at Wisconsin?

When you say major professors at Wisconsin, I never established any kind of relationship with any of them except a very good and close one with Paul Glad, my dissertation advisor. The place was so big and I never took more than one course from any of them except for him. Some of the ones I especially remember and admired were Stanley I. Kutler, Paul K. Conklin, E. David Cronon, Morton Rothstein, Allan G. Bogue, J. Rogers Hollingsworth, William R. Taylor, Reichard H. Sewell, and David S. Lovejoy. My last year at Wisconsin I devoted all of my time to writing the dissertation "Governor Philip F. La Follette, the Wisconsin Progressives, and the New Deal, 1930–1939."[9] After I had already spent the better part of a year and a half doing the basic research for the dissertation, Glad read the chapters as they came off the typewriter and made his comments line by line, word by word. He was meticulous, helpful, encouraging, and did not require any significant changes, rewrites, reconceptualizations, or anything. It came off just like clockwork.

At the first research seminar session in September 1966, Glad quickly got our attention by asking, "Do you all have a topic for your master's thesis?" He suggested that we might want to go down to the State Historical Society, where Frederick Jackson Turner[10] had hung out in the

9. Miller's dissertation eventually became his first book, *Governor Philip La Follette, the Wisconsin Progressives, and the New Deal* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1982).

10. Turner, a native of Wisconsin, graduated from the University of Wisconsin and returned there to teach in 1889 after earning his Ph.D. In 1910, he moved to Harvard University, where he taught until 1924. In his 1893 essay, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," and in subsequent works, he argued that the westward advance of the frontier was critical in shaping American institutions and society. Lamar, ed., *New Encyclopedia of the American West*, p. 1131.

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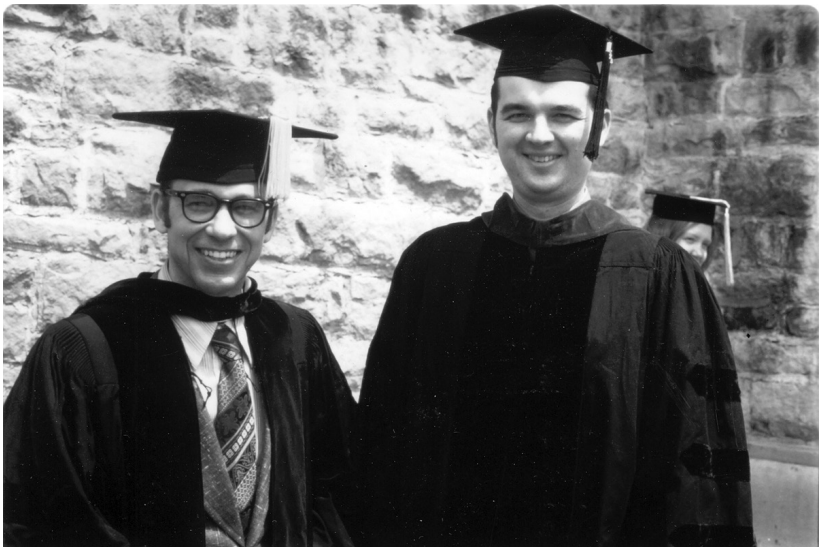

Five years of hard work culminated on graduation day in 1973, when the Ph.D. recipient posed with his major advisor, Professor Paul Glad (left).

old days, and talk to the people there. I remember going down there straight after class and talking to Paul Hass and John Holzheuter. It went something like this:

Paul Hass: "Are you interested in political history?"

Me: "Yes, I was a poly sci major for two years as an undergraduate."

Paul Hass: "How about the 1930s?"

Me: "That's my favorite decade. I'm real interested in FDR and the New Deal, etc."

Paul Hass: "There are two Wisconsin elections that would be good topics, and nobody's written about them: 1932 and 1938."

Me: "I'll look into them."

That was about it. It didn't take long to pick 1932, and that pretty much set me on my research course for the next several years.

You focused a great deal on actual politics during your years of graduate studies. Do you think the history profession has made a mistake by turning away from the study of formal politics in recent years?

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Yes. I think political history's reduced influence is mainly just neglect as most students and researchers get fascinated with and take up other topics. To think that political institutions do not matter, however, is a mistake. I'm not too worried about it, however, because political history seems to be making a comeback, and if "professional" historians fail to research and write it, journalists, political scientists, and popular authors will do the job. They often do the best job of it anyway.

Do you have any political heroes?

First of all, I've always called myself a "two-handed historian," looking for the contributions and assets of any historical figure, as well as his/her flaws, weaknesses, and failures. That said, some who would stand out on my list would be FDR, Old Bob La Follette, George McGovern, Paul Simon, Pat Moynihan, and Bill Moyers.

What did you think of the student activists and demonstrators in Madison when you were in graduate school?

I actually did not know very many of them. Madison was a big enough place, and I was out for two years in the army. I moved largely back and forth between Witte Hall (the graduate student dormitory), the State Historical Society library, the university library, the student union, and the basketball court, so all the other stuff that was happening on campus and around it was pretty much peripheral, and I didn't observe a lot of the things that were going on: demonstrations, rallies, speeches, tear gas, National Guard soldiers, hundreds of white crosses planted on Bascom Hill. I did go down with a busload or two of Wisconsin students in early December 1967, a couple of days after Eugene McCarthy announced for the presidency, and we heard him give a speech at the Blackstone Hotel in Chicago. Allard Lowenstein warmed up the crowd and had the audience in the palm of his hand. Then McCarthy walked out from behind a curtain in the back of the room. The crowd hushed as he walked to the podium, and he proceeded to give a rather dry, academic talk on Vietnam and other matters that certainly calmed the crowd down (and disappointed many) after Lowenstein's spectacular performance. Later, on the weekend before the Nebraska

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presidential primary in 1968, I signed up to go along with two busloads of Wisconsin students to campaign for McCarthy in Omaha. Some of us saw Bobby Kennedy give such a rousing speech at a nearby baseball park that we half wished we were campaigning for him instead of McCarthy.

What was your first teaching experience?

I had a National Defense Education Act Fellowship at Wisconsin for three years, and when that ran out, the department asked if I wanted a Ford Foundation Fellowship for the fourth year. Having these fellowships meant that I never had to be a teaching assistant, that is, lead any discussion sections or do any teaching. I did get teaching experience in Vietnam while serving as a court reporter in the United States Army. I found out about the University of Maryland Overseas program and taught three courses at my base at Long Binh, Vietnam. They were United States history from 1890 to 1920, United States history from 1920 to the present, and a basic survey of post-Civil War United States history. The classes lasted eight weeks and met twice a week for two hours each. I surveyed the first class I taught and found that I was the lowest-ranking guy in the room, having just been promoted to private first-class and still relatively new in the country. One of the students was a lieutenant colonel who took one of the other courses I taught later. So I did have some idea of what the classroom experience would be like before I got my first job at the University of Tulsa in the fall of 1973.

How and when were you hired to teach history at South Dakota State University?

During the summer of 1974, after a year of being a sabbatical replacement at the University of Tulsa, an opening came up in the SDSU history department when Charles Sewrey was forced to take a year's leave of absence due to health problems. I obtained that job on the basis of a ten-minute phone call with department head Rodney Bell. That was a continuing one-year job for two or three years until it became apparent that Professor Sewrey would be unable to return, and the administration put me on the tenure track. I guess you could say I came to SDSU

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because I needed and wanted a job; the history job market imploded right about the time I got out of graduate school; and I and, significantly, my wife were mobile and ready and willing to pack all our stuff into a U-Haul trailer and move to Brookings in several days' time. We sort of assumed that this post would be a short-term proposition until something "better" showed up, but after several years, especially after our daughter Ann arrived in October 1976, we looked around and decided we liked the town, liked my colleagues, liked the institution—despite its heavy teaching load and strained resources—and settled in.

Did your career as a professor inspire your kids to follow in your path, or did they possibly take after their mother?

A little bit of both. Our daughter, Ann, must have thought college teaching was pretty attractive. She became a cell biologist and is currently in her second year of teaching and research as an assistant professor at the University of Michigan. Tom, who is two years younger than she, is more the practical-minded, business type. Although he majored in electrical engineering as a student at Rice University, he's a poster boy for liberal arts, having minored in religious studies, which involved large amounts of heavy reading, class discussions, and paper writing. He tells people that it was this activity primarily that prepared him to become the businessman that he is, currently working for British Petroleum in downtown Chicago.

Who was Charles Sewrey?

Charles Sewrey came to SDSU (then South Dakota State College) in 1941 with a Ph.D. from the University of Minnesota. Among the courses he taught were recent American history, American economic history, methods and philosophy of history, and American constitutional history. He was considered brilliant and well-read, as well as something of a character. Many anecdotes circulate about him, such as how he would keep flipping a pen in his hand while lecturing. He apparently could usually be counted upon to make some comment in faculty meetings. He wrote the seventy-fifth anniversary history of SDSC when that celebration occurred. When he suffered a stroke and had some kind of

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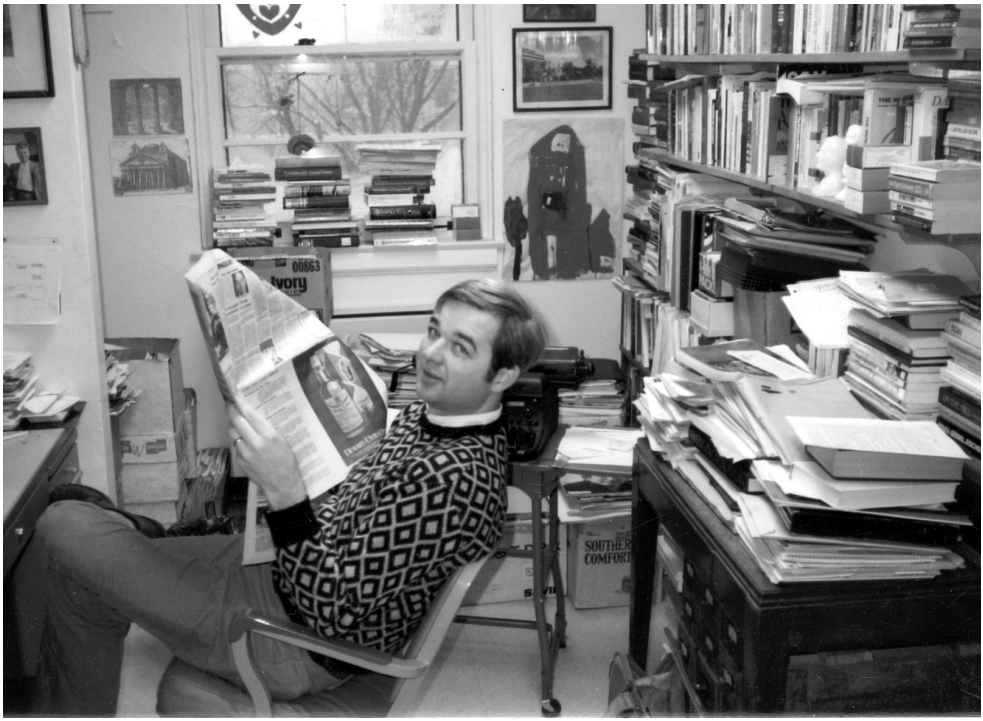
breakdown in the summer of 1974, the administration decided to hire a one-year replacement for him quickly, and I got the job. He died, too young, several years later. A Sewrey Colloquium is now held every spring at SDSU in his honor.

Who was Vivian Volstorff?

Vivian Volstorff was born in 1907, grew up in Elgin, Illinois, earned a Ph.D. from Northwestern University, and came to South Dakota State College in 1932 at the age of twenty-five. She was hired to be dean of women and did some history teaching on the side. She became famous for her "cozies" (tea-times with women students), May Day festivities, and dances (she would dance demurely with the male students).



Personal computers had not yet arrived on the scene when Miller was photographed in his office at 326 Scobey Hall around 1980.

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Her general effort to upgrade the social life of the students was vigorous and far-reaching. Her course on international relations drew in large numbers of students. Volstorff would also lecture on current events and politics to Kiwanis clubs and other groups. She and Sewrey became major "institutions" on campus. She remained unmarried and lived in a house on Seventh Street between Thirteenth and Fourteenth avenues with her sister Olive. When we moved to Brookings in 1974, she was driving a turquoise Thunderbird car. She retired in 1973 and spent many years writing her autobiography, which is very interesting.[11]

Who was Donald Dean Parker?

Parker taught history at SDSU for a number of years. He did a huge amount of local history, often publishing in anniversary editions of local newspapers and self-publishing several dozen county histories, which were mostly reprints of previously published newspaper articles. He wrote a book around 1941 called *Doing Local History*, which, I understand, was the primary manual in the United States for going about local history for a decade or two.

What classes did you teach at SDSU?

Our basic course load was twelve hours a semester. Almost always, I taught two sections of the United States history survey since 1877 plus two upper-class courses. My specialty was twentieth-century American history, so I taught United States history since 1941 on a regular basis and also American economic history, methods and philosophy of history, and South Dakota history (beginning in the 1980s). Early on, I taught American constitutional history and American cultural history several times, and, over the long haul, I sometimes taught a United States history between 1918 and 1941 course and some world history and the first part of the survey.

11. Volstorff, *The Winds of Change: An Autobiography of South Dakota State University's Last Dean of Women* (Brookings: South Dakota State University Alumni Association, 2000).

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Did you embrace any particular school of historical thought?

I don't think any particular ideological stance or line of thinking of an individual professor had any identifiable influence on me at all, aside from their modeling of disinterested inquiry, diligent research, and dedication to scholarship. I was interested in learning about "progressive" and "consensus" and "New Left" historians as objects of historical study, but it did not occur to me to try to identify with any of them. Maybe I was idealistic, and maybe I am still naive, but I took great inspiration from virtually all of my professors, who, I thought, were doing their best to study the "facts," read as much as they could, immerse themselves in the archives and documents, and come up with as all-encompassing, fair, balanced, and "objective" interpretation as they could.

Historians I admire include Richard Hofstadter, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., Daniel J. Boorstin, and Robert Wiebe. C. Wright Mills has also been a fascination with me. The things I like about people like Mills, Wiebe, Christopher Lasch, Clifford Geertz, and others is that they attempt to conceptualize the political-social-economic-cultural order and see how it all fits together, how individuals work within the broader social matrix, and how things change over time. If historians come to their subject in this fashion, full of questions and hypotheses and without predictable party lines based on ideological preconceptions and ready-made answers, they might just say something interesting, relevant, useful, and, most important, truthful.

I find the notions of "postmodernists," "deconstructionists," and truth-deniers of all types interesting but, at best, half-truthful. We always need to be modest in our conclusions and willing to modify them when the facts warrant, but to say there are no facts or that more-or-less probable, justifiable answers and conclusions are impossible to attain or worthless is to lead to the abyss. We need to depoliticize our research and teachings. Yet, we must always acknowledge that we do come to our subjects with attitudes, preconceptions, and biases, some more rational and justifiable than others.

Without going any further into possible "schools" of thought or historical tendencies that I might have or still do identify with or indi-

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Undergraduate student Jon Lauck (left) coordinated the visit of Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., to South Dakota State University in 1991. Miller (right) introduced the well-known scholar to the audience assembled to hear his talk.

viduals I consider gurus or mentors, I would like to mention a general approach to knowledge that must have developed around my sophomore year at Missouri. Someone once famously wrote that he had been writing prose all of his life. In retrospect, I might say that in a sophomore humanities class, one of those in the honors sequence of four classes at Missouri, I discovered that I had been an "epistemologist" all of my then-young life. The professor wrote the word "epistemology" on the board, and, as I have often said, it changed my life. Considering how we know what we think that we know and considering the various ways of validating or interpreting knowledge is indeed integral to the life of a historian, or any other sentient being.

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Your essay for *South Dakota Review*[12] and your attention to the information explosion and how it has been exacerbated by the mass electronic media is closely linked to the deterioration of "place" and the decline of local community culture. Can the small-town culture and local customs you have studied survive in an age of instantaneous electronic communication?

That's a sixty-four-dollar question. As you imply, many forces are operating to break down those local ties, traditions, and habits, and the electronic media are among the most formidable. This will be something to watch as time goes on, and I suppose there will always be a tension between the impulse to get enveloped in the media-oriented popular culture and communications network, on the one hand, and the face-to-face interactions that make up neighborhood and local community, on the other. As long as there are human beings who inhabit bodies and live in proximity to each other and enjoy or feel it necessary or incumbent upon them to deal personally with other human beings, there will always be the impulse to establish associations, gatherings, organizations, and other groups. Ray Oldenberg has a good name for it in his book, *The Great Good Place*.[13] Robert D. Putnam laments its decline in *Bowling Alone* and seeks to rectify the situation.[14] There are always signs out that people want and need community. The popularity of television shows like *Friends* and *Seinfeld* and any number of other ones (I don't watch TV very much) are further indications of the desire. Even *The Office* (which I do like to watch) is an example of community within the work environment. I think some of the drive by people to spend huge amounts of time on Twitter, Facebook, and the Web will wear off a little after their newness disappears. But, yes, it is a challenge and a problem. Ferdinand Tönnies sort of cast the dilemma

12. Miller, "Epistemology in Flux: Truth and Its Imitators in an Information Age," *South Dakota Review* 24 (Autumn 1986): 7–20.

13. Oldenberg, *The Great Good Place: Cafes, Coffee Shops, Community Centers, Beauty Parlors, General Stores, Bars, Hangouts, and How They Get You through the Day* (New York: Paragon House, 1989).

14. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).

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back over a hundred years ago in talking about the shift from *gemeinschaft* to *gesellschaft*.[15]

How has your eclecticism in terms of references and social theory been applied to your various works of history?

That's a hard one, but I'll try to give a couple of examples. The Highway 14 book tries to suggest a variety of kinds of sources and approaches to local history: focusing on rituals and symbols like Memorial Day (Elkton); written materials on local history—pageants, county history books, newspaper columns (Brookings); biography and economic analysis of community (Arlington); celebrity and children's novels (De Smet); painting (Manchester); local historians (Miller); photographs (Midland); tourist traps (Wall); Saturday nights (Harrold). The idea of "place" has a lot of resonance. I did an article on the symbolic importance of place with regard to the SDSU campanile.[16] An article on "place and community" in Laura Ingalls Wilder's town of De Smet[17] was what got me going on what ultimately became three books about Wilder. My new book, *Small-Town Dreams*, is about the lingering impact of place on men who came out of the small towns of the Midwest. My interest in baseball shows up briefly in my newest book on Laura Ingalls Wilder as well as in a chapter about Bob Feller in *Small-Town Dreams*. Politics shows up in a variety of places: the Phil La Follette book, two edited volumes on the political culture of South Dakota, chapters on McKinley and Bryan and on Ronald Reagan in *Small-Town Dreams*, and elsewhere.

How did you decide to write your book on Highway 14?

It wasn't a logical decision in that I went through a process, one, two, three. Rather, I knew that I wanted to do a study of small-town life and

15. Tönnies, *Community & Society*, trans. and ed. Charles P. Loomis (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1957).

16. Miller, "The South Dakota State University Campanile: Building a Sense of Place," *South Dakota History* 23 (Winter 1993): 321–45.

17. Miller, "Place and Community in the 'Little Town on the Prairie': De Smet in 1883," *South Dakota History* 16 (Winter 1986): 351–72.

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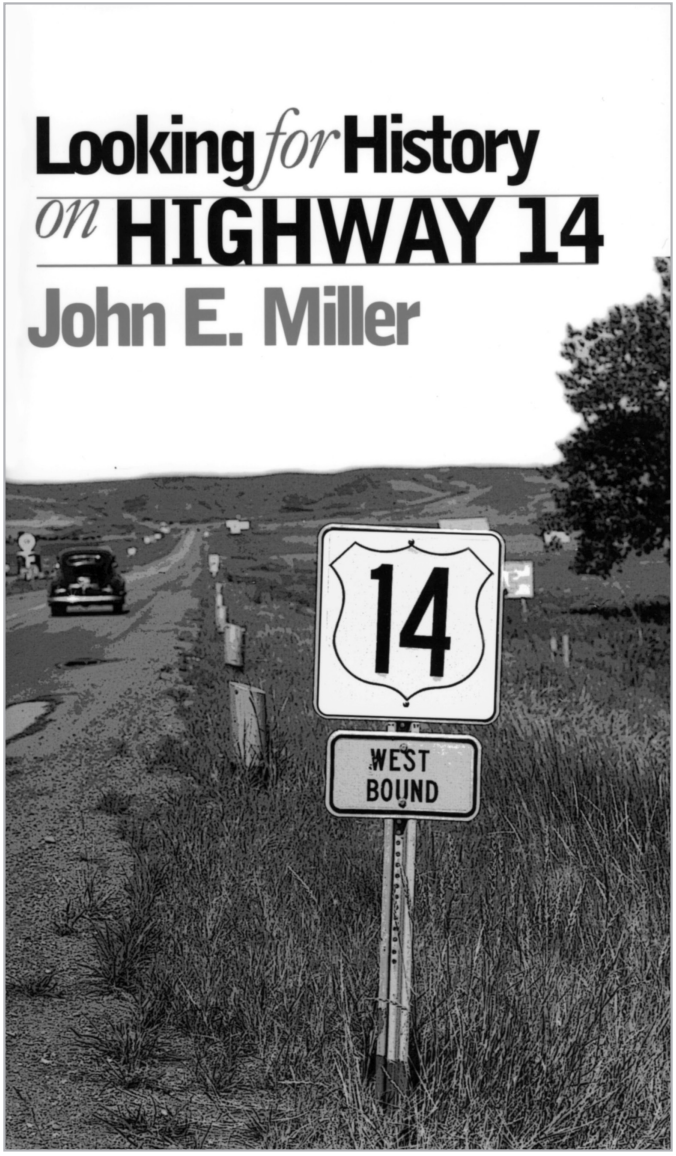

The South Dakota State Historical Society Press released a new edition of Miller's *Looking for History on Highway 14* in 2001.

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wanted to work on a number of towns, rather than a single town, in order to make some comparisons or look for commonalities. It could have been a group in a geographical area, like a county, or it could have been a sampling from a larger area, but I thought a string of towns along a highway would be interesting and make for some creative narrative possibilities, not to mention providing a variety of sizes and functions. I think as soon as that thought emerged, Highway 14 (which, after all, I lived on) presented itself as the most logical one to do in South Dakota. It has the capital, the state university, the state fair, the "most historic spot in South Dakota" (Fort Pierre), Wall Drug, Laura Ingalls Wilder, Harvey Dunn, Theodore Schultz (born, at least, in Arlington). It just seemed like a no-brainer.

When did you start teaching South Dakota history?

The early 1980s. I don't think South Dakota history got taught, at least in recent years, until we obtained a half-time position that we shared with geography sometime in the 1970s. Donald Berg had it for a while, and so did John Rorabacher. For two and a half years, Robert Ostergren, who was a Minnesota Ph.D. in geography, taught South Dakota history before he took a position in the geography department at the University of Wisconsin. So I wound up teaching it for fifteen or twenty years and that coincided with my growing interest in small-town history. I soon began to say that South Dakota history is, to a large degree, the history of its small towns and rural hinterlands.

How did your connection to South Dakota history influence your subsequent work?

After getting my book about Phil La Follette published in 1982, I was trying to decide whether to go the small-town route or the "social epistemology" route as a research project. I eventually decided on working on small towns for the time being, perhaps mainly because it seemed a little more practical. I'm a small-town boy from the Midwest, plus one Chicago suburb from 1957 to 1961, and I found the idea of place, community, suburban sprawl, an ideal way of living, and, indeed, small towns, fascinating. One factor in its favor was that, while city life got

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a large amount of attention with a whole new field of urban history devoted to it, small towns, partly because they were in the minority and rapidly shrinking, garnered little scholarly attention, at least after you got past colonial America. Daniel Boorstin, in his *The Americans: The National Experience,* recognized the centrality of small towns in nineteenth-century America.[18] And, of course, living in Brookings, the fifth-largest town in South Dakota, I was close to the subject.

Then I connected with Dennis Norlin in the philosophy and religion department, who was the point man for a humanities grant that five of us in arts and sciences worked on in 1981 and 1982. We each chose three towns to work with "to bring the humanities to the people." I picked Lake Preston, De Smet, and Bruce. The first two got chapters in the Highway 14 book, and Bruce was chosen because people there were looking for someone to help them write their centennial history book in 1983.

My idea of what the Highway 14 book would be about changed drastically after I traveled the route during my sabbatical year of 1985–1986, mainly because I realized that I'd never finish the book I thought I was working on if I didn't change the basic plan. I went back during the summers of 1987 and 1989 and did some more interviews and finally, in 1993, the book came out with Iowa State University Press as *Looking for History on Highway 14*. In 2001, the South Dakota State Historical Society Press published a new edition with an updated introduction. As I was at pains, then and now, to say, it was not a history of the towns along the highway. Rather, it was a handbook about how students and researchers could think about and do local history with a variety of approaches and using a variety of sources by focusing upon a particular set of towns which just happened conveniently to belong together along the string of a highway—in this case, Highway 14 in South Dakota.

Of course, the focus in the De Smet chapter was upon Laura Ingalls Wilder, and by 1986 I had published the article on place and community in Laura Ingalls Wilder's De Smet. More research led to my suggestion

18. Boorstin, *The Americans: The National Experience* (New York: Random House, 1965).

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to the University Press of Kansas that I write five or six more chapters on Wilder and call it a book. They said they were interested, but made no guarantees until they saw the rest of the manuscript. Thus, one year after my Highway 14 book came out, we got *Laura Ingalls Wilder's Little Town: Where History and Literature Meet*. That book, in turn, led to an invitation from the University of Missouri Press to do a biography of Wilder for their Missouri Biography Series. So, four years later, we got *Becoming Laura Ingalls Wilder: The Woman behind the Legend*, and I thought I was done with Wilder.

Come 1999, and it's time for my third sabbatical, and as I drop my daughter off at Yale for graduate school, I stay for a week at the Beinecke Library to work on Sinclair Lewis and then spend the next week at the Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown working on Mickey Mantle and Bob Feller. Fifteen years later, that book finally came out as *Small-Town Dreams: Stories of Midwestern Boys Who Shaped America*. A major reason why I quit teaching in 2003 was that I had begun to realize that I'd never finish that book at the rate I was going.

But in the meantime, by 2007, I'd published four more articles on Laura Ingalls Wilder and also had two or three unpublished conference papers about her, so I got to thinking that with another chapter or two I might have another book in the making. The one-hundredth anniversary of the Organization of American Historians was going to be celebrated in 2007 at the organization's annual convention in Minneapolis, so I put together a book proposal and pitched it there to Gary Kass of the University of Missouri Press, who immediately expressed considerable enthusiasm for the idea that eventually became *Laura Ingalls Wilder and Rose Wilder Lane: Authorship, Place, Time, and Culture*.

Meanwhile, I began working with Jon Lauck and Don Simmons on two edited volumes about South Dakota political culture.[19] My next

19. Jon K. Lauck, John E. Miller, and Donald C. Simmons, Jr., eds., *The Plains Political Tradition: Essays on South Dakota Political Culture* (Pierre: South Dakota State Historical Society Press, 2011), and *The Plains Political Tradition: Essays on South Dakota Political Culture, Volume 2* (Pierre: South Dakota Historical Society Press, 2014). These books were prefaced by Jon Lauck, John E. Miller, and Edward Hogan, "Historical Musings: The Contours of South Dakota Political Culture," *South Dakota History* 34 (Summer 2004): 157–78.

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major project is going to be a political biography of George McGovern, for which the knowledge derived while working on these two edited volumes will be of great assistance. Other book projects on my dream "to do" list include a study of a 1924 basketball tournament, Farm Security Administration photographers in South Dakota, turning points in South Dakota history, and a half dozen more—maybe even something on "social epistemology."

Do you think you were drawn to the story of Laura Ingalls Wilder primarily because she is an exemplar and symbol of the small town and rural midwestern culture that you have long studied and know so well?

I got started on this topic by doing a single conference paper cooked up in a discussion with two professors from other colleges. We all were interested in the subject of community, and I proposed to start from a depiction of a bird's-eye view of De Smet that I had become aware of and to write a little piece about community in De Smet in 1883, the year the bird's-eye drawing was done. At that time, I had no notion it would go any further than that. The project grew incrementally and serendipitously over time. It is true, however, that I saw the Wilder books as a way to get some insight into the life and culture of small towns and the Midwest, but I'm not sure I was thinking very consciously and deeply about all that at the time.

Why do you think some writers and scholars have treated small towns with derision?

I suppose that would take a book to answer. Books, after all, have been written about Americans' thoughts about cities and suburbs, and much of that thought is critical and negative, too. While there is plenty of derision, denigration, and ignoring, I am not sure it exceeds the affection and nostalgia that are expressed for small towns. The fact is, from Sinclair Lewis to Garrison Keillor, writers have been ambivalent about small towns. To the extent that people ignore them or deride them, I think some of the factors include: a notion of historical progress and a sense that the time of the small town has passed; people's basic unfamiliarity with them because they're city people and don't know all that

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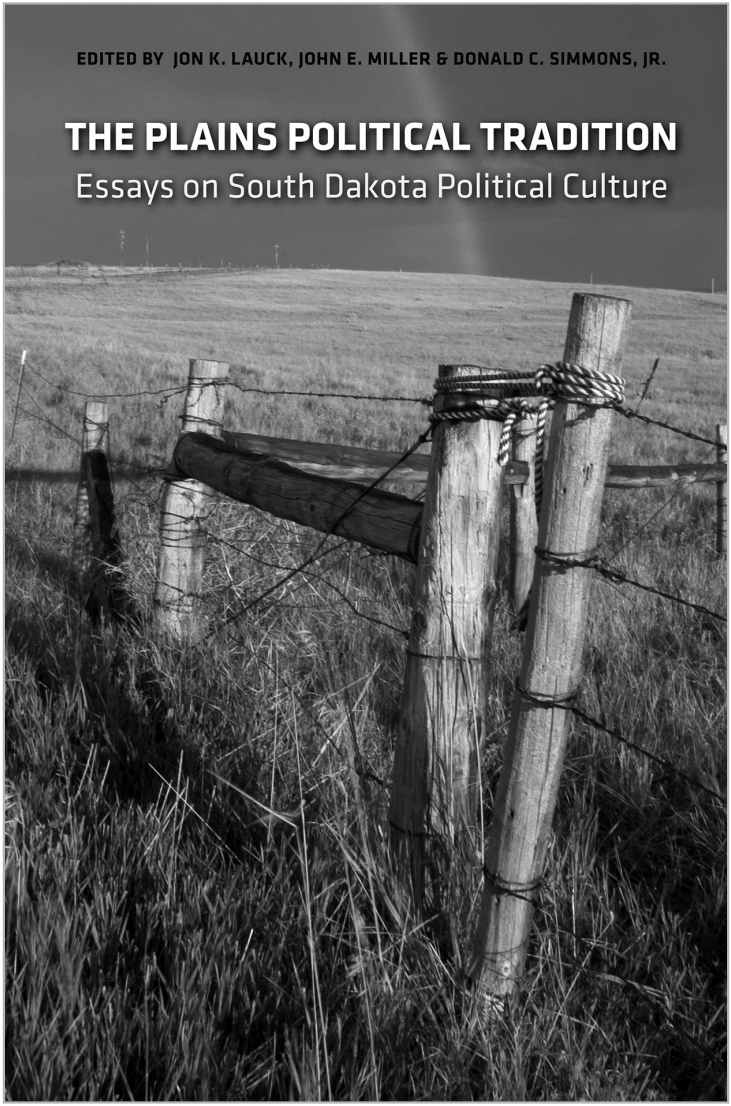

The Plains Political Tradition, published by the South Dakota State Historical Society Press in 2011, was the first of two volumes on South Dakota's political culture edited by Miller, Jon Lauck, and Donald C. Simmons, Jr.

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much about small towns; the notion that cities are where economic life happens, power is concentrated, and creativity is expressed; an inability to empathize with the unknown and the unfamiliar; and, perhaps, a need to find a scapegoat or something to kick around. To some degree, at least, their observations are based on fact or personal experience. H. L. Mencken may have been outrageously unfair and one-sided in his comments on the "booboosie" and "hicks from the sticks," but some of his accusations, after all, were relatively accurate. There is good and evil, progress and sterility, in every kind of place from the smallest town to the largest city.

Do you think the divided opinion on the value of small towns can be traced, in part, to the divided experiences of those who have written about small towns? For instance, do those who were not part of the community or the "in" crowd in a small town view them negatively, while those who were part of the community, participated in its affairs, and had good friends and neighbors view small towns favorably?

That's a very good and provocative question which I don't have a very good answer for. I think all writers, to some extent at least, have to be able to separate themselves out from the group or subject they are writing about. Or, if the writer is totally immersed in the subject and quite comfortable with it, at least he or she has to be able to step back a little and provide *some* kind of objective or semi-objective comment on it. Alienation *does* seem to provide some advantage in stimulating interesting writing, but then, again, it helps to be an "insider" in order to have access to what is going on. Whether one is an insider or outsider and whether one has a generally favorable or unfavorable view toward something, I think it is always necessary to establish *some* distance between the observer and the subject.

Are you concerned about the erosion of the nation's small towns and its impact on American culture and politics?

Yes. It's bad for the towns themselves, but it's also bad that we're becoming increasingly a more homogeneous culture of suburbs, metro

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areas, interstate highways, malls, Walmarts, and McDonald's. We're losing cultural variety just like the earth is losing plant and animal species. As distorted as Turner's "safety valve" thesis may have been, having different kinds of places like small towns for people to be able to move to, if necessary, provides a potential or mythical safety valve at least for the residents of the "mean streets" of pressure-packed, dangerous, fast-moving, coercive (as well as exciting, creative, opportunity-laden, expansive) suburbs and cities. Small towns historically have been a big part of our society and culture, and it will be a definite loss if most of them disappear.

You mentioned "the lingering impact of place" on the small-town boys that you have studied. What is the social impact on our country when people are no longer "from" an identifiable "place" and when people have no sense of rootedness?

Americans, including the American Indian nations who were here for millennia before the first Europeans arrived, have been a highly mobile people from the earliest times. But for most of those centuries, up to and beyond the Civil War, being from an identifiable place and having a sense of rootedness remained highly significant aspects of most people's personal identities. As that became less true, beginning during the late 1800s and accelerating in recent years, it raises the serious question of the social impact on American culture when people are no longer from an identifiable place and when they have lost their sense of rootedness.

Late nineteenth-century German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies perceived a distinct shift occurring between a situation of *gemeinschaft*, where personal interaction tended to be face-to-face and communities remained relatively small, cohesive, and homogeneous, and one of *gesellschaft*, where relationships were more fluid and impersonal, and communities grew larger, looser, and more heterogeneous. Americans have not been alone in lamenting "the world we have lost" in the process, but by our actions we have also demonstrated a readiness to jettison established and traditional ways when we anticipate that doing so will bring greater freedom, prosperity, and satisfaction. We have been

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and remain ambivalent about the communities we grow up in and are uncertain about what an ideal society would look like. Mostly, we prefer to "have our cake and eat it too"—retain a sense of security, intimacy, mutual aid, and close relationships while at the same time reaching for personal autonomy, choice, freedom, and innovation.

Each way of being carries with it costs and benefits, and we would prefer just to enjoy the advantages of the alternative we choose rather than suffer the negative consequences associated with it. It seems clear, however, that when society remained predominantly rural in orientation, when cities were fewer and relatively smaller in size, and when towns continued to be the central nodes in American culture, life was lived at a slower pace, relationships tended to be deeper and more intimate, and people felt more of a sense of responsibility for the well-being and thriving of their neighbors. Small-town residents could be as mean, duplicitous, vengeful, and narrow-minded as were their compatriots in city settings, but life was lived on a more human scale, people were forced to pay closer attention to each other, and there was a greater tendency to become involved in collective action than would be the case later on.

One's personal identity tended to be closely related to the place one was from—to the land, the area, the town, the community, the state, or region one was born in or resided in. Henry Ford, for example, was closely linked to Dearborn and Detroit, William McKinley to Canton, Ohio, and Lawrence Welk to North Dakota. Ballplayers today are unlikely to be identified by place as were the "Commerce Comet," the "Iowa Farm Boy," and the "Indiana Rubberman." Iowa influenced Grant Wood; Missouri, Thomas Hart Benton, and Kansas, John Stuart Curry in ways that their home states seldom do with current-day artists.

When one grows up today in a suburb of Chicago, Houston, or Los Angeles, he or she is less likely than Meredith Willson to write a musical play about his old hometown of Mason City, or, like James Whitcomb Riley, to compose hundreds of poems about his native state of Indiana, or, like Sinclair Lewis, to write a novel inspired by his hometown of Sauk Centre. Jay Leno and David Letterman do not make constant references to the places they grew up in, although the latter does call his mother in Indianapolis from time to time.

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No two individuals respond to their childhoods and upbringings in exactly the same way, and people's sense of identity with or revulsion from their places of origin varies considerably, too. Yet, any serious investigation of people's lives will reveal that a person's sense of place or lack of it is likely as meaningful in shaping his or her thoughts, actions, and sense of self as are many of the variables that tend to get more attention from social investigators, such as race, class, gender, age, social status, religion, occupation, and the like. Partly, this is a result of the greater ease with which we are able to quantify, code, and analyze these other factors. Partly, however, it derives from our too-easy overlooking of the profound impact and meaning that a sense of place (or lack thereof) has upon our lives.

As continuing trends of urbanization, depopulation of small towns and the rural countryside, and developments in technology and communication have made a sense of place less tangible and more amorphous, people have tended to pay less attention to it. Especially those who seem addicted to their computer screens, cell phones, iPods, and television sets find themselves wrapped up in a whole new environment that is in many respects placeless. If this situation seems no less real to them than the physical places that previously comprised their surroundings, these virtual worlds of sight and sound pose severe challenges—not to mention dangers—for the minds and souls of those partaking of them.

What does a sense of placelessness, a "geography of nowhere," video games, virtual reality, and the whole panoply of postmodern culture do to our sense of self, our personal identity, and our view of reality? How does it affect our sense of obligation and responsibility to others? What becomes of our notion of community and our personal roles in it? Can we make the neighborhoods we inhabit as good or better than the small towns or rural neighborhoods that once were the dwelling places of most of the population? Can we keep our feet on the ground, our eyes on the ball, and our noses to the grindstone when reality programs seem real, video games take up huge chunks of our time, and every street, suburb, and shopping center offers up the same sights, sounds, shopping experiences, and anonymity? How can we retain and

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inspire in others a sense of mutual obligation to and neighborliness toward the people we live around?

Returning place as a category for analysis to the centrality it deserves in our lives is a crucial first step for recovering a sensible and productive ability to understand and relate to the world around us. In addition to bolstering a sense of place in our lives, giving the Midwest credit where credit is due will go a long way toward righting the regional imbalance that has distorted our thinking about American culture and history for too long. Finally, by acknowledging that all of us respond to the environment and places that surround us in our own unique and highly variable ways, we will restore our understanding of the relative autonomy that we possess as individuals surrounded by the wide variety of influences, constraints, and imperatives that shape our everyday lives. We are not ultimately determined in our behavior and thinking by our race, class, gender, status, occupation, or religion—nor by the place we come from or currently reside in—even if these factors may incline us more or less in certain directions. The study of these small-town boys from the Midwest should convince us that as much as place matters in our lives, we are always able to transcend it and that our understanding of its importance in our lives can enrich and improve them.

How and when did you decide to write your new book on small-town boys from the Midwest and how did you decide who to include?

A short answer to that question is that the idea percolated for a number of years in my mind, and I began to take some tentative steps toward researching some of the individuals on my list during the early 1990s. I'll just say that at one time I made a list of possibilities, and it added up to thirty-five names. In the end, I cut it down to twenty-two, having actually written chapters on Mickey Mantle, Dwight Eisenhower, Harry Truman, Charles Lindbergh, and James Whitcomb Riley and later cutting them from the final manuscript. Other individuals I either did some research on or originally had on the list and later removed included William Allen White, Edgar Lee Masters, Sherwood Anderson, and George McGovern. With regard to inclusion and exclu-

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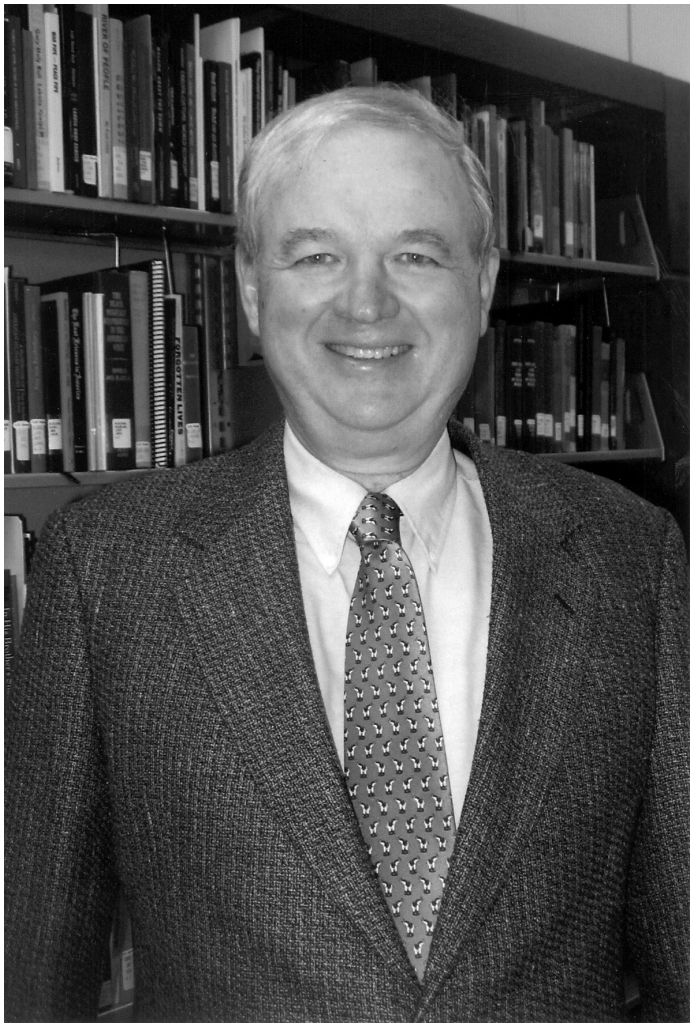

Miller is pictured here in 2013 amongst the stacks of the Hilton M. Briggs Library at South Dakota State University.

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sion, I had some very simple guidelines: we needed at least one person from each of the twelve states in the region, a smattering of occupations, and a somewhat even arrangement across time spans from the late 1800s to the late 1900s. They had to have interesting stories to tell. They all came from farms or from towns of less than twenty-five thousand population, and, to a considerable degree, had to have been substantially influenced by their local/regional origins in their thinking and behavior (which meant that this study was not scientific, using control groups and blind samples).

Do you think the writing of small-town history is declining in part because there aren't as many people growing up in small towns and on farms and therefore there aren't as many people entering the historical profession with a ready-made interest in the topic?

That's probably true. I think it would be a lot easier for a small-town person to write about the city, because he or she probably moved to the city and thus had a bifocal take on it. Maybe some city kids move to small towns and would have a different take on small towns, but they might be more likely to find them hard to fathom and decipher. It does seem true that the historical profession would do well to spend a little more time thinking about its small-town heritage, since for most of our history that's where the people lived (or on the land itself).

Which historians or other scholars do you think have written persuasively about the history of the American small town?

I'll list just a few: Lewis E. Atherton, *Main Street on the Middle Border*; Page Smith, *As a City upon a Hill*; John C. Hudson, *Plains Country Towns*; Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Americans: The National Experience*; Thorstein Veblen, "The Country Town"; Richard R. Lingeman, *Small Town America*; David J. Russo, *American Towns*; Richard O. Davies, *Main Street Blues*; Don H. Doyle, *The Social Order of a Frontier Community*; John Mack Faragher, *Sugar Creek*; Richard V. Francaviglia, *Main Street Revisited*; R. Alton Lee, *T-town on the Plains*.

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Who do you consider the most significant historians of South Dakota?

Doane Robinson, Lynwood E. Oyos, Herbert S. Schell, Arthur R. Huseboe, Herbert T. Hoover, R. Alton Lee, Gary D. Olson, Gilbert C. Fite, David A. Wolff, Richmond L. Clow, Paula M. Nelson, Joseph H. Cash, Howard R. Lamar, John E. Miller, Jon K. Lauck, and Nancy Tystad Koupal.

What do you think of Herbert Schell's *History of South Dakota* and how did you come to update the most recent edition?

It may seem a little dry to some readers, but I think Schell does a good job of carving up South Dakota history and providing a balanced narrative line. I have heard the author criticized for leaving out social history, but, if true, he does provide a good skeletal framework for understanding the development of the area, in my opinion. The book is readable. It serves as a textbook. In lieu of an entirely new narrative history of the state, which someone is welcome to do, I worked with the South Dakota State Historical Society Press to update the book by adding chapters that treat the state's history since the time it was originally published in 1961.

Is the production of South Dakota history limited by state resources?

Definitely. Partly, it is a result of low population, but much of it is voluntary, deriving from a political culture that emphasizes low taxes and low spending, which puts South Dakota at a disadvantage when compared to almost every other state.

I agree entirely with Gilbert Fite, who said that offering a Ph.D. in history in the state would not make sense. We do have a master's program at the University of South Dakota, and that has generated some useful products, but we do not have a continuing flow of master's theses and dissertations at the same level that most other states do.

Historically, the relatively heavy teaching loads on South Dakota's college campuses, generally four courses or more a semester, have not allowed for the same kind of time for research and writing that is typically available at research institutions, but that situation seems to be

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changing. Time will tell whether lighter teaching loads will result in more publications.

The lack of a university press in the state has been especially burdensome, but with the significant expansion of the South Dakota Historical Society Press, which serves some of the functions of a university press, that situation is also changing and will, I hope, result in more books on South Dakota in the future.

Do you think it's possible to revive what was once a great interest in Midwestern history?

Absolutely. Once midwestern history gets revved up with its own journals, its own organizations, and other accoutrements, observers will ask, "Why didn't someone think of this a long time ago?"

Thank you, Professor Miller.

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On the covers: Historians and their work are the focus of this issue, which includes an interview with John E. Miller (front), reflections on farm movements like the Farmers Holiday (back, top), and a reminiscence of George McGovern (back, bottom).

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