

In Memory of John E. Miller

1945–2020

John E. Miller, longtime professor at South Dakota State University and dedicated historian of South Dakota and the Midwest, died suddenly on 1 May 2020 at his home in Brookings. He was seventy-five.

Miller was born 28 March 1945 to Mildred and Channing E. Miller in Beloit, Kansas. With his four younger siblings, he grew up in small towns throughout Kansas, Missouri, and Illinois, where his father's work as a Lutheran minister took the family. Such places, along with his father's gift of a subscription to the Landmark series of books focusing on history and biography, sparked his interest in history and sowed the seeds for his later research and writing.

Miller graduated with a B.A. in history from the University of Missouri-Columbia in 1966 and earned his M.A. in history from the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 1968. Drafted into the United States Army, he served two years in Vietnam as a court reporter and history instructor. He returned to the University of Wisconsin where he earned his Ph.D. in 1973, writing his thesis on Governor Philip La Follette and the New Deal. While there, he met and married Kathy Rahdert in 1972. The couple had two children, Ann and Tom.

After a year spent teaching at the University of Tulsa, Miller joined the faculty at South Dakota State University in 1974. Over the next twenty-nine years, until he retired in 2003 to devote more time to research and writing, he taught various aspects of United States history. Beginning in the 1980s, he also taught South Dakota history, and local and regional history became one of his passions, which he communicated with enthusiasm to his students and those who attended his sessions at dozens of national and regional history conferences.

Over the years, Miller became a frequent contributor to *South Dakota History*. Research for his first article to appear in the journal, "Place and Community in the 'Little Town on the Prairie': De Smet in 1883" (Winter 1986), piqued his interest in Laura Ingalls Wilder and ultimately led to the publication of three books: *Laura Ingalls Wilder's Little Town: Where History and Literature Meet*; *Becoming Laura Ingalls Wilder: The Woman*



John Miller posed for this 2013 photograph in the Hilton M. Briggs Library at South Dakota State University.

behind the Legend; and *Laura Ingalls Wilder and Rose Wilder Lane: Authorship, Place, Time, and Culture*. Another article, “The Contours of South Dakota Political Culture,” co-authored with Jon Lauck and Edward Hogan, led to the *Plains Political Tradition* series from the South Dakota Historical Society Press, the fourth volume of which he was co-editing at the time of his death. In all, he published twelve articles with the journal.

Miller's retirement from teaching in 2003 allowed him time to focus on his research and writing. In addition to his articles for *South Dakota History*, Miller wrote two new chapters for Herbert S. Schell's *History of South Dakota*, taking the narrative to the turn of the millennium. The South Dakota Historical Society Press published the updated version of the book in 2004. The Press also published a new edition of Miller's *Looking for History on Highway 14*, which explores small towns along the route that crosses the state from east to west, in 2001. He continued the theme of small-town life and its role in history with *Small-Town Dreams: Stories of Midwestern Boys Who Shaped America*, as well as producing works that delve further into political, literary, cultural, and other aspects of the history of South Dakota and the Midwest.

Miller was the recipient of numerous awards, including the Herbert S. Schell Award for the best article in Volume 30 of *South Dakota History* for his "American Indians in the Fiction of Laura Ingalls Wilder." Miller will be remembered as a scholar with an endless appetite for research whose books and articles appeal to a broad audience and will serve as a strong foundation for future historians of the state and region.

SOUTH DAKOTA HISTORY ARTICLES BY OR ABOUT JOHN E. MILLER

"Place and Community in the 'Little Town on the Prairie': De Smet in 1883," 16, no. 4 (Winter 1986): 351-72, reprinted in Miller, *Laura Ingalls Wilder's Little Town: Where History and Literature Meet* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1994).

"The Old-fashioned Fourth of July: A Photographic Essay on Small-town Celebrations prior to 1930," 17, no. 2 (Summer 1987): 118-39.

"The Way They Saw Us: Dakota Territory in the Illustrated News," 18, no. 4 (Winter 1988): 214-44.

"End of an Era: De Smet High School Class of 1912," 20, no. 3 (Fall 1990): 185-206.

"The South Dakota State University Campanile: Building a Sense of Place," 23, no. 4 (Winter 1993): 321-59.

"Hubert Mathieu, South Dakota's Other Outstanding Illustrator," 15, no. 1 (Spring 1995): 49-63.

- “American Indians in the Fiction of Laura Ingalls Wilder,” 30, no. 3 (Fall 2000): 303–20, reprinted in Miller, *Laura Ingalls Wilder and Rose Wilder Lane: Authorship, Place, Time, and Culture* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2008).
- “Education in South Dakota since World War II: A Statistical Portrait,” 33, no. 1 (Spring 2003): 46–63.
- “Historical Musings: The Contours of South Dakota Political Culture,” with Jon Lauck and Edward Hogan, 34, no. 2 (Summer 2004): 157–78.
- “Traveling the Road of Change: Historical Forces in the Development of South Dakota Transportation,” 41, no. 2 (Summer 2011): 267–90.
- “Historical Musings: Defining Moments in Twentieth-Century South Dakota Political History,” 42, no. 2 (Summer 2012): 168–90.
- “Historian of the Midwest: An Interview with John E. Miller,” interview by Jon K. Lauck, 44, no. 2 (Summer 2014): 103–39.
- “Is South Dakota Experiencing a Literary Renaissance?,” 45, no. 3 (Fall 2015): 189–227.