

Community Matters in Iowa

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Iowa —
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Iowans inhabit the heart of the heartland, both physically and culturally. Iowa is central and centered — a place where the balance of the components that make up community is celebrated and nurtured. Family, neighborhood, town, school, work site, place of worship, community center, and state, county, and local fairs — these all create the networks that tie Iowans together and provide the sense of community that makes Iowa what it is today.

A Carroll County pancake breakfast in a church basement raises money for the local volunteer fire-fighting association and its ladies' auxiliary, the Fire Belles. A *lutefisk* supper in Bode (pop. 335) serves over a thousand people on the Thursday before Thanksgiving in celebration of a common Norwegian heritage. Associations and clubs abound in Iowa — from beer-brewing clubs, 4-H, sit-and-knit clubs, and fiddlers' picnics to groups promoting polka dancing.

The calendars of events in Iowa newspapers list activity schedules of groups such as Carson's Peace Circle of the Oakland United Methodist Church, Manning's Little Flower Study Club, the Neola Optimists' Club, Farley's Catholic Daughters of America, Bloomington's Grange, Kalona's Koffee Club, and local business organizations like the Better Elk Horn Club and the Kimballton Progressive Danes, which promote community pride and distinctiveness. Then there are the myriad committees formed to discuss, organize, and promote local and regional issues and events — everything from corn-husking festivals and the Fourth of July to guidelines for entering the local Dairy or Swine Princess contest.

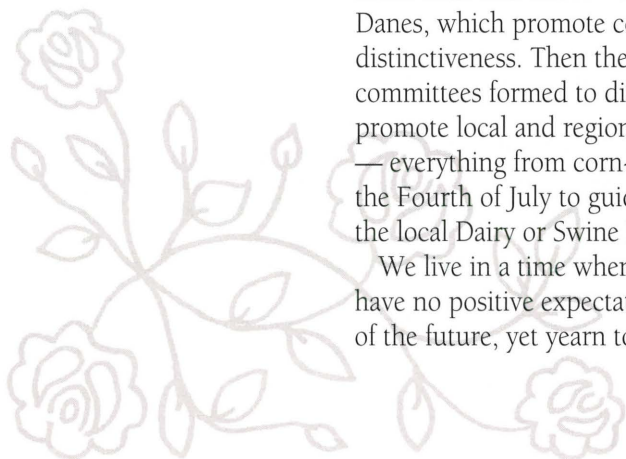
We live in a time when Americans often have no positive expectations and are fearful of the future, yet yearn to belong and feel

grounded on the local level, and search for traditions that are alive and meaningful. The term *community* is used ubiquitously to communicate well-being, continuity, and hope. But in Iowa, community is more than a well-worn cliché — it is a way of life, eagerly negotiated, energetically encouraged.

Referred to by coast-to-coast travelers as “fly-over country,” the state doesn't register on the national radar except at times of disaster (the flood of 1993), during the caucuses, or when some purveyor of popular culture seeks to evoke “America” in some elemental way. The Rodgers and Hammerstein musical *State Fair*, Meredith Willson's *The Music Man*, and movies such as *Field of Dreams* and *The Bridges of Madison County* conjure up images of a pure America through examples of an Iowa that fosters the value of supporting family and community, a determined work ethic, an educated populace, morality and decency, individual responsibility, and neat, well-kept yards — and also, at times, an understated and mildly self-disparaging sense of humor.

Traveling throughout the state, a visitor feels as if she has stumbled into an extended family. Newcomers are introduced at almost any function and instantly asked about whom they might know, and about the possibility of being related to someone from Iowa. Strangers stop to ask if you need help if you're pulled over on the side of the road. Across the state, many people still read the *Des Moines Register* in addition to their local newspapers; listen to statewide radio stations like WHO, WOI, KUNI, or WMT; and follow state “ag” reports about planting conditions or weather patterns as they blow across the prairie from Sioux City to Keokuk.

Iowa is a state of small towns on a gently rolling plain. Even the metropolitan centers of Des Moines, Waterloo, Dubuque, Davenport, Cedar Rapids, Council Bluffs, and Sioux City function as clusters of towns. Houses of worship occupy many street corners; public libraries and schools are the norm; and a high





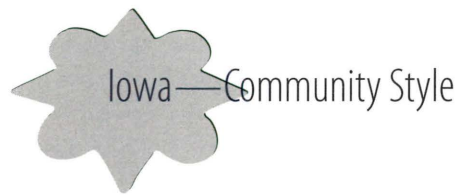
school sports team is the *town's* team. In cafés in nearly every neighborhood in Iowa, groups of farmers, business people, students, and coffee-club members gather each day at well-known but unscheduled times to discuss crop prices and political candidates, to share personal problems, plan events, play cards, or just plain gossip over plain, home-cooked fare. Coffee and cinnamon rolls, assorted pies, and the ubiquitous pork tenderloin sandwich are served nearly everywhere. Menus also vary somewhat by region, with fish available at river cafés along the Mississippi, *flæskesteg* (pork loin embedded with prunes) and *rødkål* (red cabbage) in the Danish Inn in Elk Horn, bagels and cream cheese at Jewish delis in Des Moines, savory soups at Southeast Asian gathering places in Ames, Dutch marzipan-filled pastry “letters” in the Dutch-settled towns of Pella and Orange City, German sausage in Manning, and tamales and tortillas in the relatively new Hispanic neighborhoods in Muscatine and Storm Lake. But it is not solely the selection and style of food that matter at these local eating places — it is the camaraderie, conversation, and “visiting” that they make possible.

Home-grown community music-making is vibrant and alive in Iowa. People gather in homes to make music together, in community centers or schoolhouses for dance parties, in religious settings to sing their praises, or at regional or ethnic festivals. In late spring, farmers, college students, retirees, and school teachers across the state join municipal bands and begin rehearsing for public performances held in town squares and parks all summer long. Psalms, a Black gospel group from Cedar Rapids, describe their music as “traditional gospel with a contemporary hook.” As a family group, they are deep in the pocket of tradition: their mother sang with the Zionettes, and they recently formed an ensemble for their own offspring, Children of Psalms, because, during their rehearsals, they would hear the children in the bedroom also rehearsing the songs. Much of the character of community music-making in Iowa is family based.

In Iowa girls' sports teams matter. The annual state girls' basketball tournament in Des Moines is a major event. According to basketball player Kris Larson from Newell-

Workers eat last at the annual pre-Thanksgiving Lutefisk Supper at the St. Olaf Lutheran Church in Bode. Left to right: Pastor Mark Younquist and Pastor Connie Spitzack, Norman and Rose Zeman, Emily Rolland, April Zeman, and Phyllis and Conrad Johnson.

Photo courtesy Phyllis Johnson



“Resolving conflicts and finding solutions to local, national, and international problems extend beyond politics in Iowa and reveal a commitment to widening the bounds of community.”

Fonda (a consolidated school district in western Iowa with a combined population of 1,820), “There were over 2,000 people from the Newell-Fonda area at our game.” Team-mate Jessica Jeppeson adds, “More than just Newell-Fonda people support us. People from a lot of the surrounding small communities follow us.” While basketball in and of itself enjoys great popularity throughout the Midwest, the attention paid to Iowa’s girls’ sports is unique. But the game is much more than a test of athletic ability — the girls

themselves insist on the importance of learning teamwork and having fun.

Carla Offenburger, a lifelong basketball fan and Folklife Festival fieldworker, explains, “To the young girls basketball is not a sport, or a game. Basketball is a tradition, a heritage, a festival.” Basketball also provides Iowa girls with the opportunity to develop leadership skills evidenced in the high proportion of women active across the state in business, voluntary activities, and politics.

Throughout the state’s history, Iowans have been social reformist in orientation, having enacted the first prohibition law in the country, for example, and taken a strong stand against slavery. In keeping with this

heritage and a reliance on the value of local autonomy, Iowa lacks a statewide, codified curriculum for its nationally recognized public school system, preferring instead to rely on district-level initiatives for determining the quality and content of education in a specific locale.

Iowa’s political precinct caucuses embody democracy on a grassroots level. Before the presidential party caucuses, Iowans across the

state meet with friends and neighbors and even presidential candidates to discuss party platform issues. Then, on the evening of the caucuses, a cross-section of the Iowa population — from senior citizens to newly minted eighteen-year-old voters, from long-time precinct captains to mothers accompanied by toddlers — sign in, look over campaign rosters, and elect delegates to attend the statewide party conventions in schools, community centers, private homes, and civic centers. Platform proposals on welfare, capital punishment, and health care were among those brought up and discussed at the 1996 caucuses.

Resolving conflicts and finding solutions to local, national, and international problems extend beyond politics in Iowa and reveal a commitment to widening the bounds of community. From the Lt. Governor’s Committee on Diversity, which was created in response to incidents of racism in 1991, to the Peace Institute at Grinnell College, Iowans strive to talk with civility about disruptive issues. When some youths sprayed swastikas and anti-Semitic slogans on Des Moines’s Temple B’Nai Jeshurun in 1994, the entire city protested the travesty. And when the culprits were caught and convicted, their “punishment” consisted of both community service and learning from Rabbi Steven Fink about a culture different from their own.

In Sioux City, the Food and Commercial Workers’ Union works to integrate immigrants from Southeast Asia, Mexico, and Central America into the Siouxland community, offering social services, English classes, and free turkey dinners for Thanksgiving. Although the drug, employment, and interracial problems that plague the rest of the United States are certainly present in Iowa, the difference is that here, people still believe that there are commonsense solutions — that human agency is still a viable option.

Because of that belief, residents of Iowa are and have been actively involved in a vast number of voluntary activities throughout the state. When United Flight #232 crashed near Sioux City in 1989, the Marian Health Center “set up a buffet of food items for the media....



This was definitely not treatment as usual," remember nurses Barb Small and Jeff Berens. "People brought clothes for the survivors, as did some of the department stores. Food arrived at the hospital for the staff, volunteers, media personnel, etc., from restaurants, grocery stores, and other suppliers."

Without volunteers and their organizations, much of business, education, and everyday life in Iowa would probably cease to function. Individuals, civic associations, and philanthropic societies provide services that the paid work force and government agencies do not. Shriners ferry physically handicapped State Fair visitors in golf carts from parking lots to the fairgrounds; corporate employees volunteer in work groups to help out with fundraising events for public television and radio; state workers participate in annual food drives; religious groups take turns providing and preparing food for homeless shelters; and many people serve as volunteer fire fighters or on rescue squads. The wide range of these voluntary associations speaks to the network of relationships, of communities, in which Iowans live and work. People here are connected to other people and have a strong stake in maintaining and sustaining those relationships.

An agricultural commonwealth currently interested in promoting the economic opportunities that the state has to offer through insurance, banking, and high-tech industries, Iowa nevertheless tends toward a stable, conservative norm. And yet, as in so many states in the nation where farming has been central to their economic and social well-being, Iowa faces the challenging future of possible rural farm crises with the growth of agribusiness, the consequent decline of family farming and the social institutions that surround it, plus the growth of powerful corporate interests.

The Sesquicentennial year offers a chance to recognize the value of an Iowa that nurtures neighborliness in groups of people — no matter how diverse — who share common concerns

and hopes; an Iowa that supports the vital social fabric of relationships on the local level; and an Iowa that validates an underlying belief in the viability of democratic community — all of which have provided such a prominent legacy for the state.

This Festival program highlighting the vibrant and diverse cultures of Iowa through the excellence, knowledge, and artistry of its people offers an opportunity to observe the dynamism of community in the truest sense of the word. The Festival program also reminds us of the responsibility we all have, as Americans, to believe that our public culture and its active celebration through community are valuable and must be supported, if we are to have a future worth living for.

"Is this heaven? No, it's Iowa." You bet.

Catherine Hiebert Kerst is the Smithsonian curator for Iowa — Community Style. She grew up in Wisconsin and has done extensive fieldwork throughout the Midwest, especially in Danish-American communities. This year she is on detail from her position in the American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, to curate the Iowa program.

Rachelle H. Saltzman is the Iowa curator for the Iowa program at the 1996 Festival of American Folklife and for the Iowa Sesquicentennial Commission's 1996 Festival of Iowa Folklife. She is currently director of the Iowa Arts Council's Folklife Program. Saltzman has worked as a public folklorist in Delaware, Florida, New York, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Virginia, and now Iowa.

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