

Iowa Small Towns



Pickup trucks are parked outside a café in Anthon, where farmers meet for breakfast and morning coffee. Photo © David Thoreson

Tom Morain

“...Jefferson 20, Perry 7. It was Ames over Marshalltown, 42-6. Lake City 14, Rockwell City 13. Lamoni 20, Leon 0. Winterset shut out Indianola 13-0...” And on and on the scores continue in a geographic litany every Friday from football through basketball and into spring baseball season. From these radio broadcasts Iowa children learn the names of towns before they have any idea where the communities are. Unlike the elitist weather report that acknowledges temperatures in only the major cities, as if there were no weather in the small towns, Friday night sports scores are the great leveler: any town that can field a team earns the right to march in the parade. And so the list goes on. “...Fort Dodge 21, Mason City 6. Panora-Linden 14, Dallas Center-Grimes 0. Storm Lake 15, Cherokee 12.”

The highway map of Iowa today reflects the modes of transportation of Iowa's frontier days in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Local traffic was by horse and buggy; travel between towns was usually by train. In the railroad-building frenzy of the 1870s and 1880s, Iowa towns were locked in a life-and-death game of "musical chairs": any town not on some rail line when the building stopped was doomed. Railroad executives knew it and played off neighboring towns against each other to extract local bonds, rights-of-way, and land grants, until

the countryside was honeycombed with branch lines and whistle-stop stations.

For survivors, the prize was a near-monopoly on the trade of the farmers who lived within four or five miles. Iowa's counties were laid out so that even those in the farthest corner could get to the county seat and back home again within a day's buggy travel, but a day-long trip was too much for routine supplies and the mail. Small towns were distribution centers where farmers came to buy what they needed and to sell their cattle, other livestock, and grain. Farm wives literally traded their eggs and butter at the general store for credit toward their purchases, a practice still reflected in the term *retail trade*.

Small-town merchants, however, never enjoyed the perfect monopoly on the local market to which they assumed they were entitled. As early as the 1870s, mail-order catalogue companies like Montgomery Ward and Sears Roebuck led doomsayers to predict the imminent demise of small-town retailers. The rise of chain stores in the 1920s prompted small-town merchants to urge legislation to tax

businesses by the number of retail outlets they maintained.

It was the automobile that sounded the death knell for the smallest villages. Beginning in 1909, the Model-T Ford provided farmers with a dependable and inexpensive alternative to the horse-drawn buggy, and farm families quickly took advantage of it. They drove past the smallest towns to the larger stores in the county seats, and they abandoned their rural churches for the town churches with their choirs and youth programs. They voted for school reorganizations and bond issues that constructed high schools to which their sons and daughters could not have practically ridden by horse and buggy but could



Small-Town Newspapers: Iowa Communities in Print

Jay Black

Almost all Iowans, it seems, have access to national and international news via the TV set. But what about the goings-on right in their back yard — in their neighborhood, small town, local school, or city council? Small-town newspapers fill this important gap in information for thousands of Iowans living in rural areas. The local newspaper is their neighborhood in print, and it chronicles the life and history of their community.

Newspapers are often the oldest businesses in town, and ownership can span more than a decade, even several generations. Of Iowa's 340 newspapers, 299 are small-town weeklies. A good example is the *Enterprise Journal* in St. Ansgar, a town of 1,100 people in north-central Iowa. It was started in 1878 and is still going strong.

For people in St. Ansgar, "The E.J." is such a part of their lives, family, and sense of place that they think of it as *their* newspaper. "There is not another business in town [in which] people feel they have the right to tell the employees how to run their company," said a staff member. "The people around here feel they have a stake in

this newspaper — that they own part of it. Our paper helps define our community and reflects what we do and how we live."

Like no other business, small-town newspapers give a community a sense of place and continuity.

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commute by car or public school bus.

As transportation and roads continued to improve, farmers and even small-town residents themselves discovered that a shopping trip into Des Moines or Cedar Rapids or some other nearby city wasn't so difficult. Shopping malls, Kmart's, and then Wal-Mart's lured away more customers from the small-town stores. And the declining farm population, the predictable result of a century of labor-saving farm machinery, continued the erosion. The farm crisis of the 1980s took a heavy toll on the towns that depended upon the farm economy. From 1983 to 1993, Iowa towns with fewer than 2,000 people lost 2,500 businesses.

Yet, while they may think of themselves often as having been under a long siege, small-town residents continue their fierce hometown loyalty. The younger generations may leave for college and seek their fortunes elsewhere, but high school reunions, weddings, anniversaries, and funerals still draw them home.

Two factors make critical contributions to the unique culture of the small town. For one thing, residents relate to one another in many different ways. They may have been classmates and teammates. They may worship together on Sunday morning. They share a continuous sidewalk. Their children date. They vote on the same local bond issues. They shop at the same stores. They know each other's parents. They pay taxes to the same school district. They see each other at the local café. They depend upon each other for the upkeep of city parks, the swimming pool, the storm sewers, and the cemetery. They save and borrow at the same bank. They all benefit when a repairman knows his business. They belong to the same service clubs and fraternal organizations. They are friends and neighbors. Small towns fold layers and layers of relationships back upon each other.

They also share the same stories; there is a collective memory. Newcomers remain outsiders until they understand the local nuances in the story about the boys who chained the police car to the popcorn stand or whether it was good offense or good defense that put the 1956 girls' basketball team into the finals of

the state tournament. Why did Mrs. Kitchell not leave her house for the last seven years of her life? Each town has its own mythology, and those who know it carry their citizenship with them wherever they go.

A second factor that strengthens the local ties of small-town residents is the realization, at some level of consciousness, that their own welfare is ultimately tied up with everyone else's. The town represents a miniature cosmos. No matter how much an individual prospers, he or she has no better fire protection than can be provided by the local force, a fire department that in most cases depends upon volunteers. No matter how well your daughter plays the clarinet, the band is the product of the community. And if you want her band to look good, you'll sign up when the band parents need volunteers to serve the pancake suppers that raise the money for uniforms.

And while enlightened self-interest, not altruism, may well motivate the incredible volunteer efforts that sustain small-town life, the result is often a proprietary attitude toward the community: this is "my" town because I have helped to make it what it is.

The word *politics* comes from the Greek *polis*, or "city-state." Politics was about life in the *polis*, the opportunity to be seen and heard by fellow citizens and to play a part in public life. For ancient Athenians or Spartans, life outside of their *polis* hardly qualified as human. Modern Iowa small-town residents might not go that far, but they understand the sentiment.

Tom Morain was born and reared in Jefferson, Iowa (pop. 4,292), where his father and brother have edited the local newspaper for sixty years. Morain is a cultural historian who is currently the administrator of the State Historical Society of Iowa.