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.

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...