

Reviews

Mapping the Farm: The Chronicle of a Family

John Hildebrand. 1995. Vintage Books Division, Random House, New York, N.Y. Hardcover edition published in 1995 by Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., New York, N.Y. Pp. 252.

Iowans Who Made a Difference: 150 Years of Agricultural Progress

Don Muhm and Virginia Wadsley. 1996. Iowa Farm Bureau Federation, West Des Moines, IA. Pp. 366.

American Farms: Exploring Their History

R. Douglas Hurt. 1996. Kreiger Publishing Company, Malabar, FL. Pp. 165.

A long time ago, ACE was AAACE (American Association of Agricultural College Editors.) We were called ag editors, and most of us were farm boys with a flair for journalism. Our on-the-farm experience was thought necessary for communicating about farming: production agriculture for the men, home economics for their wives, and youth stories for the 4-H members. These were our information service products.

That's ancient history now. Today's ag editor likely carries a technology-based title. Women have discovered communication is a welcoming and satisfying calling, without the professional barriers of many of the biological sciences. Our traditional agricultural colleges and government agencies have been transformed as agriculture and agribusiness have evolved. And fewer and fewer ACE members have the farm background that once was a prerequisite to employment.

These books were selected to help overcome that lack of experience or understanding of agriculture and the rural life that continues to be our primary focus. They also provide a

framework for a better appreciation of today's environmental and ecological issues.

Mapping the Farm begins with the potato famine that drove the O'Neills from their native Ireland to virgin farmland near Rochester, Minnesota, and follows the family through four generations of farming. Historian John Hildebrand, who married into the family, has woven two strands into a single thread. One is the farm enterprise, beginning with subsistence production agriculture involving the entire family and growing into a commercial enterprise being squeezed by rising costs and urban sprawl. The other strand is a sensitive history of the O'Neill family. County fairs, 4-H, dairy cows, tractors, church and community, health problems and off-farm jobs breed successes and failures within the rhythm of the seasons. Hildebrand has fine reporting and writing skills, making this a good read as well as a perceptive introduction to farm and family life.

Iowa celebrated the 150th anniversary of statehood in 1996. Agriculture had a big part in the observance, just as it had in the state's development. Don Muhm is one of our leading agricultural writers, serving three decades as farm editor of the *Des Moines Register*. Now he devotes his reportorial skills to recreating the past for the benefit of those a generation or more removed from the family farm.

Iowans Who Made A Difference tells that story through short biographies of 150 men and women who played key roles in all phases of farm life. Appropriately, the first chapter is about the Wallace family. Wallace's *Farmer* was their magazine. Father and son, Henry C. and Henry A. Wallace, both served as U.S. Secretary of Agriculture. Henry A. and his brothers created the modern farm seed industry in *Pioneer International*. Their story is a reminder of the importance of agricultural editors in shaping American farming in the late 1800s and early 1900s.

R. Douglas Hurt is an agricultural historian at Iowa State University. His *American Farms* is a step-by-step guide for researching and writing farm, farm family, and rural life history. For example, he describes and illustrates twenty barn

styles popular across America, which are a function of climate, weather, crops and livestock, and ethnic settlement patterns. Hurt provides countless tips like this to guide the reader-reporter.

These books are a good package, for each presents a different view of our country's agriculture and its development. Muhm, Wadsley, Hildebrand and Hurt are excellent writers, which contributes immensely to the quality of their studies.

ACE members and their colleagues need a working understanding and appreciation of why farming is as it is in the late 20th century. This is essential background for our writing, editing, photography, publishing, broadcasting, and Internetting efforts. These books — as well as others like them — help to build that understanding.

Ted Hutchcroft
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