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Book Review

The Small-Town Midwest: Resilience and Hope in the Twenty-First Century

Julianne Couch

2016

Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press

233 pages

Paperback: \$35.00

Crouch is a free-lance writer, a former university professor now teaching as an adjunct from time to time, an irrepressible optimist, and a great lover of the rural Midwest. In this travelogue she eschews the methodological rigors of social science and the proposed solutions of economists to tell the stories of people who have chosen to plant their lives in nine different rural communities stretching over a 900 miles from Centennial, Wyoming to Bellevue, Iowa to New Madrid, Missouri to Sedan, Kansas. All nine communities are small (100 to 4,000 people) and fairly remote being distant to a population center of 10,000 people. In her selection of communities, she sought diversity in geographies and economies. Crouch visits each community in person, often for fairly short periods of time, but chronicles each visit as both storyteller and admirer of the grit demonstrated by rural Americans.

There is no systematic consideration of the ills plaguing these rural Midwest communities, but readers will be exposed to some of the more obvious issues: depopulation, automated corporate farming reducing agricultural jobs, public school consolidation, inadequate housing, and the deterioration of retail and other services. The same distance that labels these communities *remote* is part of what helps sustain them because availability of services from accessible and larger population centers actually serves to promote out-migration and family relocation. Readers may be tempted to conclude that it takes some externality to sustain one of these small communities such as the presence of an institution of higher learning and casino (Emmetsburg, Iowa) or a state prison (Norton, Kansas), but that is too much of a simplification. Natural beauty is a distinct resource for several communities (Centennial, Sedan, and Bellevue), low crime rates are nearly ubiquitous, and county seats have an obvious advantage (Norton, Sedan, New Madrid, and Emmetsburg), but I believe most readers will conclude that the sustainability of the small-town Midwest rests almost fully on the shoulders of the people who have set down roots in their communities and simply refuse to let them die.

Midwestern rurality is doggedly self-sufficient in its mutual-aid community spirit, which is both its most admirable and limiting characteristic. The degree of mutuality necessary to cope with the winters in the unincorporated, mountainous Centennial is matched by the volunteer fire department in Bridgeport, Nebraska, and the Tarkio (Missouri) College Alumni Association that is concerned with the future of the now-closed Presbyterian college facilities. Over and over again, Crouch documents the *shape shifting* that rural community leaders must use to coordinate and contribute to community survival. She describes the opening of local museums, public libraries, a temporary residence for families visiting inmates in a state prison, and even an art studio because *someone had to do it*. When one of these Kansas communities wanted more tourists, they built their own yellow brick road. Only New Madrid has sought substantial

government assistance in the form of development grants; most communities seemed to prefer to go it alone. This spirit of self-sufficiency is also demonstrated in the individual stories - one senior who expansion of her vegetable garden in Knox County, Nebraska, when the grocery store closed, or a man who chose rural life over marriage.

The downside to this doggedness is that outsiders can find it hard to become part of one of these communities. Couch's interviews with leaders of the local chamber of commerce, the economic development office, and even the newspaper editor/reporter revealed a great deal about the history and hopes of each community, but her personal story of relocating to Bellevue tells another tale. Small-town Midwestern communities without a college to prepare them for the recurrence of new arrivals develop a high degree of insularity based on family and church ties. Even years after relocating, reaching out to meet neighbors, and participating in community life, *newcomers* rarely escape that description. I believe most readers will conclude that Couch is likely to leave Bellevue soon. She does not say that, but the longing for more community connection permeates this last chapter.

I moved to the Midwest over 40 years ago for the first time, spending two years in Nebraska and one more in North Dakota. I returned in 2011 to a small college town in South Dakota. I can appreciate Couch's love for the beauty of the plains and the quality of the people, although I admit an urbanite's remorse for the scarce services and other amenities. It can take a while to learn to love what my wife and I call *living life at 20 miles an hour*. I thoroughly enjoyed Couch's travelogue and recommend it to others who want to discover the beauty, both hidden and obvious, of the American Midwest.

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