



Flag at Sunset Ridge Park, Rolfe, Iowa. 2007.

# An Iowa Heritage

A 1991 Perspective  
from Saint Helena, California  
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The story that begins in the 1880s when my Gunderson ancestors came to Iowa until now as I sit here in California, wondering where I can find a sense of homeland, is not a unique drama. It parallels a whole era of midwestern rural life. It is an era that began with people seeking new land for farms, homes, and communities. It is an era that totters now as people struggle either to remain a part of that land or move away, seeking new places to call home in this modern age, when such a small percentage of the population lives in rural America or is involved in farming.

The story of the rise and fall of the Midwest is not one to be explored solely by Iowans or other Midwesterners. As author Wendell Berry says, the crisis of agriculture is a crisis of culture. What the Midwest and the state of Iowa are going through, and what I experience as an expatriate are connected to issues of the country as a whole. These issues are related to meaning, vision, and values and to environmental, economic, and spiritual health.

I admire Garrison Keillor and how his stories on National Public Radio use details of everyday midwestern life, and yet appeal to a wide spectrum of people. He has done what artists, theologians, and other storytellers are called to do: to look at the ordinary under their noses and shape it in a way that, if held before us, helps us look at our lives, seeing them in ways that we have not seen before, and giving us new meaning and vision.



I am concerned about loss and grieving. There have been only a few times in our nation's recent history when we collectively faced death and grieved together. That happened when we watched the funeral procession for John F. Kennedy and saw the harnessed, yet riderless stallion. An event of similar impact, yet without the same ritualistic treatment, happened when we saw the space shuttle Challenger explode. Another example, albeit of a different nature, is that of the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington. For too many years, the United States had no collective focal point for reflecting on this war or honoring its war dead. Many people bottled up their feelings. Fortunately, the country now has this mirror-like, black wall with its engraved list of casualties. People can come individually or in groups, look for a specific name or feel the impact of the entire memorial, create their own rituals, and know they are united with others in their grief and healing.

The question then arises as to when, where, and how do we come to terms with changes in rural America, less spectacular than the previous examples, but involving the death of an era and the loss of a way of life. The changes are slow and stretched out over time. It is hard to know when to stop and pay tribute because, although the shadow of loss is obvious, there is

some question as to whether or not there actually is a death. It is easier to deny the possibility than face it squarely. In addition, many of us have a stoic heritage that taught us not to admit feelings to each other or even to ourselves. So if change is slow, and it is not certain there is a death, and if people do not talk about feelings, how can there be a focal point for the masses to turn to in collective grief? Where is the symbol that will unite people, affected in diverse ways by the trauma happening in the rural Midwest? Where is the event that allows us to look into the darkness, knowing that in some way and at some time new symbols will arise?

The good thing about funerals is that they are collective rituals, marking a point in time, allowing people to unite, tap into their grief, and allow healing to begin. Small-town Memorial Day observances are wonderful in the ways people mingle at cemeteries, running into old acquaintances, greeting each other, and in many cases reminiscing about their heritage. Yet, the shortcoming is that the actual ceremonies pay respects only to military personnel without honoring our rural heritage or touching on the important questions related to the passing of an era. If there are no collective rituals designed to face the changes, there at least need to be prose, poetry, photographs, videos, paintings, and other works of art for people to gather around.



In 1988, I created a slide show on the theme of death and renewal to present at the 125th anniversary of my hometown of Rolfe. I put sweat and tears into it. I thought it would be the last photo project I would do about Iowa. I figured I would get on with my life here in California. But getting on with life has meant going back. I have felt torn between going “cold turkey” and ending my photography of Iowa or investing more in my project ideas. Is the work important? Will there be support and an audience for it?

From the fall of 1989 to the fall of 1990, I spent 17 weeks in Iowa. At first I was naive and diffuse in my focus, but gradually I am defining my goals. Do I take what images I have on hand and complete some of my project ideas in a limited format? Or do I put energy into what I am doing now, soliciting support from the Iowa Humanities Board and other agencies to pursue these dreams full scale?

I am particularly concerned that women be supported in interpreting the midwestern experience. I would like to see a feminist perspective (or perspectives), because there are so many ways in which rural culture is patriarchal and woman’s voice has been lost. Fortunately, some women authors and artists have expressed themselves on these issues. However, I want to give voice to my experience, to create visual symbolism through the medium of photography, and perhaps video, accompanying it with written text or verbal comments.

My perspective is one of love for people such as my grandparents, their way of life on the homeplace farm, and other elements of growing up in Iowa. Yet my perspective is also one of disdain for aspects of that same heritage: the favoritism shown to men, the limited roles for girls, the rigidity about what kinds of relationships are acceptable, the denial of feelings, the repression of imagination, and the style of discipline. My perspective is one of compassion and tenderness complicated by anger and frustration. It is also one of a tug-and-pull, dreaming about moving back to Iowa and yet wanting to stay my distance in order to do as Joseph Campbell suggests and come to terms with the myth system that I grew up in and, in turn, grow into the myth of my own life.

There are two sides of the coin in regard to my rural heritage. The stories and issues I want to explore are extremely important to me but are quite ordinary. There are plenty of Midwesterners with similar backgrounds. However, the fact that our stories have so much in common is no reason to negate my quest to interpret my rural heritage. Indeed, the ordinary nature of my story connects me with other people, and I hope whatever symbol or icon that comes to me in the process of creating a work of art will sustain not only me but others. Indeed this dichotomy of the exceptional versus the mundane of my heritage provides the raw material for this book.

There is synchronicity in my quest. In the spring of 1989, as I contemplated more photo and video forays to Iowa, I had no idea that during the next 12 months workers would tear down my grandparents' house on the homeplace and that my hometown would hold its last high school commencement exercises. At the same time that I am growing in understanding the significance of my rural heritage and coming into my own as a storyteller, the symbols of change in Iowa are ripe for harvest and important to interpret.

What is also clear as I pursue this project is the depth and energy I bring to it. My Iowa heritage is a gift and so is the passion to interpret it. As the two forces join together, the effect is like the fusion of two dynamos, creating something significant as the energy flows full circle.