

John E. Miller. Looking for History on Highway 14. 1993, reprint Pierre: South Dakota State Historical Society Press, 2001.

### **SUMMARY OF THE BOOK**

Written to illustrate the variety of ways in which local history can be conceptualized and researched, Looking for History on Highway 14 also provides a useful introduction to the small-town culture of South Dakota. John E. Miller, a professor of history for 29 years at South Dakota State University, taught courses on state history, recent American history, and historical methods, among others. During the fall of 1985, as a Humanities Scholar-in-Residence for the State Humanities Council, he visited every town on Federal Highway 14 between the Minnesota border and Wall, where the route merges with Interstate 90. He presented a slide program on the history of the towns along the highway in all but the tiniest towns and stayed around to interview local residents, search their libraries and historical societies, read old newspapers, and poke around in courthouse basements.

His original intent was to write a heavily footnoted monograph on the historical development of the towns along the Chicago and Northwestern Railway, which penetrated the area in 1879 and 1880, terminating in Pierre, and then continued across the Missouri River to Rapid City in 1906 and 1907. After a couple of summers spent reading several decades worth of microfilm copies of newspapers from Brookings, DeSmet, Miller, Huron, and Pierre, he decided to shift direction and write a book about the various ways in which people could think about local history and the wide variety of sources that could be accessed to obtain information.

Miller told his South Dakota history students and anyone willing to listen that the history of the state was primarily to be found in the history of its small towns and their surrounding agricultural hinterlands. By focusing upon towns located along a transportation route within a specific region, the author hypothesized that he could target towns of varying sizes and functions and make useful comparisons among them. The resulting volume focused its attention on half of the thirty towns along the highway in South Dakota, including the sites of the state land-grant university, the state fair, and the South Dakota capital. In addition, Highway 14 was home to novelist Laura Ingalls Wilder, artist Harvey Dunn, Nobel Prize-winning economist Theodore Schultz, and real estate developer and entrepreneur Charles Leavitt Hyde, along with a variety of other less prominent and anonymous, but interesting, characters.

Each chapter focuses upon a particular subject or individual, discusses how to locate and interpret sources, and considers ways of thinking about small-town history and development over time. Thus, chapter one on Elkton, the first town to be established along the railroad after it entered Dakota Territory during the summer of 1879, takes off from the author's attendance at Memorial Day services in the community on May 29, 1989, and the presence there that day of the Centennial Wagon Train, which was traveling across the state in commemoration of the state's centennial. The theme of the chapter is tradition and change—tradition being found in ceremonies like Memorial Day and in historical re-enactments like the wagon train, and change being embodied in how modes of transportation used by people progressed from self-propulsion (walking) to horse-drawn vehicles to railroads and finally to automobiles and trucks. Because the book is about towns along a highway, it makes sense to relate a brief history of the route,

which was located during 1912 and later alongside the tracks of the C. & N.W. Railroad. Originally called the Black and Yellow Trail (short for Chicago to Black Hills and Yellowstone Park Highway), it later was briefly known as State Highway 30 and then, after 1926, as Federal Highway 14.

Chapter two—"Looking for History in Small Town America"—focuses upon the author's hometown since 1974: Brookings. Here he talks about previous treatments of the community's history, including the work of one of his predecessors in the SDSU history department, Donald Dean Parker. He notes the variety of sources that can be tapped and the kinds of assumptions and attitudes that tend to prevail among local citizens when contemplating their own history. Historical celebration often gets in the way of historical truth.

Chapter three provides an opportunity to talk about a celebrated South Dakotan, Theodore W. Schultz, a farm boy from Arlington and Badger who went on to a distinguished career as an agricultural economist at Iowa State University and the University of Chicago. The Nobel Prize winner (1979) related to the author the wide variety of communal activities in which he participated as a youth and looked back upon the changes he saw occurring during the course of his lifetime, finding these transformations to have been more beneficial than deleterious.

Chapter four focuses upon another famous South Dakotan, one of the most celebrated persons of all time in the state: Laura Ingalls Wilder. It considers her novels aimed at a youthful audience as a source of understanding about local history. Manchester, the next town down the line from DeSmet, was the home of Harvey Dunn, who grew up on a farm about three miles south of town before heading off, first to Brookings, and then to Chicago and Wilmington, Delaware, to train to become the accomplished illustrator and artist that he emerged as. Miller's work on these chapters later led to three books about Wilder and several book chapters and articles on Dunn.

As he pushed westward across the state, the author looked for themes or pegs upon which to center his chapters. In Iroquois, it was photographs and artifacts displayed and stored at the local café and at the antiques store. In Huron, almost necessarily, the central theme was the railroad and its development. Railroad magnate Marvin Hughitt had designated Huron, at the crossing of the James River, as the division point and location for a roundhouse even before tracks were laid into the area.

With its focus upon local historian George Niederauer, the chapter on the town of Miller (no relation to the author) becomes a tribute to the many "guardians of local history" that can be found in almost every town. These are the self-appointed keepers of the historical flame who rescue old records, photographs, and artifacts from garbage cans and attics, start and maintain local historical societies, write papers to deliver at history conferences, save and collect books and newspapers that feature local history, write newspaper columns, and in any way they can think of work to preserve and commemorate the historical record of the community. Almost never do they receive any compensation for this (beyond personal satisfaction), and frequently they dig deep into their own pockets for the benefit of the community.

The chapter on Highmore directs its attention to the county seat battles that were a part of so many county histories and to the kinds of resources that can be found in county courthouses. Harrold's chapter is the one where the author writes about the ubiquitous and profoundly significant practice of small-town "Saturday nights," what he calls the

“quintessential communal activity” during the period from the 1920s through the early 1960s. Asking people “Was this a Saturday night town?” elicited more interesting and colorful replies than any other question that he posed while doing his research. The chapter on Charles Leavitt Hyde, the real estate mogul who built the St. Charles Hotel, the Hyde Opera House, and several of the most impressive business blocks along the upper shelf above downtown Pierre during a period of about half a decade, stands for all the go-getting entrepreneurs, business leaders, citizen-politicians, and local boosters who made their small towns grow and prosper during the early years of their development. Hyde’s life also provides a cautionary tale about the complications and setbacks that often characterize people’s lives and small-town histories but often do not make it into the historical record.

Fort Pierre, as the chapter title relates, is “the most historic spot in South Dakota.” Enough said. Midland, with its restored railroad depot used as a museum, provides an opportunity to talk about buildings and structures and what they can tell us about local history. Philip, with the multiple uses put to its old auditorium, provides a reason to discuss historical continuity and change, and the unusually large collection of photographs preserved by Evelyn Haberly Johnson of her father’s work serves as a window into the art of photography as a historical source. Wall, where one can find an unusual amount of “history in a tourist trap,” reminds us to take seriously the admonition of the author in his introduction to “stop, look, and listen.” Few people probably expect to find much history in Wall Drug Store before they get there, and only a slightly larger number probably realize how much history is contained there after they have rushed through it on their way to Mount Rushmore. They need to look and listen a little more carefully.

Finally, there is Mount Rushmore, which literally is “history carved on a mountain.” Observers will immediately understand the significance of presidential history and quickly gather the importance of the planned (but never completed) hall of records. But who isn’t surprised to discover that Gutzon Borglum originally intended literally to carve the history of the region in three-foot-high letters on the mountain alongside the images of Presidents? Mount Rushmore, it must be understood, was originally proposed at a meeting of the Black and Yellow Trail Association in 1924 by state historian Doane Robinson as a way to (a) memorialize local and regional history and (b) promote tourism. Although the former has not been entirely neglected, clearly it is the latter that has been most successful.

### **QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

1. “No single factor has been more important to the rise and fall of small towns than the historical development of differing forms of transportation.” Discuss.
2. How does the way in which the people of Brookings celebrated and commemorated their town’s history compare with that of your town?
3. Theodore Schultz viewed with equanimity what happened to community in and around the towns that he and his wife grew up in. How do you view the changes that have come to community and personal relationships during recent decades?
4. Why do you think Laura Ingalls Wilder’s books have remained so popular over time, and what do you think they have to teach us about local history?

5. Harvey Dunn painted and illustrated a version of local history. Do you have similar examples in your community of visual artists who have helped provide an understanding of the past?
6. Is there any equivalent in your community of the photographs on the wall of Velma Leichtenberg's Countryside Café in Iroquois? Why do you think storeowners, schools, and others are so interested in such displays?
7. Why do you think Huron never quite emerged as the large and important town that it hoped from the beginning to become?
8. Do you know guardians of local history like George Niederauer? What do you think motivates them? What can their fellow citizens do to assist them?
9. Did your county have a courthouse fight? What difference do these courthouses make in local communities?
10. Was your town a "Saturday night town"? What were those evenings like? Are we better off or worse off for not having them anymore? Or is it, in fact, fair to say that they no longer exist?
11. How important were small-town entrepreneurs, investors, and go-getters like Charles Leavitt Hyde to the development of their communities? Do you think he got a bum rap? Do we have equivalents of Hyde today?
12. Is Fort Pierre, in your opinion, "the most historic spot in South Dakota"? If not, what is?
13. Is it worthwhile to preserve old railroad depots (and other structures) as historical artifacts and museums? Should they be financed by taxpayer dollars or voluntary contributions?
14. With the development of camera technology, videocams, and digital cameras, photography has become more and more popular as a recording device. What historical importance do photographs have?
15. Do you think the author exaggerates when he extols Wall Drug Store for its efforts to preserve history?
16. Were you surprised to discover the historical connotations of Mount Rushmore? Why do you think most people are unaware of these connections?

### **BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF AUTHOR**

John E. Miller is a small-town boy who grew up in six different towns in the Midwest, plus one rapidly growing suburb of Chicago. He took a history degree from the University of Missouri and obtained his graduate degrees from the University of Wisconsin, where he wrote his master's thesis and Ph.D. dissertation on Depression era politics in Wisconsin. He continued his interest in political history during a three-decade career at the University of Tulsa and South Dakota State University but gradually shifted his focus to social and cultural history, state and local history, and especially the small-town history of the Middle West (no surprise, considering his background). His seven books include three on Laura Ingalls Wilder and a fourth-grade history primer, South Dakota: A Journey Through Time, which is used in more than half of the schools in the state. Since 2003, he has been a full-time writer and historian. He is currently working on a book about "small-town boys" from the Midwest, ranging from Johnny Carson, Lawrence Welk, and James Dean to Ernie Pyle, Sam Walton, and Ronald Reagan.

[SUPPORTED WITH FUNDING FROM THE SOUTH DAKOTA HUMANITIES COUNCIL]