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A book of this sort depends upon the support and generous assistance of many people, and this one particularly so. Having thought about writing it for years beforehand, I began seriously researching the subject of small-town boys from the Midwest in 1999 when, during the summer, I visited Norfolk, Nebraska, Johnny Carson’s hometown, and then, in the fall, drove my daughter, Ann, to graduate school at Yale and stayed for a week to work on Sinclair Lewis at the Beinecke Library and to study Charles Lindbergh at the Sterling Library. The following week, spent researching Bob Feller and Mickey Mantle at the National Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, New York, was a glorious interlude for one who became a historian because he was a baseball fan first. Naturally, I had to spend some of that time perusing files pertaining to my hero, Stan Musial; the St. Louis Cardinals were my team in the beginning and remain so today. Although I made significant progress that first year, while on sabbatical leave from South Dakota State University, the time it took to complete the book extended far longer than I had anticipated at the outset.

In the whittling down of my original cast of characters to twenty-two, chapters on Charles Lindbergh and Mickey Mantle got chopped, new names appeared and others were dropped, and much else was revised and rearranged. I began to tell people who inquired about my progress that I had taken John Wooden’s advice to heart, quoting from Miguel de Cer-
vantes: “The journey is more important than the destination.” As the summers rolled by, I visited the hometowns of each of my subjects and traveled to dozens of libraries, archives, museums, historical sites, and other places where they had lived and worked. Two of the three men who were still living when the project commenced—John Wooden and Bob Feller—graciously agreed to interviews. Two letters to Johnny Carson failed to elicit a response. But I was able to talk to several of his schoolmates (Chuck Howser, Marilee Thorburn, Bob Bottorff, Bob Sewell, and Jerry Huse) and to his teacher and football coach, Fred Egley. I would also like to thank Fletcher Jennings, Bobby Burgess, Paul Samuelson, Hank Hansen, Harley Ransom, Art Fishbeck, and a number of others who were willing to discuss their friendship with or knowledge about the men I was studying and the towns with which they were associated.

The dozens of city libraries and ones located on college and university campuses, historical societies, archival sources, photographic collections, newspaper offices, and other sources of information that graciously assisted me are too numerous to mention, but I extend my thanks to everyone who responded to my inquiries and requests. I am particularly grateful for being allowed access to a variety of personal papers and other historical collections, including the following: Frederick Jackson Turner Papers, Huntington Library, San Marino, California; William Jennings Bryan Papers, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln; Henry Ford Papers, Benson Ford Research Center, Dearborn, Michigan; Sinclair Lewis Papers, Beinecke Library, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut; Sinclair Lewis Papers, St. Cloud State University Archives, St. Cloud, Minnesota; Carl Sandburg Papers, University of Illinois Archives, Urbana; Thomas Hart Benton Files, Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri; Ernie Pyle Papers, Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington; Bob Feller Museum, Van Meter, Iowa; Bob Feller Files, National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum, Cooperstown, New York; Alvin Hansen Papers, Pusey Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts; James Dean Collection, Fairmount Collection, Fairmount, Indiana; Sports Information Files, UCLA Athletic Department; Lawrence Welk Scrapbooks, North Dakota Institute for Regional Studies, North Dakota State University, Fargo; Ronald Reagan Papers, Reagan Presidential Library, Simi Valley, California; and Sam Walton and Wal-Mart Collections, University of Arkansas Archives, Fayetteville.

Photographs appearing in the chapter openers are courtesy of the fol-
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I wish to extend special thanks to a number of scholars and associates who generously lent their time to read and comment on one or more chapters and, in a couple of cases, the entire manuscript: Joseph A. Amato, Andrew R. L. Cayton, David B. Danbom, Richard Fried, Joshua C. Hall, Jon K. Lauck, Susan J. Matt, Thomas K. McCraw, Gary D. Olson, Jon H. Roberts, Michael E. Stevens, and Charles L. Woodard. Their advice did much to reduce errors and infelicities and to enhance the quality of the book, but I take full responsibility for any factual errors or mistaken interpretations that inevitably creep into works of this sort.

My life has been hugely enhanced by the love and support of our daughter, Ann, who observed how attractive a scholar’s life could be and decided to become one herself, and our son, Tom, another small-town boy from the Midwest and to whom this book is dedicated. My wife, Kathy, deserves a badge of honor for listening to most of these stories multiple times, which is only one of the many excellent qualities that make her so lovable.

All writing boils down in large part to the question of what to put in and what to leave out. What an author knows of his or her subject, in turn, derives from the amount and richness of the sources that are available, the amount of time that can be had to study them, and one’s ability to assimilate and interpret the information. For a number of my subjects, for example, Henry Ford, Sinclair Lewis, Walt Disney, Ronald Reagan, and Sam Walton, the sources were so extensive that a great deal simply had to be set aside in attempting to take a fair measure of the man within the framework
of my inquiry. On the other hand, for one man, Alvin Hansen, there has as yet been no proper biography, and for another, Meredith Willson, biographies (two, in fact) began to appear only after I had done most of my research and had started to write. With regard to Frederick Jackson Turner, I enjoyed the luxury of investigating his papers while attending a five-week seminar sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities at the Huntington Library, which houses the collection. Personal papers were crucial for my investigations in several other instances, but for a number of my subjects, books and other printed sources constituted the bulk of my research material. Each essay posed its own special requirements, and thus the nature of the discussion varies from chapter to chapter. Throughout, however, the focus has been on the ways in which the small-town or farm origins of the men on whom I have chosen to concentrate affected their later lives, attitudes, and behaviors.
The Boys' Hometowns

North Dakota
Lawrence Welk - Strasburg

South Dakota
Alvin Hansen - Viborg

Nebraska
Johnny Carson - Norfolk

Kansas
John Steuart Curry - Dunavant

Minnesota
Sinclair Lewis - Sauck Centre

Iowa
Meredith Wilson - Mason City
Bob Feller - Van Meter
Grant Wood - Anamosa

Missouri
Walt Disney - Marceline
Sam Walton - Columbia
George Washington Carver - Diamond
Thomas Hart Benton - Neosho

Wisconsin
Frederick Jackson Turner - Portage

Illinois
Ronald Reagan - Dixon
Carl Sandburg - Galesburg
William Jennings Bryan - Salem
Oscar Micheaux - Metropolis

Michigan
Henry Ford - Dearborn

Indiana
James Dean - Fairmount
Ernie Pyle - Dana
John Wooden - Martinsville

Ohio
William McKinley - Canton

George Skoch
Midwestern Small Towns
and the Experience of Place

The country town is one of the great American institutions; perhaps the greatest, in the sense that it has had and continues to have a greater part than any other in shaping public sentiment and giving character to American culture.
—Thorstein Veblen

I wrote this book because I believe that small towns have garnered less attention from journalists and scholars, including my own fraternity of historians, than they deserve. Writing in 1947, the literary critic Granville Hicks observed that “it was not so long ago that the United States was a nation of small towns, and we have not outgrown our small-town heritage.” Several years later, the historian Lewis Atherton noted that the history of the Middle West “has been largely the history of its towns.” The United States today has become a nation largely dominated by its cities and metropolitan complexes, but by definition, all cities, large and small, wherever they exist, had their origins as small towns.

History, it has been said, is written by and for the winners, and for nearly a century small towns have not generally been on the winning side. Rural towns and their surrounding hinterlands were home to about seven of every ten Americans in 1900. By 2000, that figure had dropped to only two in ten. From being located at the center of the action for much of American history, extending all the way back to the earliest colonial settlements, small towns have devolved, in the eyes of many observers, into cultural backwaters, and today they fail to register very highly on the public’s attention meter.

Public opinion polls show Americans in large numbers professing a desire to live in small-town atmospheres and preferring to move to non-
metropolitan areas. Yet they often scorn and denigrate people who actually reside there. Too often, their knowledge of such places and their understanding of the people who inhabit them is wanting. Few of them ever actually move to rural environments or even seriously consider the possibility. The small town has become a vague concept in many people’s minds of an alternative way of life, an escape from the city and the suburbs, a nostalgic return to a place that never was—in a word, a myth.4

This book, then, seeks to enhance our understanding of the importance of the small town in American life and the influence it has exerted across time. Telling the entire story would require a shelf of books, because for most of U.S. history this was a nation largely composed of small towns and their rural environs. But inevitably change has come, and in recent years with a rush. In the memorable words of the historian Richard Hofstadter, “The United States was born in the country and has moved to the city.”5 In the span of a generation or two after the Civil War, a people that had historically been to a large degree characterized and defined by its towns and farms was transformed into one dominated and given meaning by its cities and industries.

In the process, much was gained, but much was also lost. Having passed through the take-off stage of economic growth during the years before the Civil War, the United States rapidly proceeded during the late nineteenth century through a tumultuous phase of industrialization, urbanization, and bureaucratization that produced stunning increases in economic output, income, and wealth, accompanied by massive social change and dislocation. By the time the United States entered World War I, it was becoming increasingly difficult to remember that only a relatively short time earlier the nation had consisted of, in the words of the historian Robert Wiebe, a conglomeration of “island communities” in which people’s lives and thoughts revolved around local concerns and happenings and for whom events in distant places were, by and large, of small import.6

Yet if in retrospect it seems obvious that small towns would necessarily give way to the metropolis in terms of power, influence, and sheer numbers of residents, millions of people still resided in those towns and in the countryside, and many new urban dwellers remained in the thrall of small-town habits, values, and ways of thinking. The lingering presence of the small town in the American psyche continued far into the twentieth century and, to a significant degree, remains a powerful presence today. Call it nostal-
gia, call it cultural lag, call it what you will—Americans have yet to rid themselves of their deeply felt, emotional ties to their small-town origins.

A nerve was struck during the 2008 election when Republican presidential candidate John McCain chose as his running mate Alaska governor Sarah Palin, who hailed from Wasilla, a town of 7,000. For much of the Republican base, this was an energizing moment, as millions of conservative voters who lived in small towns or who identified with small-town values and folkways recognized in the forty-four-year-old self-styled maverick one of their own. In her acceptance speech at the convention, Palin sought to fire up delegate enthusiasm with a quotation from 1930s right-wing newspaper columnist Westbrook Pegler: “We grow good people in our small towns, with honesty and sincerity and dignity,” adding in her own words that small-town people are “the ones who do some of the hardest work in America, who grow our food and run our factories and fight our wars.”

Liberal pundits and critics, meanwhile, were quick to counter with the observation that small towns are not the exclusive preserve of conservatives and that being mayor of a small town and governor of a sparsely populated state hardly constitute sufficient qualification for being a heartbeat away from the presidency. Putting aside the merits of the debate, what is striking about the episode is the emotional energy and contentiousness unleashed by McCain’s decision. He clearly understood the symbolism involved in his choice, as was evidenced by his own immediate postconvention itinerary, which launched the Republicans’ general election campaign by taking him and Palin to stops in the small-town Midwest, where the surrounding atmospherics of Main Street America were on prominent display.

By 2008, these kinds of efforts at media symbolism had become little more than political spin and appeals to a bygone way of life. The actual impact of small-town America in the exercise of power and in the broader decision-making process of the nation was meager at best. Demography, it has been said, is destiny, and the story told by the census over the decades has been stark. An early tipping point occurred in 1920, when for the first time urban Americans (arbitrarily defined as people living in places of 2,500 or more) outnumbered their rural cousins, 51.2 percent to 48.8 percent. By 1950, the urban percentage had risen to 64.0 percent, and in 2000 the urban percentage stood at 79.0. By then, more than half of all Americans lived in metropolitan areas of at least 1 million people, and nearly one-third of the total population lived in ones containing at least 5 million people.
But demographics do not constitute the entire story. Even as most of the smallest towns began to lose population absolutely and even as rural America as a whole declined in relative political and cultural clout, they retained an influence disproportionate to their declining numbers. In a *Time* magazine column written in 1976, when Jimmy Carter—"the man from Plains"—was running for the presidency, political commentator Hugh Sidey noted that, with the exception of John F. Kennedy, every twentieth-century president after William Howard Taft had been born or raised in a small town. He quoted Bill Moyers, a small-town boy from Texas, who observed, “I think a person gets a better grip on himself and the world when he spends these early years in a smaller place,” and he cited favorably the New York intellectual Irving Kristol’s contention that the citification of the United States had been exaggerated: “We do have an urbanized culture, but we are not a city people.”

Thirty-two years later, however, after Ronald Reagan, who hailed from small-town northern Illinois; Bill Clinton, “the man from Hope”; and George H. W. and George W. Bush, deriving from Connecticut and Texas, had completed their turns in the White House, Peggy Noonan, a former Reagan speechwriter, bemoaned in the pages of the *Wall Street Journal* “the end of placeness” as one of the identifying features of the 2008 campaign. Barack Obama? “He’s from Young. He’s from the town of Smooth in the state of Well Educated. He’s from TV,” she commented. And John McCain? “He’s from Military. He’s from Vietnam Township in the Sunbelt State.” Neither candidate, to Noonan’s way of thinking, “has or gives a strong sense of place in the sense that American politicians almost always have, since Mr. Jefferson of Virginia, and Abe Lincoln of Illinois, and FDR of New York, and JFK of Massachusetts.”

And so with the rest of us. It is not so much that place has lost all significance in our lives, but rather that the terms in which we think about it have been transformed in ways we seldom stop to consider. Having removed ourselves from small towns, where people often knew each other personally and interacted face-to-face, to larger towns, cities, and metropolitan areas, where most of the people we meet on the street are unfamiliar to us and where human interactions are increasingly anonymous, we have become, in large measure, a people for whom place is more and more abstract, artificial, and ephemeral—in a word, unreal.

This book thus is also an effort to comment on and reassert the importance of place in people’s lives, with a specific emphasis on the small-town
experience, which, after all, for most of American history provided the locus, along with rural farmsteads, where most people lived out their daily lives. The cultural geographer Yi-Fu Tuan has eloquently described the emotional attachments people carry to the landscapes in which they grew up. He uses the term “topophilia” to refer to the affective bonds that tie individuals to the settings in which they live. The literary scholar Stephen C. Behrendt writes, “People tend to identify with their earliest experiences and the places in which those experiences transpired, perhaps because those residual places and experiences provide a security that rootless adulthood usually denies us.” Or, in the words of the homely aphorism, “Tell me where you come from and I will tell you who you are.”

The power of place in influencing human lives has been recognized throughout the course of human history. Our thoughts, our emotions, and our behavior all derive to a significant degree from our surroundings, as well as from our genetic makeup and neurochemistry, family background, education, social situation, and personal relationships. But people are not merely passive receptors of environmental signals; from early on, they actively help create the contexts in which they live. In the words of author Becky Bradway, “We create place and are shaped by it.” It is a dialectical process. For the young boys growing up in the Midwest who are the subjects of this book, the impact of the social environment on them admittedly was greater than their reciprocal impact on that environment, but the experiences, memories, attitudes, hopes, and dreams they carried with them into adulthood all emerged out of a dynamic dialectic that occurred between themselves and the places in which they were born and grew up. U.S. senator and 1996 Republican presidential candidate Bob Dole, who grew up in Russell, Kansas, spoke for countless others like him when he said, “I long ago outgrew my boyhood house. But I have never outgrown my boyhood home, and I hope I never will. A house, after all, is a roof over your head. A home is a classroom of character, usually a classroom without walls. In this case, home was a small town whose sense of community was as vast as the Kansas prairie.”

It is not my intention, however, to argue for “home” as a universal ideal or as an unqualified good. The idea of home, as the novelist Marilynne Robinson tells us, is always complicated by feelings of ambivalence and ambiguity. Not everyone remembers their home or homes with affection or enthusiasm. And even for those who retain warm feelings for and positive memories of their childhood homes, the opportunity to leave home...
and to pursue new adventures and make successes of themselves is a liberating force that drives them on to new achievements and more expansive goals. Many of the young men described in this book departed their hometowns at the first opportunity without looking back, while most of them nurtured positive memories of those towns that provided emotional ballast and support.

My purpose thus is somewhat different from that of the historian Susan J. Matt in her excellent book *Homesickness: An American History*. Longing for a lost home, which is the essence of homesickness, traces back to ancient times. Matt takes note of the appearance of the term in colonial America during the years preceding the Revolution and traces its evolution across the decades right up to the present. She distinguishes it from “nostalgia,” or a yearning for a lost time, observing that while nostalgia admits the ultimate impossibility of either literally going back to the home of one’s childhood or figuratively returning to the time in which it took place, it allows for a sense of comfort and stability that many people deem mentally beneficial. Both “homesickness” and “nostalgia” have taken on negative connotations to one degree or other in the minds of many observers. My focus in these pages is simply to describe how the conscious memories of and sometimes the unconscious feelings associated with my subjects’ places of their childhood resonated with them in later life and made an impact on their thoughts and behavior. At least for these individuals, they served as crucial factors in formulating a stable notion of self and in establishing patterns of thought and behavior that would be important to them, to one degree or other, in later life.

Ironically, in the past, although people generally enjoyed less choice than they do today over where they would live, they more closely identified with those places than people usually do now. All around us lies evidence of an attenuated sense of place in a society in which every locale has begun to look alike: huge, faceless, national and international corporations now dominate the marketplace; supercharged and constantly evolving forms of electronic media bombard people with overloads of information and visual and auditory stimuli; and old habits, patterns, and traditions rapidly fall by the wayside in the wake of new technologies, industrial change, and cultural transformation. Social critics and commentators speak now not merely of a *loss* of place but of a *crisis* of place. The latter phrase implies that we suffer from a crisis of *community* as well. “We have become accustomed to living in places where nothing relates to anything else, where dis-
order, unconsciousness, and the absence of respect reign unchecked,” writes author and cultural critic James Howard Kunstler. “The small town life that Americans long for when they are depressed by their city apartments or their suburban bunkers is really a conceptual substitute for the idea of community.”

It was not always thus. “The American country town,” William Allen White asserted in 1912, “preserves better than the crowded city and better than the lonely ranch and isolated farm life the things that make America great.” The Emporia, Kansas, newspaper editor, a product of the small town and an impassioned defender of it, was certainly biased in its defense, but he also knew whereof he spoke. He remained confident regarding the small town’s future and was committed to its preservation. With its “broad circle of friendships,” the “close homely simple relations” among its residents, its “spirit of co-operation,” and a general level of equality that permitted the emergence of “no immensely rich and no abjectly poor,” the country town, he believed, was “the most hopeful of our American institutions.” A century later, I believe, he would be astonished and perplexed by what he would see.

The same social forces that have contributed to the withering away of place have helped undermine the notion of community from the second half of the twentieth century right up to the present: the impact of the electronic media, especially television; increasing dependency on the automobile, particularly with the building of the Interstate Highway System; the growing ubiquity of air-conditioning; the expansion of malls and big-box discount stores; the proliferation of franchised fast-food eateries, filling stations, motels, and stores of all kinds; and the standardization of newspapers, school curriculums, popular music. All these tendencies contribute to the balkanization of society, to the fragmentation of lives and identities, to the loss of a sense of place, and to the notion that we exist “elsewhere.”

Wendell Berry, the Kentucky poet, essayist, and eloquent spokesman for localism, laments, “Increasingly, Americans—including, notoriously, their politicians—are not from anywhere.”

What author Harry Crews observed about southern writing in 1986—that the region’s dream of neighborhood, including its distinctive speech patterns, music, food, and even worship practices, had all disappeared—could apply to every region of the country. “Now our manners are gone and our idiom turns up in the Journal of Popular Culture,” Crews complained. “The food we eat comes from McDonald’s and our preachers are
more interested in sociology than theology. There is just enough of the
dream of neighborhood left to caricature all that it once was.”

If regional distinctiveness is in decline in the United States, the trend is
doubly evident with regard to the Middle West, which has generally pro-
jected a vaguer and more elusive image than its counterparts. Although
this study only obliquely addresses the theme of midwestern regionalism,
that phenomenon provides some of the context for the biographical essays
that make it up. I am heartened by the reviving interest in regionalism as a
general phenomenon and in the midwestern variant in particular. A major
impulse behind writing this book has been to make a contribution to our
understanding of midwestern history and culture.

Exactly what comprises the Midwest poses an interesting question, and
notions about the geographic limits of the region have evolved over time.
Here, I simply follow the standard definition currently accepted by most
historians, geographers, journalists, and government agencies, which in-
cludes the twelve states running west and north from Ohio to the Dakotas:
Ohio, Michigan, Indiana, Wisconsin, Illinois, Minnesota, Iowa, Missouri,
North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, and Kansas. The region has
typically been defined as much by absence as by the presence of certain dis-
tinctive elements or characteristics. Whatever is peculiar about the Mid-
west, it sometimes seems, is what is left over after considering New
England and the Northeast, with their Puritan heritage, industrial develop-
ment, and centers of politics and culture; the South, home of slaves and
plantations and inheritor of the legacy of the Civil War; and the West, with
its majestic scenery, exploitable natural resources, and images of cowboys,
Indians, and gunfights in the O.K. Corral. All of these are caricatures, of
course, but the Midwest seems less amenable to caricature than does any
other region. How do you exaggerate “normalcy”? Midwestern historian
Andrew Cayton contends that people generally do not feel passionate
about the region; that journalists, novelists, and filmmakers have projected
a midwestern image of “normalcy and niceness”; that when it comes to
history, not much seems to have happened; and that the area’s outstanding
military and political figures—from Abraham Lincoln and Ulysses S. Grant
to Herbert Hoover and Dwight D. Eisenhower—have by and large been
ordinary and uncharismatic figures. “The Midwest, it would seem,” he ob-
erves, “is a place where, to paraphrase Gertrude Stein’s famous line, there
is no there there.”

Be that as it may, there was a time, between the Civil War and World
War I, when the Middle West was the ascendant region of the country and when outsiders looked to it for leadership, energy, and creativity. Containing 28.9 percent of the nation’s population in 1860, the Midwest saw its share steadily rise to a peak of 35.6 percent in 1890 and then gradually decline to 29.5 percent in 1950 and 22.9 percent in 2000. One of the Civil War’s many unanticipated consequences was to lift up the Middle West to a place of preeminence within the sectional scheme. Historians Cayton and Susan E. Gray have observed that “in the second half of the nineteenth century there was no more dynamic or powerful regional story in the United States than the one that Midwesterners told about themselves.”

The region, in its very tendency toward the mean and the middle ground, seemed in the minds of many observers to embody the broader aspirations and values of the entire American public. “The ‘Middle West,’ the prairie country, has been the center of active social philosophies and political progressivism,” John Dewey wrote in 1922. In his view, it had “formed the solid element in our diffuse national life and heterogeneous populations. . . . Like every mean it has held things together and given unity and stability of movement.”

But broad historical forces were operating by the middle of the twentieth century to deflect attention away from the Middle West. Whereas from 1861 to 1961, eleven of eighteen occupants of the White House had grown up in the Midwest, during the half-century after 1961 only two of ten presidents did.

So long as agriculture remained a sizable and powerful economic force, the midwestern breadbasket was the pride of the country. The premier industry in the United States, the manufacture of automobiles, was concentrated around Detroit in Michigan, Ohio, and Indiana. Chicago, the nation’s second-largest city, had emerged by the time of the Civil War as the railroad—and thus the transportation—hub of the nation. During the postbellum period, Chicago’s steel industry, stockyards, lumber mills, grain elevators, newspapers, and architectural innovations were at or near the top in the nation. In the twentieth century, Chicago writers from Carl Sandburg, Harriet Monroe, and Sherwood Anderson to James T. Farrell, Ernest Hemingway, and Saul Bellow stood in the forefront of American letters. The University of Chicago and a bevy of midwestern state universities vied for influence with Harvard, Yale, Princeton, and other higher-educational institutions.

Once, the Chicago Tribune, Cleveland Plain Dealer, and St. Louis Post-Dispatch stood toe to toe with the New York Times, Boston Globe, and
Los Angeles Times as sources of news and political commentary. Midwestern professional sports teams in baseball, football, and basketball ranked with their rivals from the Northeast. Not till the 1950s did such sports franchises begin to spread south of the Ohio and west of the Mississippi. Until 1953, the Midwest was home to seven of the sixteen major-league baseball clubs; the Northeast claimed the other nine. The Big Ten athletic conference ranked supreme in college football, and although considerable competition existed elsewhere, Indiana reigned as the basketball capital of the nation.

During the latter decades of the twentieth century, with proliferating references to the region as the “Rust Belt” and the “forgotten quarter,” the Midwest found itself readjusting its ambitions and images of itself. The so-called heartland appeared no longer to spell dominance and pride of place. Despite its relative loss of status and influence and its smaller share of population, with a resultant reduction of representation in the House of Representatives, the Midwest continued to play important roles in agriculture, manufacturing, politics, scientific research, education, and cultural creativity. Signs of the region’s renewed vitality can be found in books like Robert Wuthnow’s Remaking the Heartland: Middle America since the 1950s.

The stories told here begin in the 1890s and continue right up to the present; I present them in an effort to comprehend both the continuity of small-town influence and the changes that have occurred over time. Putting the focus on the Midwest is partly accidental, partly intentional, and partly a matter of practicality. It quickly became apparent that trying to cover the entire United States would make the book much too long. Weighing breadth against depth, I opted for the latter, trusting that other writers could train their attention on other regions of the country, assuming that similar processes operated there to make one’s place of origin highly influential on one’s development in later life. Writing a book about small-town boys from the Midwest comes naturally to someone who fits into that category himself. I was born in a small town in north-central Kansas and grew up in four more of them in Missouri and one in Illinois. For the past thirty-nine years I have lived in Brookings, South Dakota, a university town of a little more than 20,000 people. It is no little Nirvana, but it has been an appealing place for me and my wife to live in and, as people say, a “great place to raise” our two children.

An additional reason to focus on the Midwest is that it has been the most neglected region of the country as a subject for scholarly research
during recent decades. New England and the Northeast, the South, and the West all have their own historical societies, scholarly journals, conferences, college courses, textbooks, and other types of attention. The Midwest benefits from hardly any of these. Several historical journals that once focused on the region, such as The Old Northwest, Upper Midwest History, and Mid-America: An Historical Review, have disappeared. In Chicago, the demise after just several issues of The Midwesterner, which touted itself as a regional version of the New Yorker, was a telling indicator of the relative dearth of cultural supports that exist for a distinctive sense of midwestern regionalism. The twelve state historical societies in the region are quite active, and much good historical work gets accomplished, but a great deal remains to be done to promote a collective sense of midwesternness.

A parallel case exists for promoting the history of small towns. Evidence of interest in small-town history is extensive, and a number of excellent books on the subject have been written in recent years. Yet in comparison to the books and articles that have appeared about the history of cities and suburbs, small-town history lags far behind. The “new urban history” that emerged during the 1960s, accompanied by its own college courses and programs, textbooks, scholarly conferences, and journals, devoted relatively little attention to the role of small towns. These historians spent far more time investigating large cities, the growth of suburbs, urban sprawl, the rise of edge cities, and the growing spread of megalopolis. The time has come to rectify this imbalance by reasserting the profound historical importance of small towns in American history.

Between the 1940s and the 1960s, Richard Hofstadter, brilliant and insightful historian as he was, contributed to the diminution of small towns as a legitimate subject of study. Earlier, in promulgating his frontier thesis of American history, Frederick Jackson Turner had placed rural society at the heart of his analysis, and his interpretation of the frontier derived primarily from his understanding of his own native Middle West. During the 1920s, a successor of his at Harvard, Arthur M. Schlesinger Sr., developed an urban interpretation of American history. For Schlesinger, small towns were something of an afterthought; in Hofstadter’s hands, they all too often became objects of derision. Small towns had furnished the formative experiences for Turner and Schlesinger, as they did for many other historians of their generations. In contrast, Hofstadter, who grew up in Buffalo, New York, emerged as a quintessential New York intellectual after moving to the city in 1936, first to study law, then to enter graduate study in his-
tory at Columbia University. He later became a professor at the school, remaining until his death in 1970.  

Few American intellectuals of the 1950s and 1960s exerted more of an impact than Hofstadter. His perspective was urban through and through. “As a historian, he legitimized the city,” wrote fellow historian Jack Pole in 2000. His lack of firsthand knowledge of the Middle West or of its small towns made it easy for him to believe that Sinclair Lewis’s narrow-minded village dwellers, eruptions of Ku Klux Klan activity, and enthusiasm for the rants of Senator Joseph McCarthy were all typical of the Middle West as a region. Whereas Frederick Jackson Turner overemphasized the western frontier and scanted urban places, Hofstadter and historians of his inclination failed to give small towns and rural America their due. Small towns as a category and the Midwest as a region deserve a closer and more balanced look than he and some of his colleagues were willing to give them.

Readers may wonder why I have not been as interested in rectifying gender imbalance in this study. Needless to say, it is not because I bear any animus against women. I have written three books about a small-town girl from the Midwest, Laura Ingalls Wilder, with frequent references to her daughter and writing collaborator, Rose Wilder Lane. With more time, I would love to probe more deeply into the subject of small-town women but have chosen here to focus my resources.

A final note on methodology. One way of examining the impact of small-town backgrounds on a sample of about two dozen highly successful men would be to look for regularities in their ideas and behavior and to attempt to specify cause and effect in statistical terms. One might probe the connections that exist between farm backgrounds and self-reliance, entrepreneurialism, ingenuity, or conservative politics. Or one might delineate the relationships existing between small-town childhoods and traits of optimism, civic-mindedness, drive, and ambition. Such an investigation might be quite useful, but that is not my approach in this book. It would take a larger sample than I have assembled to arrive at any rigorous conclusions. There is a place and a use for such endeavors. Social scientists who extrapolate behavioral regularities from mounds of data have much to teach us. Equally impressive is the unpredictability of people’s behavior in any particular instance.

I start from the premise that human beings are individuals—complex, ambivalent, and variable creatures who are difficult to fathom and pigeonhole. People exercise considerable freedom within the constraints and pres-
sures imposed on them. Garrison Keillor, a small-town boy from Anoka, Minnesota, underlined this point in one of his radio monologues about the fictional Lake Wobegon. “This is a country that believes in openness—openness of human nature, whether it be Ray Charles or Ronald Reagan, or both of them together,” he noted. “We believe in individuals. We believe that the crucial differences are between individuals, not between groups. . . . And that is freedom—not to be trapped within your category.” True stories, to his way of thinking, are about individuals, not groups, such as womanhood, manhood, “westernness,” or “easternness.” People, he suggested, are too various in their attitudes, inclinations, habits, and ideas to make blanket generalizations about them as members of groups.  

People’s thoughts and behavior are often highly unpredictable, varying with time, place, and circumstances. People frequently change considerably over time and behave differently when operating within different groups and in response to varying cues, pressures, and influences. We all have a variety of roles to play as context and circumstances change. All of this suggests that choice and unpredictability matter as much as necessity and patterned or regular behavior. Our hypotheses and generalizations about people thus must remain tentative and contingent.

This book illustrates the variety of ways in which the experience of growing up in small towns or on farms in the Middle West influenced young men who went on to distinction in a variety of fields. These highly accomplished individuals were hardly representative of midwesterners in general. But in heightened form these stories dramatically illustrate how place exerts profound effects on people's lives. For example, Meredith Willson was so fond of telling stories about his childhood days in Mason City, Iowa, that he finally took up the challenge of a show-business friend of his to write a musical play about the town. Henry Ford was so in thrall to rural nostalgia that he built a historical reconstruction of small-town America, calling it Greenfield Village, and he later spent millions of dollars relocating some of his industrial facilities to small-town settings. John Wooden imbibed values and teachings learned at home and on the playing fields and basketball courts of Martinsville, Indiana, to such a degree that he later incorporated them in his famous Pyramid of Success, which he continued to use as a teaching tool into his late nineties and which inspired numerous books, videos, and seminars developed by other teachers of character education. Bob Feller was universally identified in the public mind with his hometown of Van Meter as the “Iowa Farm Boy” in a way

Midwestern Small Towns and the Experience of Place
that current ballplayers seldom are. Sinclair Lewis felt the sting of students’
taunts and suffered from feelings of being stifled in the social environment
of Sauk Centre, Minnesota, so keenly that when he was thirty-five he
wrote an acerbic novel based on the town, but a decade later he admitted
that it had been a good time as well as a good place for him to grow up.
William Jennings Bryan’s famous “Cross of Gold” speech, enshrined in
American history textbooks, derived directly from attitudes and ideas that
took root in him during his boyhood days in small-town Illinois. All the
figures discussed in this book were affected in one way or another by their
small-town or rural childhoods.

The stories told in this book are additive, cumulative, and mutually re-
inforcing. I cannot prove that the imprint of one’s time and place in child-
hood deeply influences one’s later behavior and thought processes. Nor
could a thousand quantitative studies make an irrefutable case for the
proposition. Ten examples might have sufficed as well as twenty-two to
make a prima facie case, and thirty-five or ninety-five would probably have
been even more persuasive. But twenty-two seems to be about the right
number to illustrate the variety of experiences of growing up in small mid-
western towns. I include at least one person from each of the twelve states
in the region in order to provide a variety of examples from a number of
walks of life, and to trace historical change and continuity I cover a time
span extending over the course of a century.

I believe that the cases described here are sufficient to establish the plau-
sibility of my thesis and to suggest that parallel processes were operating in
the lives of many other midwestern boys, including those who stayed in the
towns or regions in which they were born. “We are all regionalists in our
origins, however ‘universal’ our themes and characters,” the novelist and
short-story writer Joyce Carol Oates has written, “and without our cher-
ished hometowns and childhood landscapes to nourish us, we would be
like plants set in shallow soil. Our souls must take root—almost liter-
ally.”

32 The stories contained in this volume demonstrate that the phenom-
enon of roots applies not only to writers such as Oates but to a wide
variety of people, including many who have grown up in the Middle West.
SECTION ONE

Small Towns in the Crucible of Change, 1890–1920
For its first three centuries of development, two of them under colonial rule by Great Britain and the third as a rising nation, the United States remained heavily influenced by its village and small-town origins. At George Washington’s inauguration in 1789, more than 90 percent of the population still made its living from farming, and more than 95 percent of the people lived in places defined as rural (fewer than 2,500 population). During the decades after the Civil War, accelerating trends of industrialization and urbanization worked a profound transformation in the American economy and society, and by the turn of the century great and rapidly expanding cities such as New York (population: 3,437,202), Philadelphia (1,293,697), Boston (560,892), Baltimore (508,957), Cleveland (381,768), Detroit (285,704), Chicago (1,698,575), St. Louis (575,238), New Orleans (287,104), and San Francisco (342,782) had begun to dominate American life and culture.

As modernizing trends spread their impact through every sector of the society, residents of small towns perceived that their way of life was losing ground to urban forces and influences. In 1900, the 6.3 million people who lived in 8,931 places with less than 2,500 population constituted 8.3 percent of the population, numbering slightly fewer than the 6.4 million who lived in the three cities of more than a million, which made up 8.5 percent of the population. Another 2.9 million people lived in the 832 towns of be-
between 2,500 and 4,999 population (3.8 percent of the total); 3.2 million resided in 465 towns numbering between 5,000 and 9,999 (4.2 percent of the total); and 4.4 million lived in 280 towns of more than 10,000 and fewer than 25,000 (5.7 percent of the total). Most people living at the time would have considered the last number to be the upper limit of a small town. Meanwhile, 45.8 million people (52.0 percent of the population) lived on farms and in other rural areas outside of towns having less than 2,500 people. Thus, the total rural population still constituted 60.3 percent of the total and was half again as large as the urban population.

Although urban numbers and population trends clearly had put small towns in a defensive position by 1900, there were still many of them, and most of them continued to grow in absolute numbers until the 1920s and 1930s, when the populations of many, especially the smaller ones, started to trend downward. Nevertheless, the central importance of small towns and their surrounding rural hinterlands remained deeply embedded in the American psyche, and many aspects of U.S. economy, politics, society, and culture remained strongly influenced by the nation’s rural, small-town traditions. Cultural lag may help explain why it was not until the 1920s that a full-scale assault was launched on the traditional dominance of small-town folkways and culture in America.

One of the key developments in the transformation that occurred in American society during the late 1800s and early 1900s was a rising tide of professionalism. Prominently situated within the new professions were social scientists, including historians, who saw their prestige and influence growing among the general public. Colleges and universities such as Harvard, Yale, Johns Hopkins, Chicago, Stanford, Michigan, and Wisconsin began to play prominent roles in developing and disseminating theoretical and practical knowledge that made a major impact on industry, politics, and society in general. Emerging as the most prominent historian in the United States during the early 1900s was Frederick Jackson Turner of the University of Wisconsin and later Harvard. He was a small-town boy from Portage, Wisconsin, a county-seat town, which expanded from about 3,000 to around 4,000 residents while he was growing up there during the 1860s and 1870s. His coming-of-age in the household of a prominent newspaper publisher and politician in south-central Wisconsin had profound consequences for his choice of a profession to follow and later for the scholarly work he engaged in.

He originally intended to follow in the journalistic footsteps of his fa-
ther. While engaged in his studies at the University of Wisconsin, he changed his mind and switched to history after taking a course in the subject from a charismatic professor. As an undergraduate student he was assigned to do some historical research on the fur trade in the area surrounding his hometown; he built on that experience and made the fur trade in the state the topic of his master’s thesis at Wisconsin. Later, he expanded that work into a Ph.D. dissertation at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore. There and at other schools in the East, the reigning interpretation of American history centered on European influences in a new continent (the “germ theory” of development), but the young scholar recoiled against what he perceived to be too narrow a point of view and opted instead to focus on the impact made by the kind of frontier conditions in which he had grown up in Wisconsin. He developed an entire scholarly career researching the influence of the frontier and the American “West,” which in his mind was, in large part, an expanded version of his own Middle West.

Interestingly, he trained his attention neither on the kinds of small towns in which he had grown up nor on rising metropolitan America, although by the time urban interpretations of American history began to appear during the 1920s, he expressed an interest in wanting to learn about them, too. But by then he was in his sixties and probably felt it was too late to drastically redirect his research agenda (he continued his investigations and writing after his retirement in 1924 up until his death in 1932). In a real sense, however, throughout a career that brought him prominent mention in history textbooks, Turner projected on the broad canvas of American historical development the remembered events and transformations characterizing his own small-town beginnings in Portage. In that light, he may have regretted leaving the University of Wisconsin for Harvard and might have better enjoyed staying in Madison his entire career, despite the greater prestige that came to him as a professor in Cambridge after 1910. Although the Turner thesis (or frontier thesis) is largely passé among American historical interpretations today, for several decades it remained the reigning paradigm in the profession, and it made the Wisconsinite one of the most influential American historians of all time.

Meanwhile, the dramatic election of 1896 went down not only as one of the most exciting but also as one of the most bitter and contentious in

*Introduction to Section 1*
American history. The two major candidates—the eventual winner, William McKinley, for the Republicans and his opponent, William Jennings Bryan, for the Democrats and Populists—possessed similar midwestern small-town backgrounds. Bryan, whose father was a local judge, was born into a family of higher social standing and obtained a college education. McKinley managed only to accumulate a semester of college plus a small amount of formal training in the law. Both became lawyers and then quickly gravitated toward careers in politics during their early thirties.

Like most of their contemporaries, they had assimilated the rudiments of the region’s dominant bourgeois culture and accepted the traditional Protestant beliefs and commitments of their families. Both men displayed ambition, rectitude, love for family, and conventional morality as well as allegiance to capitalistic institutions and a desire for social and economic progress; however, they ended up on opposite sides in the political realm. McKinley, a Civil War veteran, fell easily into the patterns of midwestern Republican politics, deifying Abraham Lincoln, identifying strongly with the victorious North, assigning to government a major role in enhancing economic growth, and supporting policies that favored business, both at the national level and back home on Main Street. Bryan, as a Democrat, identified instinctively with small-town dwellers as well as with agrarians in the South, the West, and his own native Midwest while also maintaining a special place in his thinking for the working classes in all sections.

McKinley characterized himself as a simple country boy. Nevertheless, he emerged as an outspoken advocate for industrial progress and economic expansion. During the election of 1896, his backers came primarily from the highly populated, more heavily urbanized and industrialized northeastern quadrant of the nation that contained New England, the Mid-Atlantic states, and parts of the Midwest. Bryan, meanwhile, drew his electoral strength primarily from the South, the West, and other parts of the Midwest. Bryan, the “Boy Orator of the Platte,” deliberately identified himself with evangelical religious elements and more generally with rural residents and traditional small-town dwellers—the kinds of people he had grown up with in central Illinois and had come to know well as an adult in Lincoln, Nebraska. His campaign in 1896 was the last great defense of the traditional rural agrarian order against irresistible modernizing trends that were transforming the United States at the time.

McKinley, whose victory in that contest established the Republicans as the majority party in the country for the next generation, sided with the
forces of industrialization, urbanization, modernization, and empire. He did not live to see the United States emerge as a world power during the early 1900s, falling to an assassin’s bullet in 1901, but his actions after the Spanish-American War, his modernization of the U.S. Army, his buildup of the executive bureaucracy, and his business-friendly economic policies all helped ensure that the kind of life he and Bryan had known as boys growing up in the Midwest would continue to fade away, giving way to new behaviors and conditions. Yet McKinley, much like his Democratic counterpart, retained huge affection for his hometown. Bryan visited Salem, Illinois, dozens of times after leaving home to attend college. McKinley, for his part, fervently longed to return to Canton, Ohio, after his time in the White House ended, a dream that was denied fulfillment when a crazed gunman shot him fatally in Buffalo, New York, in 1901. Recollections of childhood exerted a profound influence on both men.

More than Turner, Bryan, or McKinley, Henry Ford found himself in thrall to his boyhood origins. Despite this, no one did more to undermine the dominance of small-town ways and practices than Ford, whose Model T automobile became a revolutionary social force after he introduced it to the public in 1908. Having grown up on a farm near the village of Dearborn, Michigan, 10 miles west of Detroit, he did not manufacture cars in order to change people’s lives nor, indeed, to transform society. He sold them to make money, but in the process he did more than perhaps any other single person to undermine the traditional rural way of life he had known and loved. The practical, affordable vehicles he manufactured, hugely popular in the countryside, also appealed to urbanites. By the time he entered his sixties, nostalgia for the familiar habits and practices he had known as a youth grew so strong in him that he devoted much of his time to historical preservation. His most spectacular project was Greenfield Village in Dearborn, a historical village that went up alongside a museum complex where he displayed many kinds of historical artifacts, from kettles and guns to automobiles and airplanes.

Ford was often portrayed in the press as the epitome of midwestern agrarian values, counting among them honesty, shrewdness, unpretentiousness, and dependability. The huge wealth he accumulated did not prevent him from being a genuine folk hero, and thousands of ordinary Americans wrote to him much as if he were a friend, a valued neighbor, or a member
of their immediate family rather than being the powerful billionaire that he was. To many, he symbolized the America of an earlier, simpler time when society was less complex, individuals made more of a difference, and traditional folkways continued to prevail. But although in some ways he did seem the fulfillment of the expectations people had of him as a product of rural, small-town Michigan, his behavior, goals, and ambitions were far too expansive and mercurial to be easily explained by anything detectable in his parentage and background. His closest associates were quick to observe that he was a mystery even to them.

Even if Ford himself remained enigmatic, the impact his vehicles had on the rural countryside as well as on the towns that dotted it was plainly immense. The proliferating presence of the automobile helped restructure the geography of the rural community, gave a boost to the larger towns and cities where people increasingly drove to shop and entertain themselves, and altered in a variety of ways the daily habits and rituals of the populace. In acting out his enormous role in the creation of a new consumer culture in the United States, Ford inadvertently undermined the very traditional institutions and folkways he wished to preserve.

Besides attending to the development of Greenfield Village, the automaker pursued a variety of other projects intended to revivify as well as to derive lessons from the rural way of life that he had known as a youth. Chemurgy, the movement to exploit science for the development of new agricultural products, was one of his hobbyhorses. Another was the establishment of a number of village industries, mostly in southeastern Michigan, in which the production of parts for the manufacture of automobiles was farmed out to factories in rural settings rather than being concentrated around Detroit. The most dramatic of these efforts was the establishment of a rubber-producing facility in the jungles of Brazil along lines of small-town memories he retained from his childhood. The project was given the name Fordlandia. These kinds of activities had paradoxical results: Ford, a farm boy from rural Michigan, could not get over his love for his rural, small-town origins, and at the same time his business enterprises did more than anything else to transform and undermine that way of life.

The lot of African Americans during the decades after the Civil War was much more difficult than that of European Americans, regardless of their ethnic origins. Among those in the former group who made the largest
marks were two midwestern youths born two decades apart—George Washington Carver, who began life on a farm in southwestern Missouri living with white surrogate parents, and Oscar Micheaux, who grew up in a family of eleven children on a farm near Metropolis, Illinois, on the Ohio River. The former left home around age eleven (many specifics about his early life are lost in the shadows of history) to get a better education for himself; the latter was sixteen when he journeyed north to Chicago to seek his fortune.

Carver’s delight in the land and in nature accompanied him throughout his life as he carved out a career as an agricultural scientist and teacher. Micheaux tried his hand at farming in South Dakota as a young man and did fairly well at it until a severe drought put him out of business. Clever and creative as he was, he drew on his experience as a Dakota homesteader to launch a new career as a novelist and, later, to produce movies, becoming in the process the first great black filmmaker in American history. Both men were hugely resourceful and successful in their own, but very different, ways, and they were in agreement that Booker T. Washington’s philosophy for achieving progress for the black race was the correct approach to follow.

Born into slavery and left an orphan as an infant when his mother disappeared after being kidnapped by white night riders, Carver demonstrated remarkable resilience and an exceptional ability to adapt to circumstances while moving about from a very young age from family to family—some white and some black—in a series of Missouri, Kansas, and Iowa towns. Always, his sweet disposition, religious faith, positive outlook, and drive to improve himself landed him on his feet and placed him in positions where good-hearted and benevolent adults could perceive his potential and help set him in the right direction. His winding up at Tuskegee Institute in Alabama under the famed leadership of Washington was a fortunate piece of luck. The Tuskegee director was looking for young men like Carver to beef up the academic status of the school, and Carver, who by then had a master’s degree in horticulture from Iowa State College, felt a calling to improve his race and at the same time to make his own life worthwhile and successful.

He spent most of his life in the Deep South in the heart of the Black Belt and Jim Crow racism, far from his origins in the Midwest. But he retained affection for his roots, returned several times to visit the area around his birthplace in Diamond, Missouri, and maintained a sporadic correspondence over the years with several acquaintances he had made along the
way. Having grown up in the rural Midwest, he made it his life’s mission to improve the lot of rural dwellers everywhere, both among his own people and with regard to all races. Tuskegee, with a population of around 2,000, was a small town that, although differing in many respects from the ones he had known as a youth, also had many things that were familiar about it, which made it a comfortable fit for him as he proceeded through maturity into old age.

Oscar Micheaux, whose artistic achievements took much longer for white Americans to learn about (he was widely known in the black community during his heyday in the 1920s and 1930s), had in some ways a career much more varied and exciting than Carver’s. In the course of writing seven novels and writing, producing, directing, and distributing approximately forty-five movies, he traveled all over the United States, developed a flamboyant personality, and lived through a long series of dramatic ups and downs in his career and private life. There is no record that he ever returned to visit his early home ground in the Little Egypt region of southern Illinois, and he probably did not get back much or at all to the place where he homesteaded in southern South Dakota. He would spend most of his time as a novelist and filmmaker in Sioux City, Iowa; Chicago; and the New York City area.

He maintained a special place in his heart for the “great Northwest,” the region surrounding the Dakotas where the homesteading frontier was coming to a close and where he had gambled on his future during the early 1900s. He continued to believe that African Americans possessed exceptional opportunities to better themselves by taking out homesteads and making a living on the land, his own experience notwithstanding. In three novels describing his homesteading saga in South Dakota, he devoted several chapters to life in the small towns that catered to homesteaders like himself, and he was pleased to have earned the respect and even the admiration of most of the white people among whom he had been either the only one or one of the few black people living in the area.

Thus, although in much different ways and with varied consequences, Carver and Micheaux were heavily influenced by their boyhoods on the farm and by their experiences of growing up in small midwestern towns, and they drew lessons from those experiences that they believed were relevant to others, especially people of their own race.
Taken together, the youthful experiences of Turner, Bryan, McKinley, Ford, Carver, and Micheaux illustrate the huge variety of tendencies and outcomes that characterized the lives of Americans during the decades after the Civil War, but they also provide evidence of the channelizing forces that were operating to transform the day-to-day circumstances of people everywhere. Economic growth, industrial expansion, and transportation improvements were bettering people’s lives, rendering them more mobile, and expanding their options. Although factors of class, race, education, and social background considerably constrained people’s life chances and actions, opportunities were increasing for many individuals, at least, to move, grow, and improve themselves. The tug of tradition and memories of the past, however, remained strong, and small-town mores and values retained a special power to influence attitudes and behavior.
I spent my youth in a newspaper office in contact with practical politics, and in a little town at “The Portage,” Wis. over which Marquette had passed. There were still Indian (Winnebago) teepees where I hunted and fished, and Indians came into the stores to buy paints and trinkets and sell furs. . . . Is it strange that I saw the frontier as a real thing and experienced its changes? My people were pioneers from the beginning of the seventeenth century. . . . My mother’s ancestors were preachers! Is it strange that I preached of the frontier?

—Turner to Constance Lindsay Skinner, March 15, 1922

Frederick Jackson Turner, who grew up on the edge of the post–Civil War Wisconsin frontier, became a historian, inspired by a class he took at the state university during the early 1880s. Being an unusually bright, creative,
and ambitious young man, he emerged not only as one of the first professional historians in the United States but also as one of its best. He ensconced the remembered frontier of his boyhood at the center of his interpretation of American historical development. The Turner thesis (or frontier thesis) reigned supreme in the United States during the years of his professional eminence—first at the University of Wisconsin, where he taught from 1889 to 1910, and later at Harvard, until his retirement in 1924. It became the interpretation of choice in grade school, high school, and college history textbooks. Turner’s graduate students fanned out across the country to spread their master’s viewpoint in universities from Stanford and the University of Kansas to the University of Chicago and Yale. He was showered with accolades and prizes, from honorary doctorates to the Pulitzer Prize.  

Strangely enough, significantly enough, although he projected his own childhood experience of living on the frontier onto his own understanding and interpretation of American history, it was only late in his career that he began to appreciate the importance of urban history. His hometown of Portage was one of thousands of similar bustling, aspiring communities during the years between his birth there in 1861 and his heading off to college seventeen years later at Madison, 30 miles to the south. The very ubiquity of small towns like these invited him and his colleagues to take them for granted, considering them unworthy of special attention. Although a handful of historians started writing books and articles about the history of various American cities around the turn of the twentieth century, it was not until the early 1920s, just about the time Turner retired from teaching, that they began to formulate an explicit agenda for investigating urban history. Characteristically, the Wisconsinite took note of these early soundings, registering his endorsement of the project and agreeing to the importance of urbanism in the life of the nation. Although he continued his historical researches right up until the time of his death in 1932, it was too late for him to reorient his attention and methods, which had been focused on the study of what had become by then a declining rural America. It is ironic that Turner, who lived almost all of the first forty-nine years of his life in the towns of Portage and Madison, later making his home in Boston and Los Angeles, paid only passing attention either to small towns or to cities in his writing. 

Turner rocketed to the top of the historical profession within a decade of entering it. Rising to a privileged position within an inner circle that
controlled the major professional organizations, he was, in modern parlance, connected. Able to attract a steady stream of job offers from schools like Stanford, Princeton, Pennsylvania, Chicago, Harvard, California, and Johns Hopkins, he capitalized on the leverage such invitations brought him to improve his salary and working conditions in Madison. He practiced what his biographer Allan Bogue terms “aggressive professionalism” at the University of Wisconsin, building up a little empire for himself there and utilizing his stature as a researcher and his agreeable personality to make an impact on institutional policy, including the choice of the university’s president.3

As one of the first of the “progressive historians” who dominated the field during the early 1900s, he enhanced his status by being associated with the likes of Charles A. Beard, Vernon L. Parrington, Carl Becker, and James Harvey Robinson. All the major progressive historians came from small-town backgrounds in the Middle West, were born within a decade and a half of each other around the time of the Civil War, and went east for their education.4 According to Richard Hofstadter, who has written the best book on the progressive historians, progressive history did for history what pragmatism did for philosophy, what muckraking did for journalism, what critical realism did for literature, and what sociological jurisprudence did for the law: it transformed the field into something new.5

Despite Turner’s unsurpassed stature in the field, his scholarly output remained surprisingly meager, emerging only with the greatest and most reluctant effort on his part. Words could flow effortlessly from his pen when he was writing letters or taking voluminous notes on books and documents he was reading, as those jottings accumulated relentlessly in file drawers and boxes. As time went by, writing for publication became an increasingly onerous chore for him, often necessitating steady prodding from impatient editors. Book publishers never stopped asking him to write textbooks or monographs for them, however, despite his dismal record at producing publishable manuscripts. At one time in 1901, he had signed contracts to write nine different books, never delivering on a single one of them. He had to turn down frequent invitations for speeches, articles, and public appearances, while keeping busy enough working on the ones he did accept.6

A perfectionist as well as a perpetual procrastinator, Turner was a supremely curious person, almost pathologically unwilling to bring a halt to his accumulation of notes and reference materials. There was always one more fact to gather, one more source to consult. It therefore came as
no surprise to his associates on Wednesday, July 12, 1893, the day he was scheduled to present the final paper at the evening session of a special meeting of the American Historical Association, that he was holed up in his hotel room putting the finishing touches on his talk. Many of them were out enjoying the sights of the Chicago World’s Fair, including a performance of Buffalo Bill’s Wild West show. Turner, not yet thirty-two, missed seeing the cowboy hero that afternoon, but the paper he delivered, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” launched him on the path to success.  

The document ran to over thirty printed pages. Taking his cue from a recent bulletin of the superintendent of the 1890 census, which indicated that it was no longer possible to identify a clear frontier line of settlement in the West, Turner addressed the question of the frontier’s long-term significance in the life of the nation. “Up to our own day American history has been in a large degree the history of the colonization of the Great West,” he asserted in soon-to-become famous words. “The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development.” Stated in clear, forceful, unqualified language, the Turner thesis quickly helped make him the most famous historian in the United States.

As the line of settlement pushed constantly westward, Turner argued, American society frequently reconstituted itself along the frontier. “This perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life, this expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society, furnish the forces dominating American character,” he contended. The central dynamic force of American history had lain not along the Atlantic coast but in the “Great West.” The qualities of frontier populations that set them apart from their counterparts back east were nationalism, individualism, freedom, and, above all, democracy. Specific character traits included practicality, inventiveness, energy, and exuberance.

Over time, as Turner extended and revised his ideas in numerous classroom lectures, speeches, presentations, essays, and articles in scholarly journals and popular publications, he added other qualities to the list, including egalitarianism, optimism, idealism, industry, ambition, and courage.

In Turner’s view, previous historians had overemphasized “[the] European germs developing in an American environment.” They had devoted too much attention to the Germanic origins of American culture, too little
to peculiarly American factors. He proposed to substitute a developmental model identifying several stages through which frontiers passed as the line of settlement moved in successive waves across the continent—traders, ranchers, miners, farmers, merchants, and capitalists.

Turner’s implicit question for his listeners was, Now, with the frontier gone, closing the first period of American history, what does the future hold? That query held tremendous resonance for thoughtful observers in a year in which the national economy plunged into its worst depression up until that time, striking laborers raised the specter of class warfare, hoboes and unemployed workers rode the rails, agricultural protesters ramped up their demonstrations, and social observers worriedly pondered the future.

Considering the huge impact that the young professor’s paper eventually exerted on the historical profession in particular and American thought in general, the piece stimulated very little initial response. U.S. Civil Service Commissioner Theodore Roosevelt, whose first two volumes of *The Winning of the West* Turner had earlier reviewed, noted that the Wisconsin historian’s paper contained “some first class ideas” and that it put “into shape a good deal of thought that has been floating around rather loosely.” As Roosevelt suggested, Turner had drawn on a wide variety of sources in writing his paper. It succeeded so well in later years in large part because it embodied many of the attitudes and assumptions prevailing in the culture at the time. Thinkers and writers ranging from Europeans Alexis de Tocqueville, Friedrich List, and Thomas Babington Macaulay to homegrown intellectuals Thomas Jefferson, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Henry David Thoreau had previously noted the central importance of westward expansion in the life of the nation. In 1865, *Nation* magazine editor E. L. Godkin anticipated Turner in arguing that frontier conditions bore responsibility for most of the unique traits separating Americans from Europeans.

The idea of the moving frontier, conceived of as a place of bountiful nature and republican virtue where hardworking agrarians enjoyed a superior mode of living in what Henry Nash Smith called the “Garden of the World,” enjoyed virtually universal popularity among nineteenth-century Americans. This “agrarian myth,” which was only beginning to lose force by the 1890s, heavily influenced Turner’s way of thinking, and he never quite managed to transcend it. With the rise of industry, the expansion of cities, the spread of bureaucracy, the emergence of labor unrest, and the growth of agrarian protest during the 1890s, Turner’s reason told him that
the mythical “Garden” was gone forever, but his heart told him that rural life and small-town ways had been good. Turner’s West (or, more accurately, his Middle West) was a positive, appealing place, closely identifiable with the Wisconsin surroundings in which he had grown up and the romantic aura he attached to them. The historian David S. Brown has observed, “Like Henry Ford’s Greenfield Village, the Rockefellers’ restoration of Colonial Williamsburg, and Walt Disney’s famous ‘Main Street’ theme parks, Turner selectively commemorated those characteristics of American life he found appealing and ossified them in a dream world of virtuous pioneers and brave frontiersmen.”

As all this might suggest, psychological factors figured along with intellectual ones in inspiring Turner’s emerging interpretation of American history. In later years, he often noted that his boyhood on the edge of the Wisconsin frontier had been a significant factor in turning his scholarly attention to the forces and developments operating within that environment, whose lessons were later projected onto the broader canvas of all American history. Portage, named for the confluence of the Fox and Wisconsin Rivers where Indians had crossed over long before Europeans arrived on the scene, was a bustling new community, full of energy and high aspirations. It was only a year old when upstate New Yorker Andrew Jackson Turner and his wife, Mary, who came from the western part of the state, arrived in 1855. The town had grown to 2,870 inhabitants (one-third of them born abroad) by the 1860 census, a year before the birth of their first child, Frederick Jackson, on November 14, 1861.

With two younger siblings, Fred, as he was called as a child, watched Portage expand to more than 4,000 inhabitants by the time he left for college at the nearby state university in 1878. The frontier, already pushing westward toward the Mississippi River by the time he was born, left many reminders for the boy to observe while he was growing up. Able to watch Indians still pitching their tepees when he went out hunting and fishing, the youth listened to countless stories of Indians, fur traders, and loggers who had once roamed the area. Portage consisted of an immigrant stew. Children of Yankee background like Fred mingled freely with German, Irish, Norwegian, Scottish, Swiss, English, and Italian immigrants, as well as with a few southerners who had migrated north. He and his younger sister and brother enjoyed doing the kinds of things children everywhere did—skating and sledding on the Wisconsin River when it froze over in winter, swimming in it when warm weather arrived, enjoying weekly band con-
certs in the park, waxing patriotic on the Fourth of July, engaging in pranks on Halloween, and participating in spelling bees, oratorical contests, parties, and dances. As a high school student, Fred earned notice as a budding orator, a talent later honed in college and useful to him as an adult.16

Social relations in Portage remained more fluid and democratic than in more-established places further east, but some families and groups obviously possessed greater wealth and power than others. Elitism and egalitarianism coexisted somewhat uneasily. During Frederick’s youth, his father, who was comfortably situated but not especially wealthy by the standards of the time, was part of the town’s social and political elite. He acted in a variety of roles as newspaper editor, political operative, local historian, and town booster. As a Republican Party stalwart, he served four terms in the state legislature, two on the state railroad commission, nine as clerk of the state senate, and three as mayor of Portage. He also attended four Republican National Conventions as a delegate.17 Turner later identified his family and the quasi-frontier atmosphere surrounding Portage as the two most significant shaping influences on his career.18

As an undergraduate student at the University of Wisconsin he was drawn to the study of his own native region, partly by accident, partly by instinct. In the late 1870s, with fewer than 500 undergraduate students, all of whom enjoyed free tuition, the nascent institution was hardly more than a glorified high school. It was still far from the vibrant, respected institution of higher education that it was destined to become during the time that he was a professor there. The best that can be said of it during the 1880s is that it nurtured and did not stand in the way of bright, curious, and hardworking students. Classes in Greek and Latin, oratorical competitions, special researches, and standard course work posed worthy challenges. Turner’s commonplace books, in which he jotted down thoughts and notes from books he was reading, testified to his thirst for learning, catholic taste, and seriousness of purpose. Emerson, especially, appealed to him. But he also filled page after page with quotations from Horace, Dante, Francis Bacon, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, William Shakespeare, Charles Dickens, William Makepeace Thackeray, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Walter Scott, Thomas Babington Macaulay, John Milton, Thomas Carlyle, John Ruskin, Washington Irving, and other writers and thinkers. Beyond the knowledge and stimulus to the imagination that reading provided, his reading also prompted him to make many connections

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among ideas, which in turn sparked his creative instincts. These activities fostered habits that continued throughout his life. A major part of his genius was his ability to draw ideas, insights, and facts from a wide array of sources and his talent for linking thinkers, fields, and realms of knowledge, thereby generating new insights and new questions.\textsuperscript{19}

Anyone inclined to think of Turner simply as a provincial intellect, drawn to study his own limited locale and narrowly focused in his historical thinking, needs only to peruse his commonplace books to realize how mistaken such a view is. Throughout his life Turner emphasized that his frontier concept was only one aspect of a much broader conception of historical change and development that took into account all geographic areas and every aspect of human activity.\textsuperscript{20} At the start of his career, however, practicality led him to choose a subject closer to home, one he was more familiar with, and one for which primary sources were close at hand—the western frontier.

Ironically, the man who became America’s most highly regarded historian took only minimal course work in the subject as a student. At Wisconsin he had only one class in American history.\textsuperscript{21} The course’s teacher, however, changed his life. William Francis Allen was a professor of Latin and history, having emerged from a background in classical studies. He inspired the young student with his vision of scholarly inquiry and dogged industry in the search for historical facts and the generation of reasoned interpretations. Until his introduction to Professor Allen, Turner had assumed that he would follow his father into the field of journalism. Now he began to waver. In retrospect, he would say that no other person had influenced him so much as Allen, whose unique teaching style jettisoned rote learning. Instead, Allen used a topical method in which students worked with primary sources and formulated plausible explanations for historical actions and developments. A Harvard graduate, he had done graduate studies in Berlin and Göttingen. He frequently brought historical charts and maps into his classes, just as Turner would later on. Further imitating his mentor, Turner largely abandoned narrative history for an interpretive model that identified important topics and analyzed subjects from every angle. He asked probing questions and sought plausible explanations for the “whys” of history, going far beyond simple description.\textsuperscript{22}

Allen, the university’s sole historian at the time, was primarily interested in medieval history. Turner adapted the lessons he took from his medieval studies and later applied them to the study of American history. Allen, who
impressed associates and colleagues as a “wise friend,” “well beloved teacher,” and “noble soul,” was a Renaissance man in the range of his interests and talents. Influenced by him, Turner became a social evolutionist and learned the importance of community life. His commitment to doing research in primary sources, his devotion to historical truth, his penchant for institutional analysis, and his interest in comparative studies all rubbed off on his young follower. Turner would never be satisfied to follow the easy path or to take shortcuts. His interests and methods were wide-ranging and eclectic. “He made me realize what scholarship meant; what loyalty to truth demanded,” Turner later told his own student Carl Becker.

Turner’s mentor and future colleague on the Wisconsin faculty also facilitated and indirectly guided his pupil toward serious study of the frontier. Responding to a request from Professor Herbert Baxter Adams of Johns Hopkins University for information on early land holdings in Wisconsin, Allen invited six of his best students to examine land records of early French settlers in the surrounding region. Turner’s assignment, appropriately enough, was the Grignon Tract at Portage. Fascinated by the exercise, the young man later followed up on it, picking the early French fur trade in Wisconsin as the subject for his master’s thesis several years later. Recalling bundles of letters written by French fur traders that he had stumbled on while working on the earlier project, he obtained Allen’s approval to tackle the larger subject for his thesis. Hours of energetic labor spent in the Draper Collection at the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, working with manuscripts, government documents, newspaper files, and other sources, hooked him on the attractions of research.

In the process, the notion emerged that he might be able to carve out a field of specialization for himself in western history. “The more I dip into American history the more I can see what a great field there is here for a life study,” Turner wrote his fiancée, Mae Sherwood, the daughter of a Chicago businessman, in September 1887. “One must even specialize here. I think I shall spend my study chiefly upon the Northwest and more generally on the Mississippi Valley. The history of this great country remains to be written. I shall add my mite in the way of studying it.”

At a time when virtually no one else thought of western history as a legitimate subject of research, this was an unusual and bold decision. From the beginning, too, it is evident that when Turner talked about “the West,” he was thinking primarily of his own Middle West, called the Northwest or Old Northwest in the terminology of the time. Reinforcement for his
choice of specialization came when an ill Professor Allen asked him to take over an assignment to compile a study guide for women’s clubs on the history of the Northwest. Stealing time from an already busy schedule of studies and teaching, the young scholar was able to turn out the first published outline of frontier history.\textsuperscript{28}

By the time he finished his studies in Madison, Turner had acquired many of the skills and scholarly habits of mind that would make him an outstanding researcher and teacher. Master’s degree in hand, he moved on to Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore during the 1888–1889 academic year to work on a Ph.D. degree. Hopkins, only a dozen years old at the time, already stood at the forefront of graduate research in the United States. It was popularizing Germanic methods of scholarship and providing a home for teachers and students who would become leaders in their fields of study during the next several decades. Turner was already indirectly acquainted with his adviser there, Herbert Baxter Adams, one of the founders five years earlier of the American Historical Association. Adams was the best-known history professor in the United States.\textsuperscript{29} Turner also benefited from his association with Professors Albion W. Small, a pioneer in the nascent field of sociology; Richard T. Ely, a rising economist; and Woodrow Wilson, a Hopkins graduate on leave from Wesleyan College during the spring semester to teach a course in administration, which Turner took.

Wilson, only five years older than Turner, immediately liked the Wisconsinite, and the two engaged in many long conversations, finding themselves in fundamental agreement on most issues. On one thing, especially, they were passionate. They believed that Wilson’s South (he had been born in Virginia and had grown up in Georgia and South Carolina) and Turner’s West and Midwest had been treated shabbily by previous historians and that the situation needed rectifying.\textsuperscript{30} Adams, widely known as the leading purveyor of the “germ theory” of American development, was part of the problem. He traced American character and institutions back to their alleged Teutonic origins in the forests of Germany, as modified when carried through England on their way to the American colonies. With their focus on the East and on Anglo-Saxon culture, most American historians remained unaware of and uninterested in western American history. “Not a man that I know here,” Turner wrote Allen in Madison, “is either studying, or is hardly aware of the country beyond the Alleghenies.”\textsuperscript{31} A number of years later, he acknowledged that personal resentment and a sense of

\textit{Frederick Jackson Turner}
wounded sectional pride had influenced his thinking: “The Frontier paper [of 1893] was a programme, and in some degree a protest against eastern neglect, at the time, of institutional study of the West, and against Western antiquarian spirit in dealing with their own history.”

Returning to Madison in the fall of 1889 after his year in Baltimore (he finished the requirements for the Ph.D. degree the following spring), Turner quickly rose to take over his mentor’s duties as head of the History Department when Allen contracted pneumonia and suddenly died in December. During the following three years, Turner’s growing interest in frontier history found several outlets. A paper for the Madison Literary Club in February 1891 anticipated a number of ideas he later made famous in his 1893 essay. An article published in the campus’s student newspaper in 1892 accused historians of neglecting “the fundamental dominating fact in United States history”—the expansion of its population from coast to coast. “In a sense American history up to our own day has been colonial history, the colonization of the Great West,” he wrote. “The ever retreating frontier of free land is the key to American development.” As had become his practice, Turner sent out copies of the article to a number of friends and scholars, including Adams. The latter was so impressed by it that he invited his former student to present a paper at the American Historical Association meeting scheduled for the following year in conjunction with the Chicago World’s Fair. Ironically, therefore, the person against whom much of Turner’s animus was directed in formulating his frontier thesis was also the one responsible for providing the platform that initially enabled him to broadcast his views to a wider public.

Turner was not alone in championing the cause of his section of the country during the 1890s, a decade of growing unrest and agrarian protest, especially on the western plains. His 1893 essay constituted, according to historian Michael Steiner, “the historiographic counterpart of the farmer’s revolt, the Populist campaign, the rise of literary regionalism, and the development of skyscrapers and prairie houses at the heart of the continent in the last years of the nineteenth century.” No one was more in tune with Turner’s mood and way of thinking than his fellow Wisconsinite Hamlin Garland, only a year older than Turner, who envisioned the future of American literature taking place in the same western prairies and forests where Turner saw American history being made. “The mighty West, with its swarming millions, remains undelineated in the novel, the drama, and the poem,” Garland observed in his book Crumbling Idols. Not eastern
models and experiences but western ones were the wave of the future, he believed: “Our task is not to imitate but to create.”

Turner’s frontier thesis emerged as the dominant explanatory paradigm in American history around the turn of the century. One of his critics, historian Louis Hacker, complained in 1933 that for forty years Turner had “so completely dominated American historical writing that hardly a single production of that time has failed to show the marks of his influence.” By 1910, the year he moved to Harvard and rose to the presidency of the American Historical Association, his prestige was unmatched. The frontier thesis governed textbook treatments of American history until almost mid-century and became a part of the climate of opinion, insinuating itself into movies, novels, comic books, and other forms of popular culture. A collection of Turner’s essays published in 1920 as *The Frontier in American History* finished second in a 1952 poll, behind Vernon L. Parrington’s *Main Currents in American Thought*, on a list of American historians’ favorite books. A second compendium, *The Significance of Sections in American History*, captured the Pulitzer Prize for history in 1932. A group of nearly 300 members of the profession surveyed in 1964 deemed his ideas “still dominant.”

Just as Turner’s theory had displaced his mentor Adams’s interpretation of American history, his own formulations came under increasing fire as time went on. Slowly during the 1920s, more loudly during the 1930s and ’40s, and rising to a crescendo after midcentury, critics attacked his ideas, prompting vigorous and often emotional defenses from his disciples and admirers. Turner himself expressed some surprise that more opposition to his views had not surfaced earlier. In the 1920s, prominent scholars such as Benjamin F. Wright, Charles A. Beard, and Carl O. Sauer called into question his linking of democracy and the frontier; argued for the importance of slavery, labor, class, and capitalism as alternative explanations for American historical development; and began undermining many of the details of Turner’s interpretive scheme. After his death in 1932, many felt less constrained in aiming their barbs against a scholar who had been universally admired as a person and teacher, even by his staunchest critics, while he was living.

With regard to his rhetoric and methods, Turner was accused during succeeding decades of using fuzzy language, exaggerating his findings, employing vague concepts, and reasoning imprecisely. Empirically, he came under fire for a whole host of misstatements, overstatements, unsupported
assertions, contradictions, and gaps in analysis. His notion that the frontier had served as a “safety valve” for eastern discontent, draining off excess population and providing new opportunities for the unemployed, came under especially heavy criticism. His emphasis on the frontier to the exclusion of other factors, such as industrialism, urbanization, corporate expansion, politics, religion, economic growth, class divisions, slavery, and cultural carryovers from Europe, also drew sustained opposition.

The 1960s, a decade that witnessed the growth of a variety of liberation movements, antiwar protests, and cultural criticism of all kinds, unleashed major changes in the historical profession, including heightened criticism of the Turnerian legacy. The seeds of the “new western history” were planted during this period, at a time when some practitioners in the discipline began to question whether western history itself would survive as a subdiscipline in the field. The new western historians, led by Patricia Limerick, Richard White, Donald Worster, and others, trained their guns especially on Turner’s obvious omissions from the canvas of the West: Indians; blacks, Chicanos, Asian Americans, and other minority groups; women (almost completely absent); and the environment (strange, from someone so attracted to environmental interpretations). More, they demanded an entire reconceptualization of the frontier process, insisting that rather than being heroic and progressive, it could better be described in terms of “conquest,” “invasion,” and “triumphalism.” In their effort to demythologize the subject, they largely rejected models of progress, more often turning their attention to the brutalities, inequities, shameful conduct, environmental degradation, and political shenanigans associated with the conquest of the West. They did not hesitate to call Turner and Turnerians nostalgic, racist, ethnocentric, sexist, imperialist, and worse.

The new western historians were present-minded in approach, just as Turner himself had been, but the conclusions they reached were radically different, reflecting the conditions of their own time, just as he reflected those of his. They rejected the idea that the frontier came to an end during the 1890s and insisted that historians ought properly to turn their attention toward the West as a place rather than focus on the frontier as a process. (Turner’s emphasis on the movement and fluidity of the frontier, as it progressed continually westward across the continent, downplayed its connection with any particular place, although he tended to think of his own Middle West as the section best epitomizing the process.) Above all, they
insisted upon the complexity of the subject, rejecting simple, linear explanations, and they generally surrendered claims of objectivity, neutrality, and omniscience in favor of engagement and enthusiastic caring about their subject.\textsuperscript{43}

Despite the barrage of criticism ranged against Turner’s views in recent years, his image still seems firmly lodged in the historical imagination, even if often as a target for attack by his many critics. William Cronon, a successor of his and the Frederick Jackson Turner Professor of American History at the University of Wisconsin, has been counted among the leading lights of new western history, although he quickly rejected the label. In an article published in 1987, he noted “[the] remarkable persistence of the Turner thesis in the face of so much criticism,” observing, “We have not yet figured out a way to escape him. His work remains the foundation not only for the history of the West, but also for much of the rest of American history as well. Textbooks still follow the basic outline which he and his students established in their lecture courses.” Despite all the criticism that has been directed at Turner, Cronon suggests, no satisfactory paradigm for understanding western history has emerged to replace his work.\textsuperscript{44}

If, like a pesky fly that refuses to leave, Turner and his legacy remain with us, it should not surprise us. The historian’s hold on the American imagination derives from many sources. Primarily, it is a result of the intuition many people hold to, just as Turner did himself, that the process of movement across the land from the Atlantic to the Pacific was one of the most important developments in American history. People will continue to disagree over what to call it—progress or conquest—but the significance of what happened is widely agreed on. Turner had either the good sense or the good luck to be the first to elaborate the thesis in detail. His restatement of it in a variety of forms and often in less-than-precise language invited considerable criticism from scholars, but it also allowed him and his defenders considerable room to maneuver in trying to explain what he meant or to reposition him in the critical debate. Turner’s greatest distinction as a high school student and as an undergraduate at the University of Wisconsin had been as an orator. He parlayed that skill into a job as a teaching assistant in graduate school before switching over full time to historical studies.\textsuperscript{45} That rhetorical mastery shone through in all his writing.

Added to it were a love for poetry and a penchant for poetic expression. Turner liked to clip verses or copy them in his commonplace books, store
them away in his files, read them to his classes, and insert them in his essays. One that he copied and saved was *Song of the English* by Rudyard Kipling, one of his favorite authors:

We were dreamers, dreaming greatly, in the man-stifled town;  
We yearned beyond the sky-line where the strange roads go down.  
Came the Whisper, came the Vision, came the Power with the Need.  
Till the Soul that is not man’s soul was lent us to lead.  

Dreaming, yearning, pursuing visions, drawing on soul power—these were all attributes of Turner, who was not, it should be said, a conventionally religious person. His passion for discovery, his drive to learn and understand, and his love for things intellectual were closely related to his expressive turn of mind. As many observers—both critics and followers—have commented, he was as much a literary artist as historian. Turner certainly recognized this quality in himself: “I always wanted to be an artist—tho’ a truthful one!”

Like many others, Richard Hofstadter recognized Turner’s poetic proclivities, which, he observed, existed side by side with his critical inclinations. Poet and positivist coincided in uneasy tension. In public venues, Turner often stated his points in grand, vague, and exaggerated language. In the classroom and in private conversation, on the other hand, he was generally careful to stick close to facts, eschew easy generalizations, and insist on the complexity and contradictoriness of historical experience. This is what made him an exemplary teacher, especially of graduate students, who almost unanimously testified to his open-mindedness, his stress on objectivity, and his insistence on following what he called the “multiple hypothesis” rather than relying on single-factor interpretations. His mind was anything but simple. The relentless posing of questions and unrestricted immersion in primary sources were his watchwords as a researcher.

Turner denied that he possessed any explicit methodology or that he had formulated a well-thought-out philosophy of history or even of historical research. To a Columbia University sociologist who suggested that he sounded like a sociologist, not a historian, Turner replied that he did not care what people called him so long as he “was left to ascertain the truth, and the relation of the facts to cause and effect in [his] own way.” Turner’s dual roles—as hardheaded empiricist and as poetic romantic—underlay both his greatest strengths as a scholar and his greatest weaknesses.
Turner’s reputation as a scholar derived mainly from his identification with the frontier thesis, which he continued to defend vigorously, even though he recognized many of its flaws and gaps and realized that some of the language he used in supporting it tended toward exaggeration and lacked nuance. “The truth is,” he wrote in 1922 to Arthur M. Schlesinger Sr., who would follow in his footsteps as a professor at Harvard, “that I found it necessary to hammer pretty hard and pretty steadily on the frontier idea to ‘get it in,’ as a corrective to the kind of thinking I found some thirty years ago and less.”

In truth, although Turner never repudiated his frontier thesis, he quickly moved beyond it to concentrate his attention on regions—the sections, as he called them, that had been present from the beginning of colonial America and that had spun off from the frontier during the course of its three-century progress across the continent to the Pacific. To Turner, sectionalism offered far more intellectual excitement and provided a much more complex and satisfying explanation for American historical development than did the frontier, partly because the latter was subsumed within the former. His goal became the formulation of a “total” regional history into which he could fit every section from coast to coast and north to south.

Sectionalism was valuable as a working model, he believed, because of its comprehensiveness and potential for encompassing every aspect of the American experience. It illuminated conflicts that emerged out of economic and cultural interests rooted in geography. Sectional divisions had led to the Civil War, and they helped explain a wide variety of other developments.

Turner thus developed two big ideas during his career—the frontier and sectionalism. The first brought him lasting fame and influence, although he himself rather quickly moved beyond it, and many historians eventually deemed much of his frontier interpretation to be untenable. The only book-length publication to emerge from his work on the subject was the collection of essays put together in 1920, *The Frontier in American History*. Turner had written or presented ten of the thirteen essays contained in the collection before his move to Harvard in 1910, so it was already dated by the time it was published. By 1920 he had already spent the better part of two decades concentrating on sectionalism, a subject that would occupy him until his death twelve years later. The topic generated the only real book he ever completed during his lifetime, *The Rise of the New West, 1819–1829*, which appeared in 1906 as one of twenty-eight volumes in the American Nation series published by Harper and Brothers. Invited by series
editor Albert Bushnell Hart of Harvard to write on virtually any subject he wished, Turner chose to investigate the decade of the 1820s as a case study illustrating his contention about the central importance of sectionalism in American life. Only as a result of Hart’s persistent encouragement, cajoling, and badgering did the book finally emerge in print. Turner gratefully acknowledged that Hart had accomplished what nobody else could. “It ought to be carved on my tombstone,” commented Hart, who later would be a colleague of Turner’s at Harvard. “I was the only man in the world that secured what might be called an adequate volume from Turner.”

During his final years, Turner worked on a large volume carrying his sectional themes forward into the 1830s and 1840s. Despite laboring on it for almost a quarter of a century, “the Book,” as the coterie around him referred to it, remained unfinished when he died. It appeared three years later with editing by his personal secretary and two of his former colleagues. How devoted he was to this work and how frustrating it was for him not to publish more shone through in the final words he ever uttered: “I know this is the end. Tell Max [Farrand] I am sorry that I haven’t finished my book.” In addition to finishing his big book, Turner’s former students and friends also put together a series of his essays on sectionalism, which came out in late 1932 as *The Significance of Sections in American History*. He received the Pulitzer Prize for it posthumously the following year.

Historians found much that was praiseworthy in Turner’s three volumes on sectionalism and admitted that the topic was worth investigating. But most of them were moving in other directions and certainly did not deem the topic useful as a central organizing theme for interpreting the American past. Turner’s continued insistence throughout the 1920s that the concept of sectionalism was growing in importance seemed not very convincing to them, and the challenges facing the United States during the Depression 1930s and war-torn 1940s only reinforced nationalistic tendencies in the culture. Ironically, the frontier thesis, which Turner researched much less rigorously than sectionalism and which he veered away from as an all-purpose explanation, continued to be the major basis for his vaunted historical reputation. Sectionalism, to which he devoted the better part of his career and to which he actually made his most important contribution, was perceived as a dead end by most of his colleagues. Regionalism as a theme, however, did enjoy considerable currency, especially in the art world, during the 1930s and subsequently engaged the attention of a number of interdisciplinary researchers. Regionalism, as developed by art critics,
ograpbers, cultural historians, and other social scientists and humanities scholars, tended to be more wide-ranging in its subject matter and more eclectic in its methods than the kind of sectionalism practiced by Turner, who focused more on economic and political themes in his research.  

Whether Turner was talking about the frontier or about the workings of sectionalism, he always concentrated his attention, first and foremost, on his own native section—the Middle West. People often remain loyal to the place of their birth and view the world through lenses that reflect the region in which they grew up. As a student at the University of Wisconsin, he was already thinking about making his own section his major subject of investigation. During his year of study at Johns Hopkins, he planned to offer a seminar on the history of the Northwest when he returned to Madison. Once back home, as he launched his career as a professor, he channeled most of his energy into his midwestern researches. Many of his papers and essays focused explicitly on his native section, including “The Democratic Education of the Middle West” (1903), “The Ohio Valley in American History” (1909), “Middle Western Pioneer Democracy” (1918), “The Children of the Pioneers” (1926), and “The Significance of the Mississippi Valley in American History” (delivered in 1910 at Iowa City at a meeting of the fledgling Mississippi Valley Historical Association). Most of the proof Turner advanced for his frontier thesis derived from the nineteenth-century Midwest, and his books on sectionalism reflected a similar midwestern bias. The Rise of the New West, 1819–1829, and The United States, 1830–1850, followed similar formats. The first part of each book sketched the characteristics of each section of the country, and the second part chronicled historical events during the period under discussion as sectional forces impinged on them. Most obviously, the latter, his major opus, devoted ninety-nine pages to the Middle West, whereas the South Atlantic states received only sixty-six pages and no other section received more than fifty-three.

In his 1901 essay “The Middle West,” referring to the twelve states from Ohio to Kansas, Nebraska, and the Dakotas, Turner identified the region as “the economic and political center of the Republic” and concluded that the future of the nation lay with it. Hofstadter saw Turner’s overemphasis on his native section as a case of “arrested development.” But even if the Wisconsinite was perhaps too attached to his own Middle West and generalized too much from it, as many scholars think, he was not alone. Many Americans during the early 1900s agreed with him that the Midwest

*Frederick Jackson Turner*
was the coming region—the center of growth, innovation, and influence in the United States.

Turner was not only describing home territory when he wrote; he was personally identifying with it and arguing for its worth. He had enjoyed life in Madison and never quite felt at home in Boston. Though he was warmly welcomed by the Harvard community and involved himself in many clubs and organizations there, he never developed the close personal friendships that had enveloped him in Madison. He sensed a chill in the social atmosphere in Cambridge, which sometimes made it seem like purgatory. “I love my Middle West,” he wrote Carl Becker several years after leaving Madison, and he sometimes wondered why he had ever moved away. “I am,” he admitted, “still a western man in all but my residence.”

Clearly, Turner was a bifurcated man. He was attracted to the adventure and excitement of movement and change, as embodied in his notion of the frontier, on the one hand. Meanwhile, he remained attached to a romantic vision of home, implicit in his concept of sectionalism, with a specific focus on his native Midwest. A wide range of thinkers have commented on this general phenomenon. “Human life,” according to Lewis Mumford, “swings between two poles: movement and settlement,” notions embodied in Turner’s concepts of frontier and section. Communities, Robert Bellah and his associates have written, have a history and are constituted by their past in the form of a “community of memory,” which does not forget its past. Turner partook of this process and did as much as anyone to promote it during the early 1900s. His attachment to the Midwest and his desire to defend it and to burnish its image may have led him at points to exaggerate its importance. Then again, his predecessors in the historical profession had overstated the relative importance of Puritan New England, so there was some kind of rough justice there.

Even if Turner accomplished something to redress regional imbalances in American historiography, he failed to advance understanding in another area: urban history, including the study of small towns. He was not unaware of the increasing importance of cities in American life, and he did pay some attention to towns and cities in his writings and in the classroom, but they always remained peripheral in his accounts. In some versions of his presentation of the stages of frontier development, he threw in the rise of towns and cities along with industrialism during the final stage, but he never developed his analysis of urbanism in any detail. The sociologist C. Wright Mills and others have noted that many early twentieth-century so-
cial theorists, like Turner, derived from similar small-town and rural roots. Even if his background in Portage and Madison helps explain his failure to discuss the role of larger cities in American development, it does not explain why he failed to say much about small towns.

To some degree, Turner shared the antiurban bias of many of his contemporaries, such as Theodore Dreiser, John Dewey, and Frank Lloyd Wright. His aversion to an urban interpretation might better be explained, however, by the lack of much in the way of models for such discussion and by his inability to formulate a conceptual framework to encompass the subject. Before the 1920s and 1930s, when such historians as Arthur Schlesinger Sr., and Carl Bridenbaugh began urging the importance of urban history, studies of towns and cities by historians and other scholars, though not entirely lacking, remained infrequent and underdeveloped. Turner, closely in tune with prevailing intellectual currents, seems to have been intrigued by an urban interpretation, even if he never pursued the idea himself. He wrote Schlesinger in 1925, “There seems likely to be an urban reinterpretation of our history.” Earlier, he had jotted down some notes for a possible paper, “The Significance of the City in American History,” which would examine the relationship among frontier, section, and city. In different times and circumstances Turner might have become the advocate of an urban thesis of American history. “Use data on city growth in relation to developing section and extension of frontier,” he wrote in a note to himself during the 1920s. “Show how sectional rivalry for extending frontier, new settled regions & new resources affected urban society. When & how & why did cities become densely populated and why? How did urban (including alien) ideas, interests, and ideals react on frontier and sectional items?” Although intellectually Turner was prepared to grant the importance of cities in American life, he felt more comfortable contemplating a future following upon lines of the nation’s more rural past.

This from a man who lived a decade and a half in Boston and the last five years of his life in the Los Angeles suburb of Pasadena (where he continued his historical researches at the Huntington Library). His ideal place to live remained Madison, which, with a population of 57,899 in 1930, ranked somewhere between a large town and a small city. Although Turner retained some nostalgia for his boyhood home, his reactions on returning to Portage from a year spent in Baltimore as a graduate student had been decidedly negative. Writing his fiancée in June 1889, he had said he was “stagnating” there. “What an awful life.” After having resided in Madison

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and Baltimore, Portage had seemed like a “terrible” place to live. “Even home is a little changed. I have grown away from my native place. How could I live elsewhere than in a university town.” As he grew older, however, a nostalgic tone crept into his recollections of the town, and he grew much more affectionate toward it, speaking glowingly of its attractions.

It would take at least another generation before historians paid much serious attention to small towns. Studies like Lewis Atherton’s 1954 book, *Main Street on the Middle Border*, about midwestern small towns remained the exception rather than the rule. Stanley Elkins and Eric McKitrick published an article that year suggesting that Turner’s frontier thesis could be rescued as a useful guide for research if scholars would investigate the development of community ties in small midwestern towns, for it “was unquestionably the town from which the tone of life in Ohio, Indiana and Illinois came to be taken, rather than from the agriculture in which an undoubtedly majority of the population was engaged.” Richard C. Wade, meanwhile, deftly described the importance of larger cities operating as “spearheads of the frontier” in the pre–Civil War Midwest, a theme picked up by other scholars. It took some time for momentum to build. During the 1960s and ’70s, social historians in search of community development expanded our knowledge of small-town and rural community. Histories of colonial towns written from a social history perspective proliferated, and eventually researchers began paying more attention to small towns in the Midwest and other sections of the country. In recent years, small-town history has begun to establish itself as a respectable part of urban history.

Unfortunately, much less has been accomplished in the way of writing midwestern history. As noted in the introduction to this book, the Middle West remains a poor cousin compared to the other sections in American historiography. The Northeast, the South, and the West all have vigorous historical associations, journals, conferences, and networks devoted to their study. The Midwest has been gaining ground during the last decade or two, but it remains to be seen how much it will be able to close the huge gap that continues to exist between it and the other regions in the historical imagination. Were Frederick Jackson Turner still with us today, it is likely that he would be in the vanguard of scholars calling for a renewed interest in the history of the section.