Growing Up Midwestern

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Abstract
After setting myself the task of writing a paper on “growing up Midwestern,” otherwise known as “Midwestern childhood,” I realized I had made a horrible mistake. The harder I thought about the topic, the muddier my thoughts became. The truth is that we know a great deal about individual Midwestern childhoods, but what we know about Midwestern childhood, writ large, is considerably less clear. What does it mean to “grow up Midwestern?” If a historian takes her cues from economist John Ise’s autobiographical account of growing up in the late 19th century in north central Kansas, it means to work hard on a family’s land, experience drought, grasshoppers and near economic ruin, and decide in one’s adult years to make a life somewhere other than the farm.

Disciplines
Cultural History | United States History | Women's History

Comments
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Growing Up Midwestern

Pamela Riney-Kehrberg, Iowa State University

After setting myself the task of writing a paper on “growing up Midwestern,” otherwise known as “Midwestern childhood,” I realized I had made a horrible mistake. The harder I thought about the topic, the muddier my thoughts became. The truth is that we know a great deal about individual Midwestern childhoods, but what we know about Midwestern childhood, writ large, is considerably less clear. What does it mean to “grow up Midwestern?” If a historian takes her cues from economist John Ise’s autobiographical account of growing up in the late 19th century in north central Kansas, it means to work hard on a family’s land, experience drought, grasshoppers and near economic ruin, and decide in one’s adult years to make a life somewhere other than the farm. To grow up Midwestern, in Ise’s experience and that of his many brothers and sisters, was to be born in the country, but live one’s adult days in cities and towns. Drawing inspiration from John Miller’s recent book, Small Town Dreams: Stories of Midwestern Boys Who Shaped America, growing up Midwestern might mean coming from a small place, but embodying great ambition, and using that ambition to propel oneself to fame and fortune, often beyond one’s Midwestern origins. This was the story of Henry Ford, Meredith Willson and Lawrence Welk. Equally, a historian could draw inspiration from a later period of history, and Beth Bailey’s Sex in Heartland, which chronicled the sexual revolution on the campus of Kansas University. To be young and Midwestern in that account was to escape the stifling conformity of the nation’s midsection and experiment with all of the joys that freedom from parental restraints had to offer.¹ The growing up Midwestern of the late 19th century was not that of the early twentieth century, nor was it that of the 1960s. Place, space and time all changed the contours and meaning of childhood and youth.

¹
As is true of other types of history, place, space and time have a considerable role in the history of childhood. As a result, many histories of childhood and youth have a strong connection to a particular region of the U.S. Histories of Puritan childhood, of course, are placed within the context of New England. The rough conditions of early settlement shaped lives and expectations, in contrast to that of others left behind on English soil. Discussions of 19th century American slave childhood are written within the context of the larger geographic South, and are shaped by the environmental and social conditions of that place. Place, of course, matters, and that story could not be written within any other spatial context. Place and space also informed Elliott West’s masterful narrative *Growing Up with the Country: Childhood on the Far Western Frontier*. West’s discussions of western childhood were bounded on two sides. On the one side was place, to the west of the Missouri River. The other boundary was a more elusive concept, the frontier. The children West described were living in new places, recently opened to settlement by Euro-American peoples. These two features of their lives strongly shaped their prospects. Being west of the Missouri River brought them, and their parents, into contact with environments with which they had no previous experience. Being among the earlysettlers of these locations also meant that the conditions in which they lived were rough and often unforgiving. This gave youngsters developmental experiences that were far different than those of their parents, and an identity that was also different from that of their mothers and fathers, who were often far more intimidated by these wild western lands than their children. As West wrote, “the westering experience meant one thing to older pioneers and quite another to the younger. The youngest emigrants had little of the East to remember, and those born in the new country had none whatsoever. For the young, in a sense, this was not a frontier at all—not, that is, a line between the familiar and the new. Rather, it was the original measure for the rest of their
lives, and that measure was not the one their parents had known.” As West so carefully delineated, being raised in a particular place and time mattered.

In each of these cases, multiple conditions bounded children’s lives. It was possible to define their experiences because researchers could see the edges of those children’s universes. Puritan children lived in New England, and within a particular religious culture. Slave children lived in the south, and under the economic and social constraints created by bondage. West’s frontier children lived in a broad region, but in situations in which their communities were just being settled. When I wrote about Midwestern farm childhood, I also was careful to rough out the edges of my topic; I researched the lives of children and youth who lived in a particular set of states, between 1870 and 1920, and whose parents engaged in a certain type of activity in order to earn their daily bread. Because I drew the lines in that way, I could come to relatively confident conclusions about those children’s lives. In general, work defined their days. School, for the vast majority, had to take a back seat to work, and play came in a distant third. Usefulness was the most important expectation imposed upon them by parents, and that fact changed little between the end of the Civil War, and the end of the First World War. I found very few variations in this expectation between the children of middling parents and those of the poor. For these young farmers, middle class urban expectations of a relatively leisurely childhood, defined by school and play, were as yet in the distance. Only in the post-World War II period would the lives of the Midwest’s farm children come to resemble those of their urban peers.

Historical surveys of family history and the history of childhood are not without discussions of place, but they are largely without the Midwest. Steve Mintz and Susan Kellogg published Domestic Revolutions: A Social History of American Family Life in 1988, and it is
one of the standard texts on American family history. In it, we find the predictable geographic markers: Puritan New England and colonists at Jamestown. In fact, the early period is fairly well signposted in regional terms, with discussions of the variety of experiences imposed by varying terrain, climates and natural resources. Slavery, too, is located in the South. Industrialization, somewhat problematically, is placed in the large cities of the northeast. The rest of the book is largely without the nation’s midsection, although Chicago does merit the occasional mention. Place, for the most part, was not central to the authors’ discussions of children’s lives in the period following the Civil War.

Joseph Illick’s 2002 book, American Childhoods, takes a different approach. He categorizes childhood experiences based on race, class, and broad categories of residence, such as suburban, inner city and rural. In places where a discussion of region would have substantially enhanced the discussion, such as the very short section on rural childhoods, he remains silent. The result is rather unsatisfactory, given the enormous ways in which rural childhood was, and is, shaped by regional considerations.

Even Steven Mintz, in his tour de force on childhood, Huck’s Raft, spends little time on the meaning of region in children’s lives. The enormity of his task lends itself to “bucket” discussions of the experiences of childhood and youth. While the use of examples occasionally leads to examinations of child life that could be construed as regional, that is not the usual way in which Mintz organizes his material. Much of the discussion of World War II, for example, focuses in upon Japanese-American youth and relocation, and ethnic tensions in places like Los Angeles. There is, however, no discussion of larger regional variations in the experience of children and youth in the midst of World War II. Region is simply not a significant part of Mintz’s story, and the Midwest as a place does not figure strongly.
If the standard texts on the history of childhood have little to tell us about the Midwestern experience, there are a plethora of other accounts that do provide us with snapshots of childhood in the heartland. While there probably is no such thing as a “representative story” or a representative Midwestern childhood, there are many useful narratives of growing up in the nation’s midsection. I am going to use three of those stories as examples. Each of the stories I have chosen is from a best-selling book. I have done this for several reasons. Each of these stories, to some degree, will be familiar to those of us interested in the Midwest. They are also known to a host of other Americans who read for pleasure and who are captivated by a good story. These stories sometimes tell us something we want to hear about this region we have chosen to study. They tell us about a life that in some way represented an ideal. But sometimes these stories tell us about something we ought to do better – something that needs improving because it so flies in the face of societal perceptions of what a childhood in the nation’s heartland should have been.

One of the best known of my chosen stories is that of Mildred Armstrong Kalish, who grew up in rural Iowa, and recounted her childhood in the best-selling book, *Little Heathens: Hard Times and High Spirits on an Iowa Farm During the Great Depression*. Unlike the usual late 1920s, early 1930s script, Kalish’s grandfather banished her father from their lives, and her father and mother divorced, something that was rather unusual in that era. From then on, Kalish’s father was dead to them. Her grandparents took in the now-fatherless family of five, and settled them on one of the family’s properties, a farm near Garrison, Iowa. Although she and her siblings lived in town during the winter in order to attend school, Kalish’s story is largely one of farm life in hard times.
Although Kalish’s childhood story began with a somewhat unusual and largely unexplained family breakdown, what followed was a tale of what many Midwesterners would like to believe was a typical, farm-based childhood. It almost reads like a stereotype. Kalish’s stern grandfather was definitely in charge of the household, and he believed in rules, rigid and unyielding. The children did chores, and the adults insisted upon thrift. Although their mother was somewhat unconventional, she enforced upon her brood serious attention to education. When describing her mother, Kalish wrote “She was a tyrant when it came to leaning, or anything else pertaining to school. She encouraged, nay, demanded, that we do our homework, that we do more in school than was asked of us, and that we participate in spelling, dramatic, and music . . . competitions.” True to stereotype, Kalish’s rural Iowa was a place where parents cared about their children’s education.

Kalish’s narrative includes all the homey and important elements of their lives such as domestic and wild pets, farm work, and cooperation, topped off by the kind of food your grandmother would have taken to a Midwestern potluck supper. The reader, in fact, learns how to make such Midwestern farm favorites as wilted lettuce salad, scalloped corn, buttermilk pancakes and homemade marshmallows. There is also a strong note of earthiness about her story, as well there should be, given its location in the heart of Iowa’s farm country. It is the tale of lives lived within a framework of hard labor, thrift, and caring. What resulted was a love story about growing up in the rural Midwest. As the book reviewer for the New York Times commented about Kalish’s writing, “she reports quite convincingly that she had a flat-out ball growing up (“It was quite a romp”) and her terrifically soaring love for those childhood memories saturates this book with pure charm, while coaxing the reader into the most unexpected series of sensations: joy, affection, wonder and even envy.” Mildred Armstrong
Kalish lived a Midwestern childhood well within the parameters of what we would expect of such a set of experiences, and conveyed her experiences in such a way that most of us with the tiniest bit of nostalgia would want to share a piece of it, even if just in the form of a piece of her grandmother’s pumpkin pie.

Move forward a generation, and the interested reader can take a stroll through Bill Bryson’s childhood in the Des Moines of the 1950s and 1960s. Clearly, this was a different place and a different kind of childhood than Mildred Kalish’s, but nonetheless, one that inspires a bit of the same sort of awe and envy. Bryson was the child of two working parents, growing up in the midst of post-war prosperity. Bryson wrote, “No wonder people were happy. Suddenly they were able to have things they had never dreamed of having, and they couldn’t believe their luck. . . . It was the last time that people would be thrilled to own a toaster or a waffle iron.”

Bryson spent this time of prosperity in Des Moines, which he described as a “safe, wholesome city. . . . It was a nice city – a comfortable city.” It was also a city with which its young inhabitants were incredibly familiar. The kids, in this urban, Midwestern world, wrote Bryson, “were always outdoors – I knew kids who were pushed out the door at eight in the morning and not allowed back in until five unless they were on fire or actively bleeding – and they were always looking for something to do. If you stood on any corner with a bike – any corner anywhere – more than a hundred children, many of whom you had never seen before, would appear and ask you where you were going.”

It was a world where children could easily and happily play in the park, on their street corner, or in the buildings downtown, all places that Bryson frequented regularly, and without adult supervision. The only real terrors in this world were poison sumac and neighborhood bullies.
Bryson also remembered his summer visits to his grandparents in rural Iowa with a sense of awe and great satisfaction. His description of the state’s vast agricultural lands is telling: “Stride across an Iowa farm field and you feel as if you could sink in up to your waist. You will certainly sink in up to your ankles. It is like walking around on a very large pan of brownies.”

His warm and fragrant memories encompassed the small town of Winfield, a place he dearly loved. It was an Iowa of walks downtown, cold bottles of Nehi, jiggling bowls of Jell-O, and tornadoes looming on the horizon. The rural and urban worlds Bryson described have largely vanished in the intervening years, but in the meantime, it was a heady experience. As the book reviewer in the New York Times remarked, almost with a sense of wonder: “At the heart of the manifold exaggerations is a much larger truth, a shocking revelation that few memoirists have been so brave to admit: he had a happy childhood.”

A joyous engagement with place sits front and center in Bryson’s memories of his early years in Des Moines.

The last set of Midwestern childhoods I want to discuss is unrecognizable in relation to those of Mildred Arstrong Kalish and Bill Bryson. This set of Midwestern childhoods is that of Pharoah and Lafeyette Rivers, with whom journalist Alex Kotlowitz became acquainted in 1985, just a generation beyond the Des Moines childhood described by Bill Bryson. Again, the boys’ experiences became the subject of a bestselling book, this one titled There are No Children Here: The Story of Two Boys Growing Up in the Other America. As the title might suggest, this is no story of hard working but happy rural families. It is also no story of heartwarming hijinks playing out against the background of a wholesome and comfortable city. Instead, it is the story of the failures of the Midwestern family system in a particular time and place. It is the story of a mother who cared, but had no support from an absent partner. It was the story of a place that
was not conducive to the needs of children, and an urban environment that was completely unhealthy in a way that the Des Moines of the 1950s was not.\textsuperscript{15}

Pharoah and Lafeyette Rivers grew up in Chicago’s infamous Henry Horner Homes. As historian D. Bradford Hunt has explained, Chicago’s housing projects were anything but conducive to healthy child life. There were many problems in the high rise housing projects, including cheap construction, inadequate and badly designed elevators and poor placement of the buildings relative to the needs of the residents. And one of the most significant problems was that there were so many children, relative to the number of playgrounds and schools, and relative to the number of adults available to supervise their time. The children in these housing projects overwhelmed the resources of their surroundings and their caregivers.\textsuperscript{16} Over time, the Henry Horner Homes and places like it became high rise ghettoes, no better, and in many ways worse, than the low rise ghettoes they replaced.

There was no golden glow surrounding the Rivers boys’ childhood story. Nobody comes away from that book wanting to visit their childhoods, as readers might with Kalish or Bryson. These boys lived with unrelenting struggle. There was never enough money. There was never enough parental support, with an overwhelmed mother and a largely absent father. And the physical environment in which they lived was hardly conducive to a happy childhood. Because of the physical and human dangers out of doors, some mothers in the projects constantly kept their children indoors. And if children played outdoors, the thirteen story high rise construction made it difficult for parents to supervise their activities.\textsuperscript{17} When Pharoah and Lafeyette wanted to experience anything like the outdoors available to other children in earlier generations, they had to make their way to a railroad track some distance from the Henry Horner Homes. There, bushes and trees grew wild, and the boys might find butterflies and wildflowers, and dig for
snakes. It was a very small taste of the wonders of nature that were, for Kalish and Bryson, so easily available.\textsuperscript{18} That little patch of dirt, however, was unable to compensate for inadequate economic, social and educational resources. They were children without what most Midwesterners thought of as a “real” childhood, and children largely without hope, hence the title “there are no children here.” As Kotlowitz wrote in his Epilogue, ‘Both Lafeyette and Pharoah want to move to a safe and quieter neighborhood. Lafeyette talks about it on occasion. So does Pharoah, who sat on his bed one day and cried because he worried that he might never get out of the projects.’\textsuperscript{19} Unfortunately, it was not to be, and neither of the boys got the happy ending that we want for the heartland’s children. Their story, in myriad ways, is at odds with so much that we would like to believe about the collective history of the region’s young.

These crazily juxtaposed stories leave the historian in a quandary. If we are going to write the history of Midwestern childhood, how should we do it? I am back to the sense of panic I felt upon contemplation of the vastness of the topic, “growing up Midwestern.” A fellow Midwestern historian to whom I expressed my concerns, commented, “that's so Midwestern of you to say there's no such thing [as a Midwestern childhood]. That's EXACTLY what it’s like to grow up Midwestern - basically to not know where you're from or why it matters. White Midwesterners believe we are so generically American that we assume people with regional identities are somehow misguided.”\textsuperscript{20} But how do we go about writing about a regional history of childhood, when the individual stories that make up that collective whole are so at odds with each other?

We are, I believe, stuck with the challenge of boundaries. When the historians of the 1970s and 1980s began the monumental task of creating a social history of the American people, they soon discovered that everyday life in the American past was more complicated, and
fragmented, than anyone might initially have thought. The experience of men was not that of women. Ethnicity and race added on additional layers of complication, as did class. Communities in their first stages of development, too, were not the same as they would become, once they had matured and gained a certain degree of stability. A community in decline was different, as well. Then historians added on another layer, discovering that the north was not the south, and the west was another creature altogether. Rural was not urban, and rural/non-farm, was not the same as farm. Farm tenants and farm owners might, or might not, share a common history, depending on the vagaries of place and time. One of the more recent discoveries has been that child life is significantly different than that of adults. We are, it seems, a people of layers, and which one of these layers was more important in any one place and time is entirely dependent upon the point of view of the person doing the looking.

So, can we write a history of growing up Midwestern? It is probably best, from the very beginning, to take a cue from Joseph Illick’s work, and to title it “The History of Midwestern Childhoods,” instead of “A History of Midwestern Childhood.” It is a story composed of many layers. Some of those layers are going to look remarkably like those embodied in larger histories of American childhoods, while others will not. Was Midwestern farm childhood in the immediate post-Civil War period similar to that of their peers in the South? There were certainly some similarities, but the differences had to have been significant. Was Midwestern youth culture during World War II more similar to, or different from, the youth culture of Los Angeles in the same time period? I would err on the side of difference, but the truth is, we don’t really know. Would Pharoah and Lafeyette’s childhoods have borne a greater resemblance to that of children with the same economic and social background in New York City, or those in Dubuque? Here, other factors might very well trump geography. The history of childhood is still enough of
an unknown country that we are a very long way from comfortably being able to answer these
and host of other questions, but being willing to ask the questions is certainly the best place to
start.
NOTES

1 John Ise, Sod and Stubble: The Story of a Kansas Farm (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1996); John E. Miller, Small Town Dreams: Stories of Midwestern Boys Who Shaped America (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2105); Beth Bailey, Sex in the Heartland (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999).


3 See Pamela Riney-Kehrberg, Childhood on the Farm: Work, Play and Coming of Age in the Midwest (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2005).


7 Mildred Armstrong Kalish, Little Heathens: Hard Times and High Spirits on an Iowa Farm During the Great Depression (New York: Bantam, 2007), 20.


10 Bryson, 34, 35.

11 Bryson, 36.
12 Bryson, 41-43.

13 Bryson, 172.


17 Kotlowitz, 25-26, 72.

18 Kotlowitz, 4-6.

19 Kotlowitz, 303.

20 Jenny Barker Devine, e-mail communication with the author, March 24, 2015.