

Essay Review

Labor and the Landscape of *American Gothic**

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The study of cultural landscapes comprises one of the older traditions within the discipline of geography. Geographers view all landscapes as repositories of human action—for even “wilderness” sites have been rendered so by human agency—that reflect our character, experience, and aspirations. Recent scholarship has demonstrated that landscapes are the direct products of contest among different social groups; they are fashioned and refashioned through the exercise of social power. At the same time, such landscapes actively shape society; they are complex systems of symbolic representation through which certain values and meanings are attached to both the built and “natural” environments. Thus, landscapes are “maps of meaning” that reflect and reproduce dominant cultural practice and the social order.¹

Nonetheless, landscapes can hide as much as they reveal. Though formed through social contest the end result, according to Don Mitchell, “fully mystifies that contentiousness, creating instead a smooth surface, a mute representation, a clear view that is little clouded by considerations of inequality, power, coercion, or resistance.”² In particular, what is most often missed is the human labor involved in the construction of a landscape, and the struggle over that labor and how it is deployed. Indeed, while all landscapes are the products of human work, the work that landscape often does is precisely to hide that labor. Thus, one of the chief goals of landscape study is to probe beneath the surface of material landscapes such as neighborhoods, commercial districts, or public spaces in order to reveal the conditions under which a landscape is made. This holds true not only for material landscapes, but also for the study of more representational landscapes such as photographs and paintings. The tradition of land-

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¹Examples of this type of work within geography include: Denis Cosgrove, *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape* (London: Croom Helm, 1984); David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Peter Jackson, *Maps of Meaning: An Introduction to Cultural Geography* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989); Denis Cosgrove and Stephen Daniels (eds.), *The Iconography of Landscape* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); James Duncan and David Ley (eds.), *Place, Culture, and Representation* (London: Routledge, 1993); Don Mitchell, *The Lie of the Land* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996); Mona Domosh, *Invented Cities: The Creation of Landscape in Nineteenth-Century New York and Boston* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996); Don Mitchell, *Cultural Geography: A Critical Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000).

²Mitchell, *Cultural Geography*, 113.

scape painting, in particular, has been very effective in erasing images of work and projecting instead naturalized views of the relationship between humans and the land that mask the underlying social relations through which labor is controlled and mobilized, and land is transformed.³

This essay focuses on the landscape of Grant Wood's painting *American Gothic*—one of the most important representations of the rural U.S. ever produced—and explores its role in shaping our view of labor, land, and rural life in the historical Midwest.

In the summer of 1930, Wood traveled from his home in Cedar Rapids to the little town of Eldon, located in the southeastern part of Iowa in Wapello County. The purpose of this trip was to attend a travelling art exhibit and to give local residents a demonstration of *plein air* painting. During his short visit to Eldon, Wood discovered a small, simple frame house built in the early 1880s in the Carpenter Gothic style. Wood was so struck by the design that he made a pencil sketch of the house, featuring a lean and serious couple standing in the foreground.⁴ Before returning home, he also made a quick oil study of the house and had the site photographed. Working from these initial impressions, Wood developed the painting over a period of about two months. He adapted his composition from 19th century tintypes of families in front of their farm houses, dressed his two models (his sister and his dentist) in a style consistent with the period of the house, and posed each figure with emblems of their occupation and status, again in keeping with conventions established in 19th century rural documentary photography.⁵ When finished, he submitted it to the jury of the Annual Exhibition of American Paintings and Sculpture at the Art Institute of Chicago where it was awarded a prize and immediately purchased by the museum.

Up to that point, Grant Wood had never sold a painting to a museum, but the tremendous response to *American Gothic* catapulted his artwork from obscurity to the national spotlight. The popularity of the painting derived from its rural subject matter and intended archaisms. The image satisfied a deep-seated urban nostalgia for the rural past that grew all the more powerful as the Depression set in. Indeed, the painting communicated a strong message of historical agrarian stability, providing a foundational cultural identity to people shaken by the rapid pace of societal change in the 1920s and mired in economic uncertainties of the 1930s. In the words of one art historian, it came to serve as “the national ancestral icon.”⁶

That the American public found symbolic meaning in *American Gothic* was no happenstance. Unlike other realist artists of the era—particularly painters of the urban scene—Wood actively sought to create archetypes through both subject matter and technique.⁷ For Wood, this effort concentrated on rural people and scenes in the Midwest and was so successful that he is considered “the painter of the agrarian

³Denis Cosgrove, “Prospect, Perspective and the Evolution of the Landscape Idea,” *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 10 (1985): 48–55; Hugh Prince, “Art and Agrarian Change, 1710–1815,” in Cosgrove and Daniels, *The Iconography of Landscape* (1988), 99, 114, 115; W. J. T. Mitchell, *Power and Landscape* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

⁴Wood had a longstanding interest in gothic motifs and had just returned from travels in Germany studying Late Gothic painting when he made the trip to Eldon. James Dennis, *Grant Wood: A Study in American Art and Culture* (New York: Viking Press, 1975), 80.

⁵Wanda Corn, *Grant Wood: The Regionalist Vision* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 129–130; Dennis, *Grant Wood*, 143–149.

⁶Corn, *The Regionalist Vision*, 142.

⁷Brady Roberts, “The European Roots of Regionalism: Grant Wood’s Stylistic Synthesis,” in Brady Roberts et al., *Grant Wood: An American Master Revealed* (San Francisco: Pomegranate Artbooks, 1995), 6.

myth.”⁸ Indeed, Wood’s mature (post-1929) work provides a self-consciously idealized portrayal of his native Iowa: it is a land deeply connected to the rhythms of natural process through the pursuit of agriculture; it is a land populated by independent farm families whose arduous but uplifting labors create abundance and social stability; it is a land that is strikingly pre-industrial, lacking farm machinery, railroads, automobiles, and—though painted in the 1930s—any sign of rural social or economic crisis. This “quest for a valid American iconography and mythology” yielded images of unchanging rural landscapes, untouched by industrialization and set apart from the city in economic, social and cultural terms.⁹ When urbanites do enter into a Wood painting, they appear either as hypocrites or as foreigners to be watched with a wary eye. When on rare occasion modern technology enters the composition, it brings death and ruin.¹⁰

The deliberate rural–urban and agrarian–industrial dichotomies evident in Wood’s paintings were bolstered by the rhetoric of “regionalism,” a midwestern variant of the broader effort by American artists to break from European tradition and establish their own native style during the inter-war period. In the hands of Wood and fellow painters John Steuart Curry and Thomas Hart Benton, regionalism meant the use of an accessible representational style and a focus on local scenes familiar to the artist. Yet, for Wood it also involved a spirited articulation of a rural-oriented, midwestern approach to art. This was made plain in his 1935 essay “Revolt Against the City”:

... it is certain that the Depression Era has stimulated us to a re-evaluation of our resources in both art and economics, and that this turning of our eyes inward upon ourselves has awakened us to values which were little known before the grand crash of 1929 and which are chiefly non-urban.¹¹

Regionalism rejected the cultural colonialism implied in the obligatory pilgrimage of American artists to New York, and from there to Paris. It was a call for artists to come home, return to their rural roots, and in so doing uncover the wellspring of truly authentic American art.¹² Wood used the notoriety of *American Gothic* to preach this artistic gospel of self-reliance and self-discovery, a message that found deep resonance during the 1930s when the country became increasingly insular and nationalistic. Thus, the painting became the centerpiece of an anti-urban cultural turn, as well as the chief symbol of the nation’s agrarian past. Although regionalism was short-lived (it faded in the early 1940s when the Depression subsided and Wood died), the symbolic power of *American Gothic* has only intensified over the years.¹³ Today, the painting stands

⁸Dennis, *Grant Wood*, 199.

⁹The quote is from Joseph Czestochowski, *John Steuart Curry and Grant Wood: A Portrait of Rural America* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1981), 15.

¹⁰For examples of the portrayal of city people, see Wood’s “Appraisal” and “Daughters of the American Revolution.” For examples of the portrayal of technology, see “Death on the Ridge Road.” All appear in Dennis, *Grant Wood*, 78, 177, 186. The important exception to this pattern is Wood’s mural project in the Parks Library at Iowa State University, where he included some farm machinery.

¹¹“Revolt against the City” is reprinted in both Dennis, *Grant Wood*, 229–235, and in Czestochowski, *John Steuart Curry and Grant Wood*, 128–136. Both of these authors question whether Wood actually authored the treatise, suggesting that it was more likely the work of journalism professor Frank Luther Mott, the editor of the pamphlet series in which Wood’s essay appeared.

¹²James Dennis, *Renegade Regionalists: The Modern Independence of Grant Wood, Thomas Hart Benton, and John Steuart Curry* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998), 59–60; Dennis, *Grant Wood*, 143–149; Corn, *The Regionalist Vision*, 35–62.

¹³Ultimately, the attributes that made regionalism successful were also responsible for its demise. The

in the popular imagination as a virtual short-hand for agrarianism and rural isolation.¹⁴

Given such importance within the pantheon of American art and culture, it is very instructive to return to Eldon, in Wapello County, where all of this began. Indeed, an examination of Eldon reveals that Wood's representation of rural Iowa was highly selective, if not outright misleading. Three points make this clear. First, the small frame house with the gothic arch is not located on a farm. While popular interpretations of the *American Gothic* vary dramatically, nearly all share the assumption that the people in the painting are members of a farming household.¹⁵ In fact, the house is located on two small lots in a part of Eldon that was platted in 1881 on a speculative basis by W. H. Jaques, a lawyer from the nearby city of Ottumwa, the county seat. Charles and Catherine Dibble purchased the lots and had the house constructed during 1882.¹⁶ Mr Dibble was an assistant freight agent for the Chicago, Rock Island and Pacific Railroad.¹⁷

The fact that Mr Dibble was not a farmer but a railroad employee leads to the second point: Eldon was not a farm-support town, it was a railroad town. The origins of most of southeastern Iowa's small towns and villages lie in providing services for the surrounding farm population. Such places were established in the 1840s and 1850s as farm settlement proceeded. Eldon (located alongside the Des Moines River and originally named Ashland Crossing) was not platted until 1870 and was created only because it was the site at which the Keokuk and Des Moines Railroad crossed the newly laid tracks of the Rock Island. In 1878, the latter company acquired the former, and

Footnote 13 continued

fact that Wood championed the regionalist anti-modern art rhetoric left him open to the criticism that his work was backward and provincial in style and subject. So, too, his staunch defense of the use of local material came to be interpreted as isolationists, chauvinistic, and even fascist. By 1942, when a posthumous retrospective exhibit was held in Chicago—the place where he had been celebrated just 10 years earlier—Wood's work generated little interest and no small amount of disdain from art critics. See Hazel Brown, *Grant Wood and Marvin Cone: Artists of an Era* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1972), 104–109; Dennis, *Grant Wood*, 146–149; Dennis, *Renegade Regionalists*, 71–89. In contrast to these 60 year old judgements, recent scholarship places Wood's work squarely in the context of the international evolution of ideas and techniques within modern art, arguing that his painting was not at all provincial in style, but reflected a distinctive and sophisticated synthesis of both American and European sources. See Roberts, "The European Roots of Regionalism," 32–40; James Dennis, "Grant Wood's Native-Born Modernism," in Roberts et al., *An American Master Revealed*, 43–62.

¹⁴Corn, *The Regionalist Vision*, 129–142. There are two main ways in which this rural image has been interpreted. A sympathetic, mostly midwestern, view holds that the painting is an affectionate, albeit somewhat bleak, recording of Iowa's steady and independent agrarian culture; here, the couple appears as faithfully religious, neighborly, hard working, thrifty, and cautiously resistant to change. A more critical view, associated with a distant urban gaze, holds the painting to be biting social satire and its subjects to be insular, restrictive, prejudiced, harsh, and even venomous. Wood did not intend the painting to be satire (though he does ridicule his rural subjects in many other paintings). Regardless, this split view—apparent in both art criticism and popular parody—only serves to underscore the deep-seated rural–urban dichotomy that Wood both tapped into and helped perpetuate. See also Dennis, *Renegade Regionalists*, 59–60; and Dennis, *Grant Wood*, 109–129.

¹⁵This interpretation was apparent when the painting was first shown and never changed despite qualifications made by Wood. In particular, Wood intended the subjects to be father and daughter, not husband and wife. He was more ambiguous about their occupation, implying that they were farmers in some interviews and small town residents in others. See Dennis, *Grant Wood*, 78, 80, 85; Corn, *The Regionalist Vision*, 132–133.

¹⁶Harrison Waterman, *History of Wapello County* (Chicago: S. J. Clarke Publishing Company, 1914), 476; Ruth Sterling, *Wapello County History* (Montezuma, IA: Sutherland Printing Co., 1986), 358.

¹⁷Sutton Publishing Company, *Directory of Ottumwa and Wapello County, Iowa 1888–1889* (Ottumwa: Sutton Publishing Company, 1890), 228; McClelland and Company, *Township and City Directory of Ottumwa and Wapello County, Iowa, 1886* (Ottumwa: J. S. McClelland and Co., 1887), 283.

Eldon was made a division point within the expanding Rock Island system.¹⁸ The town grew rapidly over the next decade or so; its population increased from just 427 people in 1875 to 1,725 in 1890. The railroad was the economic life-blood of the town, operating a large roundhouse, repair shops, stockyards, and a large hotel. Of the 322 employed persons listed in the 1889 city directory, more than half listed a railroad occupation.¹⁹

The third point is that, from its inception, Eldon had a twin city named Laddsdale located a few miles to the southwest, across the river at the border of Wapello and Davis counties. Laddsdale (defunct since the 1920s) was also a product of the railroad, but unlike Eldon its employment base was not the roundhouse and repair yard, it was coal mining. The boom in railroad construction in Iowa after the Civil War generated a growing demand for locomotive fuel and spurred the development of the state's coalfields. In 1872, O. M. Ladd began operating a slope mine near Eldon on a short spur off the Rock Island main line, selling the coal to the railroad. In 1882, Ladd sold the mine to the Eldon Coal and Mining Corporation, which expanded the operation. For three decades, the Rock Island continued to purchase the output of these mines for its coal chutes at Eldon. Because of the high quality of the coal and reliable railroad demand, the mines at Laddsdale provided steady employment to roughly 100 miners until the mines played out during the 1910s.²⁰ Though it had its own U.S. Post Office and school, Laddsdale was a classic company town that functioned as a dependent satellite of the Rock Island facilities in Eldon.

Thus, while Wood used impressions of Eldon in the 1880s to produce *American Gothic*, a look at the town's historical geography paints a very different picture. As a result, we are left with two apparently contradictory iconographies of place emanating from the same image: on the one hand, it is the point of origin of the nation's pastoral idyll, and on the other hand it is a landscape of railroads, coal mines and industrial labor—the symbolic heart of 19th century capitalism. Wood, perhaps inadvertently, chose to suppress the latter in favor of the former, and, in this sense, the work that *American Gothic* does is to construct the history of the rural Midwest as one dominated exclusively by farms and villages. This tremendously influential representation is one in which the farm is highlighted and the labor of the farmer is celebrated, but the coal mine is neglected and labor of the miner is virtually erased.²¹

The intent of this essay is to re-work the landscape of *American Gothic* and recover some of the histories of industrial labor that are hidden behind the painting's familiar surface. In particular, it focuses on the development of a coal mining industry in the region, and the formation of two distinct but interwoven rural mining landscapes: one above ground, the other below. By questioning the separation of agrarian and industrial realms that stands behind and animates Wood's image, this study offers insights into rural history that—like the painting itself—have significance far beyond the local study area. Examining rural industrial landscapes counters the prevalent Jeffersonian view

¹⁸Waterman, *History of Wapello County*, 283; Glenn Meagher and Harry Munsell, *Ottumwa: Yesterday and Today* (Ottumwa: Ottumwa Stamp Works, 1923), 112–113.

¹⁹Sutton Publishing Company, *Directory of Ottumwa and Wapello County*, 227–231.

²⁰Alvie Harding and Mable Harding, *The Ghost Mining Town of Laddsdale, Iowa, 1872–1918* (Eldon: Alvie and Mable Harding, 1971), 1–4.

²¹Quite similar dynamics were at work in this period in the state-sponsored public art of the New Deal. Artists, with the support of New Deal administrators, produced nostalgic and heroic images of agrarian activities that imparted a sense of cultural stability to rural landscapes and served to invent a shared national culture. See Barbara Melosh, *Engendering Culture: Manhood and Womanhood in New Deal Public Art and Theater* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 10, 53–66.

that has been overlain not only upon the Midwest but the rural U.S. more generally, and thereby creates opportunities to gain new perspectives on American labor history. Indeed, the Iowa coal mining landscape holds important clues for understanding the rural origins of a set of work practices that spread across the nation and helped fundamentally transform labor relations in urban mass production sectors by the mid-20th century. More broadly, the study sheds light on the lasting power of art and other forms of cultural representation to shape our views of particular places and to influence the process through which certain histories are preserved in the landscape while other histories are neglected and allowed to fade away. This process should be of concern to labor historians for, more often than not, it is working class landscapes that are lost.

THE MINING LANDSCAPE ABOVE GROUND

Today, the most visible and enduring emblem of Iowa's coal mining heritage is a building that was torn down more than 100 years ago. Built in Ottumwa in 1890, the "Coal Palace and Industrial Exhibit" was the brain-child of city boosters and the centerpiece of aggressive business efforts to promote the area's coal reserves, railroad connections, and suitability for manufacturing. The Coal Palace featured a fanciful Beaux Arts design carried out in an exterior made entirely of coal. It was decorated with medallions depicting local industry, and flags representing the 11 coal producing counties that fell within Ottumwa's domain. The ebony building's main hall displayed the products of local manufacturers and the basement contained a mock coal mine. Visitors entered the mine through an elevator shaft and were then seated in pit cars and pulled by mule past a series of industrial scenes showing the interior of a mine. Both President Benjamin Harrison and future president William McKinley came to Ottumwa to give speeches on the Coal Palace stage, and the exhibit was featured in the national media.²²

Though it stood for just two years, the Ottumwa Coal Palace looms large in local memory. It has been the subject of numerous essays and is a central topic in nearly every account of Ottumwa and Wapello County history.²³ Most recently, a 1998 exhibit at the Wapello County Historical Museum featured an amazingly detailed scale model of the edifice. The exhibit was promoted around the city using posters and newspaper advertisements emblazoned with the Coal Palace image. The region's mining history has thus been recalled and celebrated, but in a way that focuses primarily on urban merchants and manufacturers. By contrast, the rural landscape of coal mines and mining towns has been less well documented and its remnants have not been developed as a cultural resource. Here, as elsewhere, social memory and historic preservation have focused on the history of industry rather than the history of labor—and on spectacular rather than ordinary landscapes.²⁴

²²Thomas Gardner, "Peter G. Ballingall and the Ottumwa Coal Palace," *TAMS Journal* 23 (1983): 128–132; Carl Kreiner, "The Ottumwa Coal Palace," *The Palimpsest* 44 (1963): 572–578; Hubert Olin, *Coal Mining in Iowa* (Des Moines: State of Iowa, 1965), 60–65.

²³Meagher and Munsell, *Ottumwa*, 62–64; James Taylor, Jr., *Ottumwa: One Hundred Years a City* (Chicago: Manz Corporation, 1948), 30–31.

²⁴The fact that the mining community of Buxton has received a great deal of attention is in keeping with this pattern. Buxton, which has been the subject of two books, was anomalous among Iowa coal camps both in terms of size (its population reached nearly 5000 people in 1910) and demographics (nearly half of its inhabitants were African American). See David Gradwohl and Nancy Osborn *Exploring Buried Buxton* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1984).

The neglect of these landscapes today reflects the social and geographic isolation of coal miners a century ago. The coal mines that supported industrial development in Ottumwa, Des Moines, and other Iowa cities were widely scattered across the southeast Iowa countryside, and the majority of miners lived in isolated rural towns called “coal camps.” Most of these mining towns were small, though a few—like Hiteman and Buxton in Monroe County—had several thousand inhabitants. Regardless of size, none lasted very long, and most have completely disappeared. Still, one can peel back the layers and recover bits and pieces of this largely forgotten landscape.

Coal mining was initiated in Iowa during the 1840s when small drift mines were established to meet the demand for fuel generated by steamboats plying the Des Moines and Mississippi rivers. Widespread prospecting for coal followed after the Civil War, spurred by railroad expansion within the state and across the Midwest. Four railroad lines were completed across Iowa by 1870, and a dense rail network soon evolved to service the fast growing agricultural-based economy.²⁵ Iowa’s first modern, machine-based mines opened in the late 1860s, and over the next several decades hundreds of mining ventures followed. From the 1870s through the 1920s, mining flourished in the state. At its peak in 1909, the Iowa coal mining industry employed over 18,000 people, produced nearly 8 million tons of coal, and ranked seventh among U.S. states in the value of coal produced.²⁶ The largest mines were “shipping mines” that operated under contract with individual railroads. Other, smaller mines produced for a local, non-railroad, market. Coal mining was a critical aspect of the wider process of industrialization occurring within the state; Iowa coal powered local factories and provided fuel for an array of urban uses.

Although coal underlies a significant portion of the state, coal production was concentrated in just a handful of counties located in the Des Moines River valley. Wapello County was one of the first in Iowa to have its coal reserves developed, due, in large measure, to the construction of two railroads within its boundaries during the 1850s.²⁷ It led the state in coal production during the 1860s and then remained among the top 10 coal producing counties through the 1920s. The county’s coal mining industry reached a high water mark in 1903, when 27 mines produced 382,000 tons of coal and employed nearly 800 miners.²⁸ Overall, 398 different underground coal mines were sunk in Wapello County, and more than 15 significant coal mining communi-

Footnote 24 continued

Dorothy Schwieder, Joseph Hraba, and Elmer Schwieder, *Buxton: Work and Racial Equality in a Coal Mining Community* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1987). Still, despite this research, the Buxton site remains unmarked and there is little sign of the former town left on the landscape.

²⁵Leland Sage, *A History of Iowa* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1974), 108–115; Richard Overton, *Burlington Route* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965), 92–97.

²⁶*Fifteenth Biennial Report of the State Mine Inspectors for the Two Years Ending June 30, 1910* (Des Moines: State Printer, 1910), 95; E. R. Landis, *Coal Resources of Iowa* (Iowa City: Iowa Geological Survey, 1965), 102. The year 1909 reflects the peak in terms of employment, not output. Peak output was reached in 1917, during World War I, when just less than 9 million tons were produced.

²⁷A. G. Leonard, 1902. “Geology of Wapello County,” in *Iowa Geological Survey Annual Report 1901* (Des Moines: Iowa Geological Survey, 1902), 478–484; James Lees, “History of Coal Mining in Iowa,” in *Iowa Geological Survey Annual Report, 1908* (Des Moines: Iowa Geological Survey, 1909), 540–544; Olin, *Coal Mining in Iowa*, 31–35.

²⁸Department of the Interior, United States Geological Survey, *Mineral Resources of the United States, Calendar Year 1903* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1904), 462–463.

ties—each associated with a shipping mine—were established between 1865 and 1915.²⁹

One reason for the relatively light imprint left on the rural landscape by coal mining has to do with the character of the coal deposits themselves. Iowa coal was originally laid down during the Paleozoic Era on a very rough and uneven limestone surface, resulting in coal seams that are discontinuous, of uneven slope and depth, and quite limited in extent.³⁰ For this reason, individual Iowa coal mines were exhausted relatively quickly. In fact, the average productive life of an Iowa coal mine was just eight years.³¹ In Wapello County, the average was just five years.

This short life-span minimized the scars left on the landscape by underground mining operations. Once a mine was played out, the mine entrance and air shafts were caved in, the few top structures were removed and re-used at a new mine site, and the tracks and ties of the railroad spur that connected the mine shaft to the main lines were ripped up and carried away. Even the coal camp was easily moved: the houses, company store, and other buildings were loaded onto railroad cars, shipped out, and put down at a new camp location—sometimes in a nearby county and sometimes only a few miles away. Just months after a mine had closed, all that remained were mine waste piles, a few rutted streets, an overgrown baseball field, and perhaps an odd shack or two. The Iowa mining landscape was thus one in constant flux: shafts were sunk, the coal was mined for a period of a few years, the mine was then abandoned, new sites were located, new shafts were sunk, and so on. Miners and their families moved across the coalfield's counties continually in search of work, staying in some places for several years and in others for only several months.³²

Yet, the ephemeral character of mining communities did not derive solely from geological conditions—it was also a product of social and economic forces within the coal mining industry. Operating in a very competitive market, Iowa coal mine owners sought to minimize their investment in facilities by constructing coal camps that were transitory by design. The camps were sited hurriedly with little regard to topography, and for this reason were often subject to flooding. The ungraded streets sprouted up in

²⁹Neil Harl, John Achterhof, and Karen Weise, "Coal Mine Data for Eight Iowa Counties," *Agricultural Experiment Station Misc. Bulletin 13*, Iowa State University (1977), 107–114; Sue Parrish, "Disappeared and Disappearing Towns, Old Coal Mine Sites, Wapello County, Iowa," unpublished paper, 1991, Manuscript Collection, Wapello County Historical Museum; Sister Madeleine Schmidt, "The Ghost Mining Towns of Wapello County, Iowa," unpublished paper, 1976, Manuscript Collection, Wapello County Historical Museum.

³⁰Henry Hinds, "The Coal Deposits of Iowa," in *Iowa Geological Survey, Annual Report, 1908*, 25–32; Olin, *Coal Mining in Iowa*, 6–17.

³¹Dorothy Schwieder, *Black Diamonds: Life and Work in Iowa's Coal Mining Communities, 1895–1925* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1983), 157–158.

³²Schwieder, *Black Diamonds*, 157–159; Mike Bodnar, Personal interview, Iowa Labor History Oral Project, Special Collections, State Historical Society of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa (1981), 2; Harry Booth, Personal interview, Iowa Labor History Oral Project, Special Collections, State Historical Society of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa (1978), 1–3, 10–11, 31; Lloyd DeMoss, Personal interview, Iowa Labor History Oral Project, Special Collections, State Historical Society of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa (1978), 42–43; John Ducey, Personal interview, Iowa Labor History Oral Project, Special Collections, State Historical Society of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa (1981), 45–46; Mike Mosley, Personal interview, Iowa Labor History Oral Project, Special Collections, State Historical Society of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa, (1981), 1–5; James Provenzano, Personal interview, Iowa Labor History Oral Project, Special Collections, State Historical Society of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa (1978), 1.

a haphazard fashion and soon were ruttled. Throughout southeastern Iowa, most of the coal camp houses were simple four room structures that were built quickly and cheaply. Set on temporary post foundations, these wood frame buildings had board and batten siding, rough interior plaster, and no insulation. Because coal operators resisted spending money on maintenance, these buildings soon fell into various states of disrepair. Sanitation facilities were also rudimentary. The houses had no interior running water and only outdoor pit toilets, while water for the camps was drawn from shallow wells that were often so poorly placed that many posed a serious health threat.³³ In these isolated coal camps, miners and their families had poor access to health care and generally inferior educational opportunities.

The fact that these living conditions could be imposed upon mine workers reflected both the dominant position held by mine operators with respect to their mostly immigrant labor force and, more broadly, the extension of urban control over a subservient rural landscape. Moving from one isolated rural work site to another, miners had little choice but to rent company-owned housing if they wanted employment. Similarly, the company-owned store was often the only place to buy food, clothing, mining tools, and other necessary goods. Occasionally, nearby farmers and local merchants would sell their goods in the coal camps, but some mining companies went so far as to fence off their camps to keep these vendors out.³⁴

Moreover, because work was irregular, miners often ran up a significant debt at the company store in order to maintain their households when the mine was closed.³⁵ Most non-railroad mines shut down for the summer months because the local demand for coal was strongly seasonal, and even the shipping mines closed periodically due to variations in railroad demand and market fluctuations brought on by overproduction in the industry.³⁶ This build-up of debt occurred despite the fact that many of the miners' wives contributed to household income by taking in boarders, a practice that added significantly to their daily labor of cooking, washing, and cleaning.³⁷ Thus, an uneven production schedule prevented most from getting ahead financially and kept them mired in rural poverty.

The rural mining landscape, then, was one characterized by the social isolation of miners and their families, the transitory nature of mining communities, the pervasive economic dependence of miners on mine operators, and rough, impoverished living conditions. Not surprisingly, miners were widely viewed by city dwellers and farmers alike as outsiders from an inferior class—people that were foreign, uneducated and transient. Miners came to occupy the bottom rung of the regional social hierarchy, while the landscape of coal camps was cast as temporary, unclean, and dangerous.³⁸

³³Charles Nichols, *Report of Inspection of Housing and Sanitary Conditions at Various Coal Mining Camps* (Ames: State Commissioner of Housing, Iowa State Board of Health, 1919), 31–36; Schwieder, *Black Diamonds*, 87–90; Booth, ILHOP interview, 5, 9–10, 14; Mosley, ILHOP interview, 5; Loren Blomgren, Iowa Labor History Oral Project, Special Collections, State Historical Society of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa (1981), 4; Clarence Rowley, Personal interview, Iowa Labor History Oral Project, Special Collections, State Historical Society of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa (1981), 8–9; Earl Smith, Personal interview, Iowa Labor History Oral Project, Special Collections, State Historical Society of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa (1981), 10–11.

³⁴Bodnar, ILHOP interview, 31–32.

³⁵Blomgren, ILHOP interview, 7–8; Bodnar, ILHOP interview, 31–33; Provenzano, ILHOP interview, 15.

³⁶Schwieder, *Black Diamonds*, 23–24.

³⁷Schwieder, *Black Diamonds*, 70. Most of the company-owned housing was assigned to married miners, so in many cases, the only housing option available to single miners was boarding.

³⁸The belief that miners were an inferior class of people permeated the region, and was deeply held by

An entirely different set of meanings was attached to this rural landscape by coal miners themselves. Though constrained by the paternalism and hegemony of coal operators—and faced with quite limited opportunities to change these difficult circumstances—miners nonetheless managed to put their own imprint upon the coal camps. Many families improved their company-owned houses by putting porches on the front or adding summer kitchens to the back. They planted gardens and fruit trees, canning the produce for winter use. They constructed out-buildings to be used for storage as well as to raise poultry and even hogs.³⁹ These changes on the land reflected household strategies designed to deflect the operator's economic dominance and gain some small measure of independence. At the same time, these changes signaled the miners' struggle for social and geographic stability, and served to established fledgling signs of permanence and domesticity in an otherwise transient and spare environment.

This sense of tension between two very different views of the coal camp landscape—the bleak and dirty company town versus the hopeful, albeit modest, community of miners—is evident in the memories of those that grew up in these rural places. On the one hand, nearly every person who has told the story of their youth in the camps remembers economic hardship and the sting of social stigmatization. On the other hand, even those that moved frequently from camp to camp describe childhoods characterized by a strong and stable sense of community identity and mutual support among families.⁴⁰

THE MINING LANDSCAPE BELOW GROUND

Above ground, miners were subject to domination by urban-based coal operators. But below ground, it was a different story—one that re-shaped urban industrial relations in the mid-20th century. Over the course of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, some miners and their families began to migrate from the coal camps to the region's cities in search of non-mining work. This trickle of rural-to-urban migration turned into a stream when coal production declined and the last coal camps were abandoned in the 1920s, and it continued through the 1930s. Coal miners brought to the city a strong collective identity and a well developed spirit of resistance to their employers. These distinctive characteristics emerged from a rural landscape that now lies buried deep within the earth: the workaday world of the mine itself.

In Iowa, most mining occurred using the room and pillar method. The layout of such a mine consisted of a main entry tunnel extending out along the coal seam from the bottom of the shaft, and several cross-entry tunnels running perpendicular to the main entry tunnel at intervals of approximately 300 feet. The actual mining occurred in the

Footnote 38 continued

mine operators. See Nichols, *Report of Inspection*, 31–32; Schwieder, Hraba, and Schwieder, *Buxton*, 84–86; Schwieder, *Black Diamonds*, 165–166.

³⁹Schwieder, Hraba, and Schwieder, *Buxton*, 44–45; Schwieder, *Black Diamonds*, 159.

⁴⁰The small size of most mining camps, along with the shared experience of work and isolation, helped to instill this sense of community among miners and their families, even among different ethnic groups. However, such fellowship did not extend to African Americans in the smaller camps. See Blomgren, ILHOP interview, 6; Bodnar, ILHOP interview, 39–42; DeMoss, ILHOP interview, 46; Ducey, ILHOP interview, 19–20, 23–24 (1981). See also Edith Blake, “An Italian-American Girlhood in Iowa’s Coal Country,” *Palimpsest* 74 (1993): 119–126; Robert Rutland, “The Mining Camps of Iowa: Faded Sources of Hawkeye History,” *Iowa Journal of History* 54 (1956): 41–42; Dorothy Schwieder, “Drawing the Personal Narrative into the Landscape of Iowa’s Coal History,” *Palimpsest* 74 (1993): 127–129.

area between the cross-entries. Digging and blasting away at the coal face, miners formed “rooms” (usually just 3 to 5 feet in height) which grew to be about 30 feet wide and 150 feet long as the coal was removed. Rooms were separated by narrow “pillars” of the coal seam left in place to support the overburden. One or two miners were assigned a room by the mine supervisor and worked that room until all the coal was removed.

Because of the inherent difficulty of monitoring workers that were scattered over an extended subterranean area, mining evolved as piece work rather than wage work. Indeed, once a miner entered the mine, he was subject to very little direct supervision. The method he used to extract coal from a room, the number of helpers used, and the pace at which he worked were completely up to him. The amount of money made depended on the amount of coal loaded and sent to the surface, which, in turn, depended upon experience and skill as well as the hard work of the miner and his assistant (usually a teenage son or other male relative). Necessary skills included pick-work, drilling holes for explosives, and firing the shots, but also extended beyond the mechanics of mining the coal face to a range of support tasks such as track laying and roof timbering. Men who neglected these tasks or took short cuts were considered poor miners and fools. Men who practiced their craft carefully were widely respected. Outsiders thought the work of mining to be common and bleak, but again, miners had a quite different self-image. Toiling long, hard days in dangerous conditions, they viewed themselves as skilled craftsmen and took great pride in their work.⁴¹

The underground room and pillar landscape, then, was the place where miners developed both a sense of independence from the coal operators and a strong collective identity rooted in a common craft. Brought to the surface, these qualities provided the basis of effective labor organization which allowed miners to challenge the power of mine owners. A tradition of collective action first emerged in the coal mines of Great Britain and was brought directly to the coalfields of the U.S. through immigration. In Iowa, the first coal miners were from England and Wales, and their attitudes and practices took root quickly and flourished.⁴² Indeed, trade union organizing appeared at the very outset of Iowa coal mining in the early 1870s, pivoting around a set of issues common to miners throughout Europe and America: low piece rates, an irregular work schedule, unfair weighing methods, problems with mine safety, and mandatory use of the company store.⁴³ Iowa branches of several fledgling national miners’ unions were created during the 1870s and 1880s. Miners also formed the core of the Iowa Knights

⁴¹David Brody, “Labour Relations in American Coal Mining: An Industry Perspective,” in Gerald Feldman and Klaus Tenfelde (eds.), *Workers, Owners and Politics in Coal Mining: An International Comparison of Industrial Relations* (New York: Berg Publishers Limited, 1990), 76–81; Keith Dix, “Work Relations in the Coal Industry: The Handloading Era, 1880–1930,” in Andrew Zimbalist, *Case Studies in the Labor Process* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1979), 158–165; Merle Davis, “Horror at Lost Creek,” *Palimpsest* 71 (1990): 106–109; Schwieder, *Black Diamonds*, 24.

⁴²For discussions of the influence of British miners on the U.S. coal mining industry see Clifton Yearley, Jr., “Britons in American Labor: A History of the Influence of the United Kingdom Immigrants on American Labor, 1820–1914,” *Johns Hopkins University Studies in Historical and Political Science* 75 (1957): 123–141; Andrew Roy, *A History of the Coal Miners of the United States* (Columbus: J. L. Trauger Printing Company, 1907), 61–74. For discussion of the role of British miners in Iowa see Schwieder, *Black Diamonds*, 7–15; Shelton Stromquist, *Solidarity and Survival: An Oral History of Iowa Labor in the Twentieth Century* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1993), 28.

⁴³Bill Douglas, “Fighting against Hope: Iowa Coal Miners and the 1891 Strike for the Eight-Hour Day,” unpublished paper, State Historical Society of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa (1977), 7–15.

of Labor; of the first 22 local assemblies formed in the state between 1878 and 1881, 17 were organized among miners—and five of these were located in Wapello County.⁴⁴ From the mid-1870s forward, strikes and labor unrest were common in the coalfields as miners attempted to exert their collective power. In 1891, Iowa miners were organized as District Thirteen of the newly formed United Mine Workers of America (UMW). By the late 1890s, the UMW had established both a shorter work day and an annual joint wage agreement with Iowa's coal operators. Coal miners also used the union to improve mine safety, implement consistent weighing and screening procedures, change the system of monthly wage payments, and contest the requirement to purchase necessary work supplies at the company store.⁴⁵

This spirit of resistance was embodied above ground in the miners' hall—a building that stood apart in a coal camp landscape otherwise dominated by paternalism. The miners' hall—which was often owned outright by the union local—was a gathering place for union members to discuss work issues, but it also served as a community center. The miners' hall housed literary and musical programs, movies, and dances, as well as church services and burial services for many different denominations.⁴⁶ It was the heart of the coal mining community—the place that brought diverse people together. It was also the visible symbol of the successful struggles waged by miners; by the turn of the century, the Iowa coalfields were solidly unionized and nearly every mining camp had a union hall. At this time, District Thirteen of the UMW turned its attention to the improvement of conditions outside of work, particularly medical care, education, and housing conditions in the coal camps. These efforts yielded results, but not until the 1920s when the era of underground coal mining in Iowa was drawing to a close.

While resistance to the mine operators spurred unity within the coal camps, in some instances it also led to conflict among miners. From the early 1880s through the 1910s, mine operators responded to labor disputes and strikes by recruiting African-American laborers from the South. In many cases, striking white miners were displaced from both their jobs and their houses by the black recruits, leading to racial tensions that spread throughout the coalfields. As a result, a pattern of racial segregation emerged in which most black miners lived in just a few large mining communities. Outside of these places, black miners faced threats and discrimination: they were shut out of many coal camps, and in others were often denied union membership. Such actions contradicted official District Thirteen policy which favored racial integration, but persisted nonetheless.⁴⁷

Ultimately, the tradition of worker resistance in Iowa mining came to shape an industrial landscape extending far beyond the coal camps. From the Iowa coalfields came John L. Lewis, head of the UMW from 1919 to 1960, founder of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) in 1937, and arguably the most important labor leader of the 20th century. Lewis was born in 1880 in Lucas, Iowa where his father, a Welshman, worked at the mines of the Whitebreast Fuel Company, a mining firm based in Ottumwa two counties to the east. Lewis learned to mine in Lucas with his father and brother, but reportedly also worked for a while at the Whitebreast mines at

⁴⁴Jonathon Garlock, *Guide to the Local Assemblies of the Knights of Labor* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1982), 112–129.

⁴⁵Schwieder, *Black Diamonds*, 126–140; Davis, “Horror at Lost Creek,” 109–114;

⁴⁶Davis, “Horror at Lost Creek,” 105–106; Blomgren, ILHOP interview, 5; Booth, ILHOP interview, 16–17; Rowley, ILHOP interview, 7.

⁴⁷Olin, *Coal Mining in Iowa*, 46–53; Schwieder, *Black Diamonds*, 151–155 (1983); Schwieder et al., *Buxton*, 16–20.

Keb in Wapello County.⁴⁸ He was preceded as head of the national UMW by John White, his mentor and another Iowa miner.

As the leader of the CIO, Lewis championed industrial unionism, a cause that came directly from his background as a coal miner. An early form of industrial unionism had effectively been practiced by the miners for decades. Despite the strong craft identity among miners, their unions had from the beginning embraced everyone who worked at a mine, including non-miners such as mule drivers, trappers, and enginemen. To a significant degree, this practice seems to have evolved in response to the rural isolation of the coal mines. Because the non-miners working in the industry were so few in number and so widely scattered across the landscape, they were not an attractive organizing target for craft-based unions. The isolation and harsh conditions of the coal camps made clear the plight shared by miners and non-miners and encouraged the development of a common identity; something that was often reinforced by their shared social status as immigrant “outsiders” in the region. So, too, the lack of other community institutions meant that the union became the focal point of community life, which added greatly to work place cohesiveness. Additionally, this tradition of organizing all of the workers at a particular mine site was accompanied by early efforts to link scattered union locals into broader regional or even national coalitions, and by pioneering attempts to negotiate work and compensation standards with multiple employers at the industry level.⁴⁹

Yet, John L. Lewis is only part of the story when it comes to the role of Iowa coal miners in the development and dissemination of industrial unionism. When coal miners made their way into the cities, they found work in many of the rapidly growing mass production industries of Iowa and the greater Midwest, including farm equipment, automobiles, rubber, and appliances, as well as meat packing and other kinds of food processing. When the CIO began to organize these industries, thousands of former miners (and the sons and daughters of former miners) filled the ranks of the industrial working class. Miners and their family members comprised a group that was familiar with industrial unionism and supportive of the CIO. In many plants, former miners comprised the core of local union activists. This was the case in Ottumwa at the John Morrell meat packing plant (where local number one of the CIO’s Packinghouse Workers Organizing Committee was formed), at the Ottumwa Iron Works, and at the John Deere hay machinery plant. In addition, many District Thirteen miners were

⁴⁸Mention of John L. Lewis working at Keb is made in one of a series of essays on abandoned coal mining towns written in the late 1930s. These essays, now housed in the Iowa Collection of the Ottumwa Public Library, were sponsored by the Daughters of the American Revolution and written by area students. Betty Kepple, “Keb,” unpublished essay, Iowa Collection, Ottumwa Public Library, Ottumwa IA. Recent biographies of Lewis make no mention of time spent in Wapello County, but do acknowledge that the record of his family’s movements in Iowa is far from complete. See, for example, Melvyn Dubofsky and Warren Van Tine, *John L. Lewis, a Biography* (New York: Quadrangle, 1977), 3–19. In general, the students who wrote the Wapello County essays used the memories of older family members and friends as their main sources of information.

⁴⁹This is not to claim that the UMW—because it championed industrial unionism—was a radical union, or even one with a particularly strong democratic tradition of rank and file participation. It was not. Lewis himself had purged the union of its socialists in the 1920s and the union was run in a very autocratic fashion with districts having quite limited autonomy. The point is that the UMW formed the core of the early CIO. Lewis and the UMW provided the leadership, the money, and the organizers to the CIO; it is doubtful that industrial unionism would have proceeded without him. “Indeed, until 1941, in most things except name the CIO was the UMW and John L. Lewis.” See Robert Zieger, *The CIO, 1935–1955* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 139.

recruited to work as CIO organizers throughout the country, and Lewis appointed other miners to leadership positions within the national organization.⁵⁰

This is not to claim that industrial unionism had a single point of origin, nor to claim that Iowa coal miners formed the only worker vanguard of the movement. The point is that the Iowa coal camps must rank high on any list of places that contributed significantly to the spread of such practices; these coal miners were very influential in the development of the CIO at a variety of geographic scales and in this way imprinted their ideas and practices on the broader labor movement and, by extension, the entire nation.

CONCLUSION

American Gothic is a powerful portrayal of the rural American landscape. Like all landscapes, the painting does work within society by communicating a particular view of place. In this case, the work it does is to construct the history of the rural Midwest as one dominated exclusively by farms and villages while simultaneously hiding the experience of urbanization and erasing the role that industrial labor played in the development of the countryside. This essay attempted to recover some of the social histories missing from *American Gothic* by beginning to reconstruct and remember the coal mining landscapes that were once strewn across much of rural Iowa.

Setting the history of coal mining alongside the idealized agrarian images of Grant Wood provides glimpses into forgotten worlds. It reveals a landscape of scattered industrial towns that were interspersed with farms and underlain by vast networks of tunnels and extractive work spaces.⁵¹ These rural industrial sites played a vitally important role in the region's social and economic history. The coal that emerged from these places formed the backbone of regional economic growth. Coal fueled the expansion of railroads across the region, contributing to the rapid development of Iowa's agricultural economy and providing broad support to the processes of urbanization and resource-based industrialization. Not only did coal provide power, heat, and light for the state's cities, but mine management and mine-related manufacturing and

⁵⁰This argument concerning the formative role of Iowa miners in CIO success across the Midwest is based on oral histories of miners and union organizers recorded by the Iowa Labor History Oral Project. See Blomgren, ILHOP interview, 40; Booth, ILHOP interview, 41, 50–51; Ducey, ILHOP interview, 10–15, 18–19, 46–50, 53; Mosley, ILHOP interview, 22; Provenzano, ILHOP interview, 24, 39, 50, 53; Smith, ILHOP interview, 8; Edris Owens, Personal interview, Iowa Labor History Oral Project, Special Collections, State Historical Society of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa (1981), 9; Camille Price, Personal interview, Iowa Labor History Oral Project, Special Collections, State Historical Society of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa (1981), 14–15; Walter Weatherstone, Personal interview, Iowa Labor History Oral Project, Special Collections, State Historical Society of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa (1981), 18–19; Kenneth Ellis, Personal interview, Iowa Labor History Oral Project, Special Collections, State Historical Society of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa (1978), 18; Don Harris, Personal interview, Iowa Labor History Oral Project, Special Collections, State Historical Society of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa (1978), 5–6; Jack McCoy, Personal interview, Iowa Labor History Oral Project, Special Collections, State Historical Society of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa (1983), 9–10; Elmer Cline, Personal interview, Iowa Labor History Oral Project, Special Collections, State Historical Society of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa (1981), 26–27. See also Stromquist, *Solidarity and Survival*, 82–84.

⁵¹Placing coal mining alongside farming also forces us to acknowledge the co-existence and articulation of agrarian and industrial pursuits in rural areas, and thereby opens up opportunities for gaining new perspectives on the dynamics of rural class relations. Such questions, however, are outside of the immediate scope of this essay.

services were important components of many urban economies. So, too, the distinctive-work culture of the coal miners—shaped by the nature of their extractive labor and by their social and geographic isolation—had a profound effect upon regional society. In Iowa, coal miners provided the foundation for the first effective labor organizations and were the catalysts for early labor legislation in the state. Most importantly, these obscure rural coal mines and coal camps were home to one of the most important social movements of the past century—industrial unionism.

Despite the historical significance of coal mining, farming stands proudly at the center of the rural landscape today, while few signs of the mining industry remain. So few, in fact, that the coalfield landscape—upon which so many lived and worked—seems to have vanished. Even at its peak of development, underground coal mining in Iowa left little impression upon the land, and once the mines closed it faded quickly from view. By the mid-1950s, one Iowa historian had already noted that very few remnants of the state's mines and coal camps endured.⁵²

In Wapello County, the last of the coal camps ceased to exist in the early 1920s, as the increasing availability of cars and trucks and the improved conditions of roads allowed miners to commute to work from the larger towns in the area. By 1930, most of the mines had closed. Farmers reclaimed many of these sites, converting them to crop and livestock raising, while other sites simply reverted to woodland. Even the piles of mine waste, the most visible feature of the abandoned mines, were removed to be used as road bed by the state and county in the 1920s and 1930s. The site of Laddsdale, near Eldon, was obliterated during a brief era of strip mining in the 1940s and 1950s, as well as by the process of land reclamation that followed. Symbolically enough, the site of Keb—the county's largest mining town and a center of union culture—is buried under a large landfill.

Why have these places been neglected not celebrated? Perhaps it is due to the passive disregard for ordinary industrial landscapes evident throughout the U.S. But in the case of Wapello County, and Iowa generally, coal mining seems to have been more actively forgotten. In fact, just as the era of underground coal mining was coming to an end—and as the state lost much of its visible rural industrial character—a noticeable shift occurred in the way that Iowans thought about and promoted their state. Nearly every 19th century promotion of Iowa, from the emigrant guides of the mid-1800s through the elaborate schemes of the turn-of-the-century boosters, emphasized the state's mineral resources and manufacturing capabilities along with its unparalleled agricultural resources. As geographer Daniel Block has noted in his study of Iowa state highway maps, this dual promotion of the state as both agricultural and industrial continued into the early 1930s, but then became increasingly one-sided. By the early 1950s, images on state highway maps depicted the state as exclusively agricultural, lacking any reference to industry or even cities.⁵³

Thus, by the mid-20th century, a new state identity had emerged—one that cast rural Iowa (and to some extent, all of Iowa) as firmly agrarian rather than industrial and working class. This process, of course, coincided precisely with the rise in popularity of Grant Wood's historic rural imagery. Here, one comes face to face with the crucial role that cultural representation plays in the process of social memory and landscape

⁵²Rutland, "Faded Sources of Hawkeye History," 35.

⁵³Daniel Block, "Romantic and Modernist Images on Twentieth Century Iowa Official State Highway Maps," Newberry Library, Hermon Dunlap Smith Center for the History of Cartography, Popular Cartography and Society NEH Summer Institute, Slide Set Number 28 (2001), 4–12.

preservation. In *American Gothic*, and a host of other paintings, Wood constructed a powerful, though artificial, division between agrarian and industrial worlds—and made this division central to the story of the region's past. His work became a keystone in the incredibly strong arch that is Iowa's deeply held agrarian identity. Wood clearly is not solely responsible for this state of affairs but his art continues to be a central participant in sustaining a symbolic vocabulary in which farming and coal mining could not be situated farther apart on the American scene: one is the very embodiment of a mythologized pre-industrial era characterized by self-sufficiency, social harmony, and abundance, while the other is widely held to be ground zero for the class dominance, social conflict, and human deprivation that accompanied the arrival of the industrial age.

Given this, it is not surprising that so little remains of the region's coal mining industry. The mines and coal camps were intended to be temporary places and once abandoned, they were quickly and easily forgotten.⁵⁴ These rural industrial landscapes—shaped through competition, exploitation, resistance, and discrimination—stood in jarring contrast to the popular story of a stable and tranquil rural Iowa society. Most were, quite literally, plowed under. But this is a labor history that should not be buried. If remembering this episode of rural labor history means cluttering a landscape that is otherwise singularly associated with Jeffersonian virtue, so be it. If it helps extend Iowa's strong tradition of industrial labor history into the countryside, so much the better.