

Life was Once a Picnic in Long Beach: Hawkeye Traditions and Their Cultural Assimilation to
Southern California

By Matthew Lindsay

Speaking to a massive crowd of over one hundred thousand native Iowans, Governor Earl Warren once proclaimed in 1950, “We have more Iowans here in California than they have in Iowa!”¹ Part of the Midwestern migration westward, the men and women whose numbers were as thick as the fields of tall corn they left behind who crowded together to watch the Governor speak were indeed part of a social and cultural shift in early Long Beach History. Many previous scholars have discovered why Governor Warren would make such a bold proclamation, yet there is still a great deal left to uncover about the place once known as “Iowa by the Sea.” For decades it seemed, southern California was entirely populated by inhabitants born elsewhere. They were in fact Middle Westerners, and they arrived in such large numbers to the Golden State that few would now deny their collective cultural and social contributions to the region. Rural Hawkeyes exchanged life on the farm for a new one by the beach, and many flocked to the southern California coast seeking to “Take it easy and have a good time.”² Yet these transplanted Iowan migrants also brought along with them some uniquely Midwestern values and traditions. The annual Iowa Day Picnic was a traditionally rural gathering that attracted one hundred fifty thousand Hawkeyes from all over the state of California to Long Beach at its peak. Gathered together in Bixby Park within sight of the Pacific Ocean, Iowans simultaneously celebrated their past Midwestern heritage and appreciated their newly-adopted home—albeit with a certain kind of cognitive dissonance. This grand annual gathering gave corn-fed Hawkeyes of all ages

¹ “Annals Addenda,” *The Annals of Iowa* 30 (1950), 464.

² Sam Greene, “Transplanted Iowans,” *The Annals of Iowa* 29 (1949), 491.

opportunities to meet, develop personal connections, and celebrate a unique Midwestern tradition together, relieving some of the anxieties many naturally felt from migrating across one-third of the continent. The first half of this analysis will profile Iowan migrants themselves, the seemingly stereotypical characteristics they possessed, and some of the contributing factors to their settlement out west. The second half of this paper will attempt to examine how the annual celebration of the Iowa Day Picnic facilitated assimilation for early Midwestern transplants, established by the Iowa State Association as a major site for cultivating social networks, which ensured significant forms of social stability for mostly rural migrants who arrived from Iowa between 1900 and 1930. Additionally important to analyze were how—for some observers—seemingly worthless trinkets which represented Hawkeyes’ dual fealty to both states and afforded them a temporary social status at the Iowa Day Picnic.

Midwesterners were a mobile people in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Yet their westward migration was conceivably influenced by outside forces. According to the leading voice in southern California history Carey McWilliams, “Artificial stimulation certainly played a part in encouraging Iowans to settle in southern California.”³ Development of the railroads and the establishment of transcontinental links between the East and West in the late nineteenth century allowed many Americans greater movement—especially Midwesterners. The affordability of rail travel via the Santa Fe connection made the prospect of migration to California more accessible and some tickets to travel west were even advertised as low as one dollar. This accelerated what one local historian called at the time, “An avalanche rushing madly to Southern California.”⁴

³ Carey McWilliams, *Southern California: An Island on the Land*, (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Press, 1949), 164.

⁴ Ibid 118.

Now connected by rail, little would avert Midwestern interest in southern California. Hawkeyes quickly sped across the plains, over the Rocky Mountains, and invaded the southern coast. Deterred only by the events of World War I, Iowan migration to Long Beach occurred in such great numbers in the early twentieth century that a direct rail line was established from Des Moines to Terminal Island by 1920—the cost of a ticket was only five dollars.⁵ For several decades, it seemed all roads and rail lines in Iowa ended out west in California. They left the gently rolling and verdant green hills of Iowa behind, traded expansive cornfields for towering skyscrapers, and abandoned their farmhouses for cozy bungalows. Long Beach grew rapidly. It seemed to many who passed through this expanding coastal city during this period that “Every one of these inhabitants either came from Iowa or was conceived by Iowans.”⁶

What conceivably began this rush to southern California? Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce boosters selected Iowa for experimental marketing campaigns in 1907, seeking new markets for citrus growers and to bring both settlers and tourists to the southern coast.⁷ Boosters were sometimes powerful organizations, persuasive print media, or influential individuals who sought to aggressively advertise southern California to other regions of the United States—particularly Iowa. They took great pains to charm—sometimes beguile—many Midwestern customers, newcomers, and tourists in efforts to lure them to the Golden State. State boosters even produced pictures of oranges stuck to the limbs of gnarled Joshua Trees and falsely claimed they were indigenous to the region.⁸ Even as early as 1888, the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce sought Iowan migrants—simple, rural folks who were “Tired of the long, bleak

⁵ Doris Nelson, “The Iowa Association of Long Beach: A Brief History,” original manuscript, private collection of the Iowa Association of Long Beach, 1985, 1.

⁶ Darwin Teilhet, *Journey to the West*, (Garden City: Country Life Press, 1938), 474.

⁷ Rahno Mabel MacCurdy, *History of the California Fruit Growers Exchange*, (Los Angeles: G. Rice & Sons, 1925), 59.

⁸ McWilliams, *Southern California*, 120.

winters, and would be delighted to move to this new Eden.”⁹ They aimed to attract practically *anyone* from Iowa to the southern coast, yet middle-class migrants—and their money—were indeed the most sought-after.

Southern California boosters Advertisements on billboards placed throughout the Hawkeye State proclaimed to thousands of pairs of rural eyes, “Oranges for health, California for wealth!”¹⁰ Iowan newspapers were also inundated with advertisements. Few native Iowans had ever seen an orange or a lemon—let alone tasted one. Yet they became enamored with citrus. After the first year of their experiment, Sunkist produce sales rose over 50% in Iowa.¹¹ Boosters aggressively continued their Midwestern advertisement campaigns, yet they also utilized other strategies. In 1881, California fruits and vegetables were proudly marketed to Iowans in an exhibit in Des Moines, with lecturers praising them to both houses of the Iowa State Legislature.¹² Local trade associations like the California Fruit Growers Exchange also greatly contributed to the influx of Iowans to southern California and Long Beach. They sent bannered trainloads—known colloquially as citrus trains—of produce back to Middle America and brought Hawkeyes back with them, synthesizing major population shifts out west.

From 1900–1930, the mass migration of Iowans to Long Beach rapidly transformed this sleepy coastal town into a major metropolitan city. Swelling in size from 17,554 in 1910 to 140,867 in 1930, white Midwesterners comprised approximately 95% of the population of Long Beach.¹³ By 1922, the Iowan population reached nearly 250,000 in southern California, and one

⁹ David Halberstam, *The Powers That Be*, (New York: Knopf, 1979), 107.

¹⁰ MacCurdy, *Fruit Growers*, 59.

¹¹ McWilliams, *Southern California*, 163.

¹² *Ibid* 163.

¹³ U.S. Bureau of the Census, “Historical Census Statistics on Population Totals by Race, 1790 to 1990, and by Hispanic Origin, 1970 to 1990 - For Large Cities and Other Urban Places in the United States,” 2005.

reporter claimed their numbers were the size of a small occupying army of nine divisions.¹⁴ At the time, many naturally wondered how so many loyal sons and daughters of Iowa left their farms behind, yet there were some prominent Hawkeyes who theorized why. Addressing a crowd of over 50,000 former Hawkeyes in 1957 at the Iowa Day Picnic, former Iowa Governor Goodwin Knight claimed he “Believed one reason why so many Iowans have been attracted to California is an affinity born of the fact that both states have known great migrations.”¹⁵ Indeed, the Governor was correct that the great states of Iowa and California developed a special relationship in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

Articles featured in Iowa newspapers and periodicals acknowledged a particularly unique and special relationship between the Golden and Hawkeye States. Iowan newspapers often printed “Out West” stories from friends and family members living—or travelling—in California, which cultivated strong and continuing community ties between transplants and with those still living in Iowa.¹⁶ Hawkeyes living in California were also keenly interested in the affairs of their distant family and old friends in Iowa. Many of them retained subscriptions to local newspapers—generally from the county or town they hailed from—some even voted in Iowa elections and even paid Iowa state taxes by keeping their legal residences there.¹⁷ Headlined for Harlan Miller’s 1937 article “Long Beach—Paradise for Aging Iowans” in the Des Moines Sunday Register was a banner that bluntly asserted “Living costs Little—Writer Tells What Your Aunts and Uncles do for Excitement,” revealing to his readers an idyllic—yet slow-

¹⁴ Allen Carncross, “Modern Picnics: Much Improved, Heap Different,” Long Beach Daily Telegram, August 11, 1922.

¹⁵ Jack McDonald, “50,000 Ex-Iowans Jam Park Picnic,” Long Beach Independent, August 18, 1957, A3.

¹⁶ Donald Read, “The Long Beach Image,” (master’s thesis, University of Southern California, 1971), 108.

¹⁷ Harlan Miller, “Long Beach—The Paradise for Aging Iowans,” Des Moines Sunday Register, May 2, 1937, 15.

moving—coastal lifestyle many relatives of Hawkeyes seemingly lived out in southern California.¹⁸

Southern California boosters chose to attract Iowans to the region because of stereotypes. Characterized by their friendly dispositions, Iowans were described by some as “Peaceful, thrifty, and intelligent.”¹⁹ Midwesterners—particularly Hawkeyes—were pious people that brought seemingly wholesome values to Long Beach. Sometimes described as bland or boring, they were considered so plain by some that a newspaper columnist sarcastically described Iowans as “No different from other folks, excepting that they come from Iowa.”²⁰ Even those from out-of-town remarked at how Iowans identified themselves. Attendees to the 1910 Iowa Day Picnic intently listened as the mayor of Pasadena admitted that the mostly Iowan population of his city “Abandoned the question of what state visitors are from and have a new one of ‘What part of Iowa do you hail from?’”²¹ Hawkeyes were described as reliable and pioneering to some observers. Yet to others, Iowans living in southern California seemed ostensibly boring. Governor Knight—retired from Iowa politics and living in Los Angeles—recalled at a later Iowa Picnic the character of the people he once served “Have a tradition of rugged individualism which makes them a solid element in any community in which they live,” and that Iowans uniquely possessed the “Spirit of a dependable citizenry.”²² Unlike poorer whites living in other regions of the United States, southern California boosters labeled Iowans as particularly valuable citizenry—in both character and worth. They valued traits commonly associated with

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Jon Gjerde, “Middleness and the Middle West,” in *The American Midwest: Essays on Regional History*, ed. Andrew R.L. Clayton and Susan E. Gray, 194. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2007.

²⁰ Carncross, “Modern Picnics,” I14.

²¹ Unknown, “Thousands in Iowa Throng,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 14, 1910, IV12.

²² MacDonald, “Ex-Iowans Jam,” A3.

Midwesterners like honesty and hard work, which were the “Essential components of a good reputation [for people] in small towns in Iowa.”²³

Most early Iowan migrants that traveled west and settled in Long Beach were generally of rural origin, middle-class, and retired. Many were tired of tilling tough soil between rows of tall corn stalks, their hands were deeply calloused after years of work, and their fissured brows were wrinkled by the glare of the sun. Yet Iowans were robust people. Older, yet still spry, farmers sold their valuable homesteads to developers in Iowa and relocated westward. Most middle-class Iowan migrants possessed modest assets, yet those with money indeed “Came to Long Beach to pay.”²⁴ Transplanted from the farm to a fast-growing coastal city only 25 miles from Los Angeles and safely sheltered by the Palos Verdes Peninsula, elderly Hawkeyes sought fair weather and fresh, clean air. Many reached their golden years, and they sought respite from the hardships of rural labor and wanted to “Take life easy” basking in the warmth of Golden State sunshine.²⁵ In conversation, many older Iowans were largely unconcerned with the cities they once lived near and chose instead to identify themselves by county of origin. “I’m a Polk County man” was a common expression heard among lingerers at the Rainbow Pier, or sometimes during fierce debates between Hawkeyes at the Spit and Argue Club.²⁶ Local Long Beach venues seemed to completely fill as Iowan retirees flocked to Long Beach in even greater numbers. Following the footsteps of previous pensioners, there were so many living in Long Beach they lent the city its honorary title of “Iowa’s western capital.”²⁷ Indeed, newcomers continued the journey that previous pioneers blazed. Trekking across the continent from family

²³ Denise Spooner, “A New Perspective on the Dream: Midwestern Images of Southern California in the Post-World War II Decades,” *California History* 76 no. 1 (Spring 1997), 52.

²⁴ Read, *The Long Beach Image*, 107.

²⁵ McWilliams, *Southern California*, 157.

²⁶ *Ibid* 170.

²⁷ Judy Pasternak, “It’s No Longer a Picnic to be Iowan in Long Beach,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 12, 1984, A1.

farms in Polk County and small towns like Emmetsburg, they craved the crisp, salty air of the Pacific Ocean.²⁸ Midwesterners became so numerous in Long Beach that it was also jokingly known as “Iowa’s Sea Port.”²⁹ Yet it was not only the aged and infirm who sought Southern California sunshine, many younger Hawkeyes also left home seeking to pioneer their own personal prospects.

Younger generations of Iowan migrants had different reasons for migrating to southern California, yet they retained many characteristic Midwestern traits. In her many interviews with Iowan transplants to Los Angeles and Long Beach, Denise Spooner noted how younger Hawkeyes believed sunny southern California “As a place of adventure and opportunity,” and their motivations for migrating often reflected this belief.³⁰ Many later migrants were professionals—sons and daughters of farmers—younger people who gave up toiling, back-breaking farm work, yet retained a particularly middle-class work ethic.³¹ One that was ingrained within them by their hard-working parents. Frank Merriam was once one of these young, industrious Hawkeyes. Active in Republican state politics back home in Iowa, he turned his political ambitions to California and worked in the state assembly for several years. He was eventually elected for governor and famously defeated novelist Upton Sinclair—author of *The Jungle* and leader of the *End Poverty in California* campaign—in a landslide gubernatorial election in 1934.³² Enticed by the economic growth, younger Hawkeyes were attracted to Long Beach. It expanded quickly in the 1920s, and newer transplants who arrived from Iowa cultivated

²⁸ Bruce Bliven, “To California,” *The Palimpsest* 52 (1971), 502.

²⁹ McWilliams, *Southern California*, 170.

³⁰ Spooner, “New Perspective,” 53.

³¹ Read, “Long Beach Image,” 114.

³² “Re-elected Governor of California,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 7, 1934, 1.

a novel image of a mostly white and Protestant California dream—one that valued hard work and rewarded their ambitions with success.³³

Escaping to the California coast presented a certain kind of inconspicuousness for younger Hawkeyes unavailable to their peers back home in Iowa. Uprooting elsewhere to an unfamiliar place enabled some transplants to both reinvent themselves and escape the social scrutiny often experienced within small-town communities. Youthful Midwesterners who sought the isolating comfort of anonymity could easily disappear into relative obscurity within the quickly growing urban metropolis of Los Angeles and Long Beach. Many opportunistic Hawkeyes were given a chance at personal reinvention in southern California and indeed some escaped the “Midwestern tendency to judge people.”³⁴ Indeed, shame was a powerful repressive tool that undoubtedly stifled individuality. Their behavior was often judged by critical—religiously *overzealous*—family and neighbors, and young folks were expected to adhere to an unspoken moral code “Against which [their] conduct was appraised.”³⁵ For many Hawkeyes, a desire for companionship like they once knew in Iowa conflicted with the limitations imposed by associations with their home community.³⁶ Instead they left the perceived smallness of rural life behind—small farms, small towns, small communities, and small problems. Young folks desired a lifestyle out west that was ideally “One to be whoever and whatever they wanted to be.”³⁷ The larger the city, the easier the escape. Major California cities with sizable populations like Los Angeles and Long Beach undoubtedly made it far more difficult for any relative in distant Iowa to pass judgment.³⁸ Indeed, many younger Hawkeyes constructed their own anonymous version

³³ Read, “Long Beach Image,” 108.

³⁴ Spooner, “New Perspective,” 45.

³⁵ *Ibid* 52.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 56.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 50.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 52.

of a California dream both in the shadows of tall skyscrapers and far away from expansive cornfields as they escaped to the southern coast.

Long Beach was a perfectly peaceful place for its majority Midwestern population. Advertised as “A place like the Midwest, but better,” southern California boosters sold aging Hawkeyes bright sunshine, temperate weather, and a place to retire.³⁹ They bought a warm, sunny version of the California dream which starkly contrasted with the harsh realities of life on the farm—and the sometimes-extreme Iowa weather. Although they left their seemingly flat and plain-looking home behind, transplanted Hawkeyes were sometimes accused of resembling the landscape from which they came. Yet despite a perceived plainness by native-born residents—even by Hawkeyes themselves—Iowans reshaped their new California home to suit their Midwestern tastes. Writing for the *Des Moines Register*, the popular columnist Harlan Miller once claimed that “Long Beach is not an exciting paradise, [but] inevitably it has a decided Midwest flavor, with subtropical foliage.”⁴⁰

The Midwesterners who populated the wooden pews of Methodist and Lutheran evangelical churches in Long Beach were particularly pious. Hawkeyes were indeed proud church-going folk, and they brought with them to California “a complete stock of rural beliefs, pieties, superstitions, and habits.”⁴¹ They abstained from alcohol and rarely was a bottle passed around—let alone ever seen—at an annual Iowa Day Picnic. Iowans in southern California demonstrated their concerted commitment to temperance by overwhelmingly voting for and passing their own prohibition legislation in 1922, casting 143,000 “Yes” votes to 84,000 “No” votes.⁴² In his voluminous book on southern California history, McWilliams claimed that “The

³⁹ Ibid, 45.

⁴⁰ Miller, “Aging Iowans,” 15.

⁴¹ McWilliams, *Southern California*, 158.

⁴² Ibid 157.

changing character of the stream of migration to California ... strikingly indicated the shift of the point of origin.”⁴³ In other words, migrants from outside the state—in this case, Iowa—determined the early character of southern California and subsequently the city of Long Beach.

Hawkeyes also possessed a unique kind of cognitive dissonance unlike any other migrant to southern California during this period. Between their feelings regarding their new homes along the coast and the distant ones over which they sometimes collectively lamented, it may have seemed to many observers that Iowan transplants were simply confused. According to historian Jon Gjerde, Midwesterners dually possessed unique senses of “Cognitive dissonance of [both] nostalgia and revolt” regarding their new urban home within southern California.⁴⁴ Although Long Beach practically became a Midwestern enclave along the coast, in some ways Iowans still missed the pastoral place of their birth. Iowa newspaper editor Sam Greene once said, “They all have nostalgic memories ... but not strong enough to move back there.”⁴⁵ Hawkeyes were seemingly among the most conflicted of all Midwesterners living in southern California—Iowa natives who “Identified with the Midwest but did not live there anymore.”⁴⁶ There is little doubt the loyal sons of daughters of Iowa retained their love for their beloved and cherished home, yet they simultaneously held a unique kind of admiration for their new one and yet had no intentions of leaving. Iowans were conceivably a “home-loving breed.”⁴⁷ Yet a certain kind of anxiety influenced their organization into state associations, and their celebration of annual picnics reflected a “Dual need of retaining elements of the past and of proving [to themselves] that the move to Southern California was beneficial.”⁴⁸

⁴³ Ibid, 161.

⁴⁴ Gjerde, “Middle West,” 193.

⁴⁵ Greene, “Transplanted Iowans,” 491.

⁴⁶ Gjerde, “Middle West,” 186.

⁴⁷ Teilhet, *Journey*, 474.

⁴⁸ Joseph Boskin, “Associations and Picnics as Stabilizing Forces in Southern California,” *California Historical Society Quarterly* 44 no. 1 (March 1965), 21.

Picnics are a quintessentially Midwestern tradition, and Iowan migrants brought this all-American and rural celebration with them to California. Initially held in 1887 at Lincoln Park in Los Angeles to “Celebrate their freedom from the winter,” organizers of the first Iowa Day Picnic began this annual tradition in January because of the delightful and warm sunshine characteristic of southern California winters.⁴⁹ Impressed—and surprised—by the fair winter weather, Iowans held their first picnic in southern California at a time of year when their Midwestern compatriots were inundated with snow. Although they continued their picnic traditions in California, Midwesterners were humble enough to admit they were not the first to celebrate them. One writer for the Long Beach Daily Telegram attempted to explain the origin of early American picnics by claiming they “Were a purely American institution ... that Native Americans began after the pilgrims landed on the East Coast.”⁵⁰ At first, The Iowa Day Picnic only attracted a few hundred Hawkeyes, yet excited picnickers nevertheless began swelling in greater numbers as Iowans continued migrating to California. By 1922, visitors to the picnic reached over seventy thousand, breaking all previous attendance records.⁵¹ The Iowa Day Picnic was advertised in newspapers distributed throughout California, and Iowans traveled to Long Beach from all over, and they transformed a seemingly local function into a grand gathering. This once humble affair in Long Beach “resembled one of the old-time country fairs back east and in the Middle West” according to some observers.⁵² Yet numbers at the picnic reached their peak in the 1930s with nearly one hundred fifty thousand easy-going Midwesterners happily reminiscing of home.⁵³ At times, the Iowa Day Picnic even attracted attention from around the

⁴⁹ Pasternak, “No longer a Picnic,” A17.

⁵⁰ Carncross, “Modern Picnics,” I14.

⁵¹ Unknown, “Record Number Expected Here at Big Picnic,” Long Beach Daily Telegram, August 11, 1922, I14.

⁵² Unknown, “Thousands in Iowa,” IV12.

⁵³ McWilliams, *Southern California*, 167.

world. Comparing one of their local events with the festivities held in Long Beach, a London newspaper once remarked it was “As active as a horseshoe at an Iowa Day Picnic” in their “Similes of 1925” column.⁵⁴

For several decades, annual picnics served as sites of intensely active social networks for many Iowan transplants. The Iowa Day Picnic was a Midwestern social tradition that helped to ease the tension of migrants who uprooted and moved to an unfamiliar place. These former farm hands needed to familiarize themselves with their new urban environment since they were separated from their accustomed rural way of life. Indeed, migrating from small towns and farms to an urban landscape was enough to make some Iowans anxious. Picnics provided a “sense of security and stability through the familiar” and were a comfortable extension of rural life for them.⁵⁵ The annual Iowa Day Picnic provided a means for Midwesterners both young and old alike from all over California to recognize their Hawkeye heritage. Organized by the indefatigable Charles H. Parsons, by 1920, the picnic grew so large that it was eventually broken up into 99 separate celebrations that were complete with their own picnic tables, decorations, and refreshments. Visitors to these larger Iowa Day affairs were directed to one of these interconnected picnics based on what county they hailed from, and signed their names proudly on large roll sheets—Parsons was known to remark how Polk County crowds were often the largest.⁵⁶ Picnic visitors could walk by roll sheets tacked to any one of the tall Eucalyptus trees that grew in Bixby Park or Recreation Park and likely see a familiar friend or colleague’s written name. The Iowa Day Picnic in Long Beach indeed “Reflect[ed] the dual need of retaining elements of the past and of proving that the move to southern California was beneficial.”⁵⁷ For

⁵⁴ Unknown, “Similes of 1925,” *London Sun*, August 16, 1925, 17.

⁵⁵ Boskin, “Associations and Picnics,” 19–20.

⁵⁶ McWilliams, *Southern California*, 170.

⁵⁷ Boskin, “Associations and Picnics,” 21.

some, attending the picnic was to see old friends, revisit memories, and reminisce together, for others, it may have relieved the glum loneliness they experienced living in a strange place. The picnic may have helped, because according to Parsons himself, the annual celebrations aided to “Liquidate the blues.”⁵⁸

How did the Iowa State Association facilitate social networks for Hawkeye transplants? According to McWilliams, the first All-States Society of Long Beach was established in the late 19th century to “keep alive the ties and friendships affiliated with the home state from which so many have migrated to California.”⁵⁹ Early state societies were essential in assimilating and familiarizing recently transplanted migrants—who clung to their culturally rural roots—with their new surroundings. They formed “*Ersatz* communities, communities within a community, [or] workable substitutes.”⁶⁰ Although Iowans may not own the credit of forming the first state society in California, they *were* among the largest migrant community in southern California and certainly the first to hold annual state picnics.⁶¹ If there was safety in numbers, then Hawkeyes certainly enjoyed the benefits of their westward exodus and concentrated settlement in Long Beach. The Iowa Association of Long Beach organized the first Iowa Day Picnic celebration seeking to establish both community cooperation and friendship among fellow Iowans in California. According to McWilliams, “Association ... enabled him to keep alive his memory of home.”⁶² In other words, many Iowan ex-patriots were united by collective sentiments of fellowship, and the annual Iowa Day Picnic helped these homesick Hawkeyes relieve some of their apprehension. Indeed, the Iowa State Society undoubtedly created a sense of stability for

⁵⁸ McWilliams, *Southern California*, 169.

⁵⁹ Boskin, “Associations and Picnics,” 20.

⁶⁰ McWilliams, *Southern California*, 170.

⁶¹ *Ibid* 167.

⁶² *Ibid*, 165.

newly-arrived Iowans. Almost solely responsible for gathering so many Hawkeyes together at the Iowa Day Picnic, “The organization of the Iowa Association of Long Beach [was] undoubtedly the greatest factor” for comfortable Iowan migration to California.⁶³

In the dense, urban landscape of Long Beach and greater Los Angeles area, Hawkeyes relied on the Iowa Day Picnic to re-establish social ties and companionship. They once lived in relatively isolated rural communities in Iowa when one’s neighbors essentially provided most social interactions. Yet living in southern California afforded an anonymity impossible to any Hawkeye still in Iowa. “Back in Des Moines, or in small towns in Iowa, you knew everyone,” and many left the Midwest to escape the judgmental eyes of their rural community.⁶⁴ They were friendly people; farmers who naturally spoke about the weather, rainfall, and crop yields with anyone—especially strangers. Yet in a place where asphalt roads lined with palm trees interweaved across a unnaturally reclaimed desert for miles in a labyrinthine maze, it was no wonder that many Iowans who traveled out west seeking the “Sun-kissed life” were sometimes easily lost in this unfamiliar landscape.⁶⁵ Yet attending the annual Iowa Day Picnic ensured that some lonely Hawkeyes could find a familiar face and reconnect with old friends—if for only a day. Many Hawkeyes who attended at the picnic indeed once enjoyed their simpler lives back on the farm. Elderly attendees often swapped the same exaggerated stories among old friends, sometimes meeting their coastal compatriots once again—possibly for the first time in years, or even decades.

In some ways, social networks for transplanted Iowans reached beyond the corporeal world. Obituaries for prominent—sometimes ordinary—Hawkeyes were often printed back

⁶³ Gene Plumb, “‘Iron Horse’ Blazed Trail for Iowans Trek Westward,” Long Beach Daily Sun, July 11, 1926, 4N.

⁶⁴ Spooner, “New Perspective,” 51–52.

⁶⁵ Ibid 57.

home in Iowa newspapers. Although many Iowans sold their farms for a newer coastal scenery, they nevertheless still possessed strong ties to family and friends back home. Iowa newspapers and periodicals often printed obituaries that celebrated Hawkeye's lives upon receiving a death notice, for many Hawkeyes often expired in Long Beach. They usually noted either their birth or time spent in Iowa and newspapers generally commended the deceased's public service or entrepreneurship. Often born on lonely farms surrounded by corn fields for miles, men who earned education, politics, wealth, and relative fame were memorialized for their work in Iowa or California—sometimes both.⁶⁶ Iowa newspapers generally printed how prominent ex-patriots enjoyed their retirement out west in Long Beach before death. Some older—yet still-living—Hawkeyes were convinced that California's fair climate and temperate weather could improve their health and vitality, and many of them escaped the bitter winters in Iowa in their final years to enjoy what little life they still possessed. Indeed, they fled in search of extending their lives, believing that the mild California weather could ease, or possibly cure their rheumatism or invalidity. Carey McWilliams called Midwesterners' rush to southern California an "Enthusiasm for 'climatology'" that was known as the "Southern California Fever."⁶⁷

At its peak, the Iowa Day Picnic was an all-day affair consisting of music, entertainment, guest public speakers, and activities. Some called it a "Day-long party."⁶⁸ Gathered together by the thousands, visitors to the Iowa Day Picnic were often met by smiling faces—for many old friends, they received hearty slaps on the back and firm handshakes. Shaded by tall eucalyptus trees and cooled by the brisk California breeze, Iowans enjoyed the easy life—at least once a year. The Los Angeles Times remarked after the celebration in 1900, "Flags were flying, badges

⁶⁶ Obituary of Joseph A. Rominger, *The Annals of Iowa* 16 (1929), 558–559.

⁶⁷ McWilliams, *Southern California*, 98.

⁶⁸ Bliven, "To California," 505.

were fluttering, tongues were wagging, and giant firecrackers boomed, it was a day of jubilee for Iowa.”⁶⁹ Hawkeyes devoured a lunch consisting of fried chicken, corn-on-the-cob, sandwiches, and pickles; they enjoyed fruit-filled pies and sugared doughnuts for dessert; finally washing their hearty meals down with gallons of sweet tea or coffee. Charles Parsons—the man responsible for such a magnificent reunion in the 1920s—once said picnic organizers provided “Hundreds of gallons of coffee with cream and sugar in abundance” to satiate the older folks.⁷⁰ In addition to a seemingly endless feast of traditional Midwestern cuisine, a variety of activities were also planned for visiting Hawkeyes to the Iowa Day Picnic. The Long Beach Municipal Band loudly boomed hometown favorites for the crowd, often patriotically beginning with the “Pledge of Allegiance” and ending with the “Corn Song.” Crowds of Iowans—both young and old—stood and waved their hands in the air, mimicking the corn stalks which they remembered often swayed in the wind back home. They sang it with enduring pride and only sat back in their picnic benches once they finished singing with the lyric, “That’s where the tall corn grows.” Famous political public speakers were often invited to the picnic to rally civic activism among an active Republican-leaning voting bloc. Presidential candidate Herbert Hoover made the Iowa Day Picnic a strategic stop on his campaign for the presidency in early August of 1928 and spoke to a crowd of over 75,000 fellow Hawkeyes. Both acknowledging and praising natural Iowan industriousness in the Golden State, Hoover said “Iowa was settled by those of adventurous spirit and courage, the descendants of whom have undertaken the building of other states.”⁷¹

Many mementos were given to participants to commemorate their Midwestern heritage and as tokens of pride. Worn as a badge of honor, Iowan picnickers were sold pinback buttons

⁶⁹ Unknown, “The Iowa Picnic,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 19, 1900, I15.

⁷⁰ McWilliams, *Southern California*, 175.

⁷¹ Unknown, “Thousands in Iowa,” IV12.

with illustrations of both a pig and a yellow ear of corn on a white background inscribed with the words “Hog and hominy.”⁷² Indeed, these objects were symbols of both pride and nostalgia for Iowans, who possessed great regard for their former rural home. In addition to the thousands of buttons worn by Iowan picnickers were colorful ribbons also meant to be adorned proudly—sometimes enviously to others—on their chests. Each ribbon held specific meanings and was meant to symbolize their connections with their home state of Iowa. Red ones were only given to those born in Iowa, representatives of the “lifeblood that must be sold only to natives; blue ones were sold to those ‘who have merely *lived* in Iowa;’ yellow ribbons were *only* sold to guests of the picnic; and white ones were sold as “a badge of glory to Hawkeyes.”⁷³ Often wearing the ribbons with pride, these tokens were social status symbols for boastful Hawkeyes. Prizes were also given to several Iowans who reached a specific status at any given annual picnic. They were offered in different competitions including, youngest, oldest, longest-lived, and—only for female Hawkeyes— “Most beautiful” from Iowa or of Iowa-stock. Although seemingly worthless trinkets to some, these commemorative pins and ribbons were particularly meaningful to Hawkeyes.

Mementos sold at the Iowa Day Picnic held deep significance for attending Iowans. It could likely be asserted that any outside visitor—undoubtedly even some reclusive Hawkeyes—could presumably feel alien amidst tens of thousands of native sons and daughters of Iowa gathered together at its peak in the 1920s. If one were to walk between rows of picnic tables filled with smiling, jovial Hawkeyes reuniting and not actually hail from the great state of Iowa they would likely have been ignored—treated as an outsider. According to the famous

⁷² McWilliams, *Southern California*, 169.

⁷³ *Ibid* 168.

anthropologist Clifford Geertz, “They may [have] seem[ed] virtually not to relate to you at all.”⁷⁴ In his observations of the Balinese sport of cockfighting, Geertz opined that “Much of Bali surfaces in the cock ring,” and indeed, much of Iowa once surfaced during the annual Iowa Day Picnic celebration.⁷⁵ Geertz claimed that both Balinese men and its culture were “Obsessed with cocks,” they looked upon cocks as with a “Mixture of rapt admiration and dreamy self-absorption.”⁷⁶ Similar to the “Jaundice of envy” experienced by unlucky picnic-goers who had the misfortune of only being peripherally related to an Iowan, simply a resident of the state for a short time, or even a non-resident. Non-native Hawkeyes coveted both the red and white ribbons worn by specifically natives or those who had lived there 50 years or more.⁷⁷ Although they were first conceived as a scheme to fund Iowa Day Picnic expenses and its organization each year, the sale of colored ribbons inadvertently created status symbols—important only to Iowans. The respect and elevation of one’s reputation for their possession of a particular color mirrors Geertz’s observations of “The hierarchy that rests in their natural colors” for Balinese fighting cocks.⁷⁸

For one sunny August day in southern California, it seemed that Iowa itself bordered Long Beach. The Iowa Day Picnic represented something meaningful for most attending Hawkeyes, people who largely led conceivably uneventful—or dull—lives. Originally rural people who rose with the sun and retired for the day at its setting, easy-going Iowans lived much like the island-dwelling Balinese—in “spurts.”⁷⁹ Used to their past lives as farmers, many older Hawkeyes both retired and residing in Long Beach seemingly lived lives of mostly nothingness

⁷⁴ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretations of Cultures*, (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 413.

⁷⁵ Ibid 417.

⁷⁶ Ibid, 419.

⁷⁷ McWilliams, *Southern California*, 168.

⁷⁸ Geertz, *Interpretations*, 447.

⁷⁹ Ibid 445.

interspersed with the excitement of that annual grand spectacle at Bixby Park they patiently waited for all year. Geertz asserted the Balinese lifestyle was an “Arrhythmic alternation of short periods when ‘something’ is happening and equally short ones where ‘nothing’ is” as well, and it seems that the lives of transplanted Iowans who lived in southern California in the early twentieth century certainly paralleled this particularly unique condition.⁸⁰ However, for many Midwesterners who were accustomed to living in the middle, a life considered relatively mundane punctuated by moments of thrilling delight conceivably seemed appropriate. Iowans—except those at the Iowa Day Picnic—represented in California what Carey McWilliams called “A glacial dullness engulfed the region.”⁸¹

Known by many affectionate nicknames to its mostly Midwestern population, Long Beach was home to hundreds of thousands of Hawkeyes—if only for a warm, August afternoon. Indeed, they left verdant fields behind for boulevards lined by lofty palm trees. Iowans were successfully lured to the region by southern California boosters with promises of health, wealth, and mild weather. From all over the Hawkeye State, Iowans poured into the southern California region and Long Beach both by rail and road for decades—most of them sought a peaceful place to retire after years of hard agricultural labor. Instead of reaping yellow corn harvests they reaped golden California sunshine in considerable numbers. Although they were hardy, grain-fed folk, many were naturally unnerved by living somewhere unfamiliar. In response to their anxiety, state associations were formed by early Midwestern settlers to establish a sense of community and fraternity among former Hawkeyes. In addition to aiding assimilation to a new coastal paradise, they established an annual picnic celebration that—at its peak—attracted over one hundred thousand expatriates both young and old to “Caliowa,” or “The *other* Des Moines.” Such a grand

⁸⁰ Ibid, 445.

⁸¹ McWilliams, *Southern California*, 157.

gathering of native sons and daughters of Iowa at the annual picnic allowed a far easier and faster transition for Iowan transplants to their new California home. Indeed, without state associations or the celebration of annual picnics to establish stable social networks and facilitate assimilation, the contributions of Midwestern migrants to southern California would likely not have been as profound. When congregated together they held friendly contests among each other, handing out prizes and selling mementos of serious value, inadvertently creating status symbols based on specific meanings. Geertz's study of Balinese cockfighting illuminates how valuable seemingly worthless trinkets are to cultures—in this case, Iowans in Long Beach—based on the characteristics attached to them, and Hawkeyes were certainly interested in the social status they afforded to them if only for a day at the Iowa Picnic. It seems of all migrants who traveled westward, Iowans living in both southern California and Long Beach truly developed and possessed “The strongest sense of themselves,” through Midwestern traditions they had brought with them, and their continued migration to the coastal region transformed both its early landscape and culture.⁸²

⁸² Nelson, “Brief History,” 1.

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