Clarion Review

History

God Saved This Place for Us
Al Oppedal
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Four Stars (out of Five)

In *God Saved This Place for Us*, Al Oppedal traces the unique history of his hometown community—the Lost Island and Walnut townships of Palo Alto, Iowa. The struggle of the generations of Danish and Norwegian who settled this community is more than an interesting ethnic portrait of Scandinavian immigrants in rural America. It is a microcosm of humanity's collective will to persevere.

The author was motivated in documenting Palo Alto's history out of a deep commitment to preserve a special way of life. His earnestness in sharing the town's history is evident in the authenticity of the accounts. The accounts are rigorously researched, including collections of letters, for example, from pioneer settlers as early as 1864.

Landless in their own homelands, thousands of immigrants began flowing from Scandinavia to America after the Civil War, with Danes and Norwegians settling in an inhospitable and uninhabited part of Iowa. By 1870, the immigrants had fallen prey to "swamp land swindlers" who took advantage of settlers looking for cheap land suitable for farming. As a result of a mile thick ice sheet during the Wisconsin Glacial Epoch, which ended about 10,000 years ago, Palo Alto County was left with a "terrain of steep gravel hills … marshy peat ground, potholes, swamps and lakes." A pastor of the Lost Island Church described the mud as " … so deep … the buggy sank down to the axles." Though the land proved difficult to farm, the Norwegians and Danes persevered and survived.

As a historical documentary, the author brings to light some startling revelations about the community's political and social progressiveness, especially during the antebellum period, the Great Depression, and World War II. Palo Alto was notably proactive, opposed slavery, fought for better conditions for farmers, and championed educational reform. Some of the community was even swept up in an armed rebellion of militant farmers. Unlike the majority of

rural America, Palo Alto opposed isolationism, showing their patriotism with more than a fair share of men to serve in World War II.

Naturally, the church played a powerful role in “developing country life ideals,” serving as a bastion of security and fellowship in a vast, isolated land. Despite language and cultural differences, the Danes and Norwegians overcame sharp divisions and religious firestorms within their congregations. The vast majority of the community’s faithful attended church and shared pastors. Particularly poignant is the description of the crisis the community suffered in 1934 when the Lost Island Church burned to the ground. The fire occurred at a time when the community was just beginning to feel hopeful about pulling out of the Great Depression. Though the loss of the church was devastating, within a few weeks the congregation raised enough money to rebuild.

This book goes well beyond regional appeal and will give readers a compelling look at a community’s brave struggle to adapt to their new homeland.

Gary Klinga