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Review: 'Hero of the Heartland: Billy Sunday and the Transformation of American Society, 1862-1935'

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army life and the boastful bravery of an unseasoned soldier. After the company sustained its first casualties during the opening days of the Philippine War, his writings reveal the quick evolution of opinion toward the Filipinos from neutral observer to vindictive soldier employing racial epithets.

For students of American imperial and military history, this work is useful in illustrating the logistical problems and conditions of service endured by volunteer soldiers campaigning in the Philippines. In addition, the exploits of the First Nebraska mirror those of the Fifty-First Iowa Volunteer Infantry Regiment as recorded in Private Joseph Markey's *From Iowa to the Philippines* (1900). Furthermore, *Inside the Fighting First* complements recent scholarship on this period such as A. B. Feuer's *America at War: The Philippines, 1898–1913* (2002); Richard K. Kolb's *Blaze in the Boondocks: Fighting on America's Imperial Frontier in the Philippines, 1899–1913* (2002); and Brian M. Linn's *The Philippine War, 1899–1902* (2000).

Hero of the Heartland: Billy Sunday and the Transformation of American Society, 1862–1935, by Robert F. Martin. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002. xi, 163 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$27.95 cloth.

Reviewer William Vance Trollinger Jr. is associate professor of history at the University of Dayton. He is the author of *God's Empire: William Bell Riley and Midwestern Fundamentalism* (1990).

It is hard to imagine how anyone could write a boring book about the colorful evangelist Billy Sunday. Robert Martin does not disappoint. The University of Northern Iowa historian tells a lively and well-researched story about Sunday's Iowa childhood—his father's untimely death, his family's grinding poverty, his mother abandoning him to an orphanage—as well as his career as a major league baseball player, his conversion at a Chicago mission and his marriage to Helen (Nell), his remarkable success as an entrepreneurial evangelist, and his failures as a father. In all this Martin convincingly depicts Sunday as the quintessential midwesterner and American who, “in his sincerity and unique embodiment of so much that was a part of his nation's past and present, . . . represented for millions of Americans a figure of heroic proportions” (140).

Hero of the Heartland is a short book, but Martin fills it with interpretive insights. He convincingly argues that Sunday's “childhood separations” left him with a “profound sense of insecurity and inadequacy” (23) that dogged him his entire life, a point that helps explain

his utter dependence on Nell. Martin also nicely explains how Sunday's baseball career provided him with both a connection to the public and a wealth of stories that fit his message of individual responsibility and achievement. And although Martin may overstate the case, he makes a good argument that there is much about Sunday the moral reformer that fit the era of Progressive reform.

Given that Billy Sunday was the greatest evangelist of his day, it seems a bit odd to observe that *Hero of the Heartland* lacks an adequate treatment of, well, religion. From this book one gets little sense as to how Billy Sunday fits into the great tradition of American revivalists. Moreover, although Martin does make a number of references to Sunday's "fundamentalist theology," he provides no elaboration or definition, except to imply (erroneously) that fundamentalism can be understood as synonymous with nineteenth-century evangelicalism. Perhaps Martin's inattention to such issues is because he understands Sunday to be much more interested in "applied Christianity" than in "mere discourses in fundamentalist theology" (128); that may well have been the case, but it does not follow that the theological content of his messages was immaterial.

Hero of the Heartland concludes with a chapter that focuses on a crucial question: why did Billy Sunday's popularity decline so precipitously after World War I? Martin argues that much of the answer is to be found in the congruence between the evangelist's career and the popular image of his native region. In the early twentieth century, Sunday and the Middle West appealed to anxious Americans by "affirm[ing] the relevance and efficacy of conventional norms for a nation in transition" from a rural, agricultural past to an urban, industrial future (136). But by the 1920s the future had arrived. With the triumph of modernity, a remnant of rural and small-town Americans gravitated toward fundamentalism or the Ku Klux Klan; Sunday responded by turning his attention to Christ's Second Coming and the evils of evolutionism and modernism. The point is that the heyday of Billy Sunday and the Middle West had passed, and the evangelist and his region "seemed . . . increasingly quaint, ludicrous, or irrelevant" (136).

Martin makes his case eloquently. It would have helped if he had taken into account the rich historiography that counters the notion that the Klan and the fundamentalist movement primarily consisted of rural folks who could not adjust to modernity. As regards fundamentalism, not only did it have its origins and much of its strength in cities, but it has thrived in both urban and rural areas since the 1920s, with no signs of fading away. One wonders if Billy Sunday's declining popularity had much more to do with the effects—nicely described by

Martin—of aging and the emotional toll of dealing with his sons' personal scandals than with the increasing irrelevance of his message.

What is most striking about *Hero of the Heartland* is Martin's ability to note Sunday's shortcomings—his intolerance, chauvinism, materialism, and more—while at the same time persuasively arguing that we should understand the revivalist as a psychologically fragile man who never escaped the trauma of his Iowa childhood. Critical yet sympathetic: just what one hopes for in a biographer.

Robert F. Martin won the 2003 Benjamin F. Shambaugh Award for *Hero of the Heartland: Billy Sunday and the Transformation of American Society, 1862–1935*. With this award, the State Historical Society of Iowa recognizes the most significant book on Iowa history published each year.—Ed.

Moving Out: A Nebraska Woman's Life, by Polly Spence, edited by Karl Spence Richardson. Women in the West Series. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002. 280 pp. Illustrations. \$17.95 paper.

Reviewer Barbara J. Steinson is professor of history at DePauw University. She is the author of several articles about rural women in the twentieth century.

The autobiography of Polly Spence (1914–1998) provides illuminating contrasts between small-town life in south-central Nebraska and in the rugged northwestern corner of the state, which bears little similarity to neighboring prairie states.

Spence's childhood memories include compelling accounts of Klan organizing in Franklin and resistance by her father (the town's newspaper editor), exchanging goods and services with merchants for advertising and subscriptions, solving financial problems by moving into cheaper housing, and burning anger at her often critical mother.

Their move to Crawford in 1929 landed them in a western town marked by a different "tempo and texture of life," with "loose and relaxed attitudes" of "live and let live" (78). Nearby Fort Robinson provided entertainment and an earnest suitor, whom Spence spurned for the University of Nebraska. Her amusing life as a sorority girl in the early 1930s ended before she completed a full semester. Back in Crawford, Spence fell in love and married a rancher. Reflecting on their early marriage, Spence recalls "working hard and trying our damndest," but "each year we went deeper in debt" (130). Spence's account of motherhood is fairly brief, but she details the crushing im-