

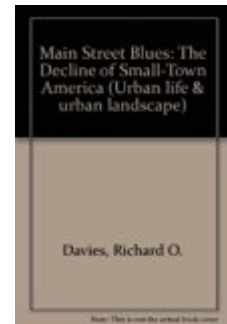
# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Richard O. Davies. *Main Street Blues: The Decline of Small-town America*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1998. xiii + 234 pp. \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8142-0782-6; \$50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8142-0781-9.

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## The Death of Small Towns

Small towns die slowly and often painfully like a person with a long illness. At best, their decline is merely ignored by those who live in larger, more vibrant communities. At worst, they become an embarrassment for those who see them. In the Midwest, many of the small towns that dot the countryside from Ohio to the Great Plains often have seen better days when mines, mills, and railroads provided jobs and a relative prosperity. These towns thrived before the county seats and larger service centers offered not only better employment opportunities but also choices in the form of discount stores, education, and entertainment. Small-town, rural America, still exists, of course, but it is far different at the turn of the twenty-first century than at the dawn of the twentieth century.

Richard Davies, professor of history at the University of Nevada at Reno, has written a provocative book about the demise of Camden, Ohio, the birthplace of Sherwood Anderson and Davies's home town. In many ways Davies looks back at the small town of his boyhood as if it were for the last time, a pilgrimage of sorts. Davies, however, analyzes the decline of Camden with the cold, dispassionate eye of an excellent historian. This is not a book that nostalgically looks back to Camden's better days. Rather, it is a model study of complex economic, social, and political changes during the twentieth century that affected small towns across the nation. In this respect Camden serves as a case study for the transformation of small towns that informs the reader as much about modern day, urban, and industrial America as it

does about the towns that epitomized rural America, particularly in the Midwest during the twentieth century.

Located about twenty-five miles southwest of Dayton, Camden's town site was first occupied in 1810 by two grist mill operators. By 1850, Camden was a bustling agricultural service center with about four hundred residents. Town leaders secured the necessary funds to support the construction of the Hamilton and Eaton Railroad, which linked Camden to the outside world in May 1852. Its voters, whose ideas for economic progress and national growth mirrored the planks of the Whig Party, became staunch Republicans during the Civil War and never looked back. They felt comfortable with government that favored small-scale businesses, the improvement of agriculture, and some regulations to ensure the protection of the general welfare as long as nothing was done in a hasty, rash, or fiscally irresponsible manner, particularly regarding labor unions, immigration, the tax base, and property rights. In 1896, no Americans displayed more patriotism and town pride than Camdenites when they helped elect William McKinley president by a 2-1 vote, then reaffirmed their choice four years later.

Like other small midwestern towns at the turn of the twentieth century, Camden was Protestant, conservative, patriarchal, and agriculturally oriented. Its residents worked hard, and they believed in progress, the inherent superiority of capitalism and the middle class, and family sit-down meals at supper time. Camden's residents took pride in their town band and baseball team,

while school basketball occupied their time on cold winter nights. Racial and ethnic homogeneity prevailed. Then, the Great Depression changed everything.

By 1931 the agricultural economy had collapsed, farm foreclosures became common, local banks fell into receivership, and the cash flow in the stores along main street diminished to a trickle. Camden's unemployed Republicans now eagerly signed up for a host of government relief programs, but they did not change their voting habit. Tax revenues declined precipitously, and the city government could not keep up with needed public services. Before anyone could resolve national and local economic problems, World War II pulled and pushed many residents into the military or to industrial jobs in the cities. Once people moved away to improve their lives, they seldom returned. Camden continued to decline during the 1950s when a major interstate highway bypassed the town leaving it more isolated and impoverished than ever before.

Camden did not have the human or financial resources to respond to the nearly cataclysmic changes that affected the town after World War II. Even if the town had vibrant leadership and full coffers, the decline of Camden would have been impossible to prevent. Many of its residents wanted a different lifestyle. Small towns like Camden offered little more than an inadequate standard of living and underemployment if not unemployment. Soon the newspaper, school, and bank, the most

important institutions in small towns in the twentieth century, were gone. Camden became the place of the rural poor in the form of unskilled, low-wage, blue collar workers who held jobs in larger surrounding towns and cities and home for low income retirees who managed to get by with few conveniences and services. Without a substantial voter base, both federal and state governmental officials conveniently forgot them, although previous federal programs such as the interstate highways system and farm programs proved more harmful than beneficial because both encouraged the migration of rural residents to the cities. Davies does not believe that small-towns will pass from American life, but he contends they will exist as marginal entities that provide a few services and benefits for those who need such places to reside.

Davies has mined the local newspapers for the heart of his research, but he also brings the perspective of a resident to his narrative. The result is a solid, interpretive work that informs the reader not only about the complexities of small town life but also the effects of national changes that have irrevocably affected small towns across the country. For anyone interested in social history or the history of the Midwest, Davies's study is a good and necessary read.

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