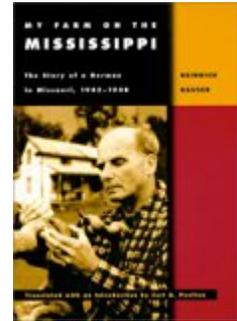


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Heinrich Hauser. *My Farm on the Mississippi: The Story of a German in Missouri, 1945-1948*. Translated Curt A Poulton. Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 2001. x + 168 pp. \$24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8262-1332-7.

Reviewed by Paul Fessler (Department of History, Culver-Stockton College)
Published on H-GAGCS (December, 2001)



A German Fairy Tale in Rural Missouri

A German Fairy Tale in Rural Missouri

Originally published in Germany in 1950, *My Farm on the Mississippi* was clearly written for a non-academic audience. In this brief, very accessible book, Heinrich Hauser, an opponent of the Nazi regime and wartime German refugee, turns his three years from 1945-1948 on a Missouri farm near the German-American community of Wittenberg into an engaging adventure story. Though Hauser is primarily concerned with conveying the trials of working a farm partly on the flood plain of the Mississippi to a general German audience, this book caught the eye of Curt Poulton, a historical geographer and translator at the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs. Poulton translated it into English. He argues that Hauser, as a German living among a German immigrant community in the wake of World War II, offers invaluable commentary upon this 1940s "postimmigrant America" where immigrants' native language and customs were still alive. Poulton hopes that this translation offers researchers a vivid historical geography of a community largely wiped away by the 1993 flood. Indeed, Hauser's examination of a fading culture from the perspective of an Old World visitor should prove to be the main attraction of this work within academic circles and for use as a supplementary assignment in undergraduate and graduate courses.

In 1939, Hauser, a prolific writer of fiction and non-fiction, escaped from Germany with his Jewish wife and two children. After unsuccessfully trying his hand at

farming in upstate New York and then at city life in Chicago, Hauser and his wife yearned for the romantic fresh air of the proverbial American heartland. With no prospects or firm destination, Hauser set off for St. Louis and points southward in an old 1928 Packard in search of his dream farm. South of St. Louis and just north of Cape Girardeau, Hauser and his wife began passing signs to "Stuttgart", "Dresden", "Altenberg", and "Wittenberg". In Cape Girardeau, Hauser spotted a "Dr. Schultz" and paid this German-speaking physician a visit to inquire about the region and the German-sounding places. Working through the German-American subculture, Hauser soon bought a farmstead south of the town of Wittenberg, Missouri.

Hauser recounts how his wife Rita and son Huc struggled to make the farm a working proposition for the next three years. Most of the profits, however, were used to provide care packages and other aid to their German friends and relatives back home. During the rest of the time, his family survives horrific floods, raging forest fires, and a comic shipwreck. During the summers, his son Huc devised plans and adventures such as making a boat with an outboard motor in ways reminiscent of a *Little Rascals* episode. By 1948, however, low crop prices and homesickness convinced the reluctant Hausers to return to Germany and abandon their Missouri farm.

It is important to note that Hauser was not writing for scholars interested in the status of German customs and habits in the post war world. Hauser was not

primarily interested in how well his neighbors retained their ethnic identity and their mother tongue. Instead, he focused upon the trials and joys of running a farm in America without going broke. This struggle with the land and the river is at the heart of his narrative. This is the storyline that captured the German reader's attention. Indeed, I suspect it will be easy for many H-NET subscribers to identify with a writer/academic type struggling to eke out a living from the land. Much of Hauser's farming knowledge came from book reading and from his correspondence with agrarian academics such as George Washington Carver. In fact, I probably learned more practical details about working a farm from this book than all the countless books on the Populists and agrarian dissent that I read in graduate school. The Mississippi river, farming, and the countryside, then, not ethnic relations and the German immigrant subculture, are the overwhelming focus of Hauser's writing.

Nevertheless, Hauser offers a useful window into this German-American society on the banks of the Mississippi. As Hauser notes, it is this region's rural isolation that permitted its German culture and language to survive both World War I and World War II and beyond. Hauser knew he was among his own kind when he saw women working the fields—a practice Americans generally avoided. In the local bars, these German-Americans would add salt to modify the sweet American beers like Falstaff and Budweiser. When the war in Europe was over, Hauser's family celebrated with a crowd of itinerant German-American lumber workers playing "schottisches" and singing songs such as "Am Brunnen vor dem Tore" and sea tunes like "In Hamburg da bin ich gewesen". Also particularly interesting (and useful for immigration and ethnicity courses) are Hauser's recollected interactions between these German-Americans and the nearby African-Americans.

Even if Hauser did not dwell upon it extensively, it was this enclave of Germans and their familiar language that attracted these homesick refugees and made them feel at home. Hauser's observations serve as a vivid first-hand account of German-Americans as less than ideal material for the melting-pot. As Hauser explains upon first entering the region:

"It was remarkably perplexing to enter the store, ask for things in English, and then receive the answer in best German. At the bank, where I cashed a couple of traveler's checks, the customer before me said, 'Na, Euscheen, giv mir mal heite hunnerd Dollaars.' Not only did everyone speak German, but they all said du to one

another. It was like a fairy tale—it was miracle, and yet it was not America; time and distance were magically crazy" (28).

These German-Americans in 1940s Missouri still had a sense of loyalty to the "old country". Hauser cites the generous collections taken for the homeless in postwar Germany in the small towns of Altenberg and Wittenberg as evidence of this loyalty. Stories circulated through this Missouri community of postwar Germans searching out American maps for German-sounding names and begging for assistance. Even such dubious requests were rarely refused under the direction of the still-influential Lutheran pastors. Such loyalty among German-Americans could still create a backlash among the dominant Anglo society, however. Early in their residency, Illinois fishermen, angered by Hauser's presence near their fishing sites, complained to the FBI about Hauser's activities and observations.

Just as Alexis de Toqueville's *Democracy in America* offers an outsider's critique of early nineteenth-century America, Hauser's observations present a valuable perspective of postwar America, its rural traditions and ethnic relationships. Hauser is an "outsider/insider" within the postwar German-American community. Though an outsider as a recent German refugee, he can speak the language (both linguistically and theologically). This allowed him to enter into the culture and bring a unique perspective to bear upon it.

Because this book was originally written for a German audience unfamiliar with many aspects of American society and culture, Hauser's narrative is particularly instructive to an American audience today. For many undergraduate students in particular, Hauser's emphasis on the basics of everyday American life proves more fascinating to American readers today than when it was originally published. Approaching the daily life of the post-World War II America from the cultural distance of a foreigner is in many ways similar to the approach of today's readers and students separated from that cultural landscape by the passage of fifty years. Thus, Hauser's cultural observations, which may have seemed less interesting to an American reader in the 1950s when the work was first published, are met now with a much different perspective.

Without Poulton's sparkling translation, however, these observations would have lost much of their power to English readers. Poulton's work arouses comparisons to other recent and notable translations such as W.C. Kuniczak's translation of Heinrich Sienkiewicz's monumen-

tal trilogy beginning with the novel *With Fire and Sword* (popular Polish nationalist fiction written during the late nineteenth century—a useful assignment for courses dealing with 19th century European nationalism, by the way). Poulton remains faithful to Hauser’s intent to provide his readers with an adventure story. So dependent upon narrative flow and colorful description, this value and attraction of this work would have been irreparably harmed by a poor translation.

Poulton includes his own valuable annotations in footnotes. He carefully identifies ideas and notions that fail to translate from German to English. For example, when discussing Lutheran ministers, Hauser refers to them as “shepherds of the soul”. Poulton explains in a footnote that he opted for the literal translation of “Seelenhirten”, the common German vernacular for clergy. Poulton also explains shifts in German language that Hauser notes such as the use of “du” rather than the more formal “Sie”. Poulton uses footnotes to update the reader on the current condition of the geographical landscape described by Hauser. Yet, when possible, he provides useful and interesting commentary on the surrounding area. Poulton also identifies numerous spots where Hauser either embellished his story or forgot factual details of the surrounding area and community.

Though translated and edited by a historical geographer, the preface and the footnotes are written more with a general audience in mind. This volume would have been more useful to academics had more space been given to placing Hauser’s narrative more firmly in a historical and scholarly perspective in an expanded preface or introduction. Poulton devotes only a little over two

pages in the introduction to the background of the German immigrants and their community. Little or no historiographical context is given to illustrate the value of Hauser’s work. Even readers outside the academic realm would have been much better served by introduction and analysis similar to that in *News from the Land of Freedom* by Walter D. Kamphoefner, Wolfgang Helbich, and Ulrike Sommer (Cornell University Press, 1991).

Except for that minor quibble, this work could be effectively used in conjunction with writings by German immigrants and native-born Americans during this post-war period. Hauser’s very accessible style makes such an exercise in perspectival differences an attractive option for an undergraduate assignment or as an addition to a graduate reading list of immigrant memoirs and fiction.

An academic’s recommendation of a book as a “good read”, however, can often be regarded as suspect by undergraduates and general readers. Perhaps our overexposure to dissertations and monographs have perverted our sense of what constitutes an enjoyable and easy to read book. To counteract such biases and perversions, I asked my wife to read Hauser’s book. Despite possessing a master’s degree, my wife still shares with most undergraduate students a distaste for an academic writing style. A historian like Oscar Handlin might keep her interest but any work by Perry Miller would likely become a paperweight. If my wife cannot plow through the first chapter of a book without nodding off, then my undergraduates are doomed. This book passed my wife’s test. If only all books published by academic presses could boast such accessibility.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

[/~gagcs/](#)

Citation: Paul Fessler. Review of Hauser, Heinrich, *My Farm on the Mississippi: The Story of a German in Missouri, 1945-1948*. H-GAGCS, H-Net Reviews. December, 2001.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=5746>

Copyright © 2001 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.