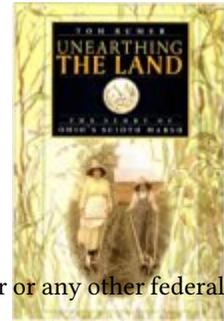


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Tom Rumer. *Unearthing the Land: The Story of Ohio's Scioto Marsh*. Akron: University of Akron Press, 1999. xi + 291 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-884836-52-7.

Reviewed by Charles C. Kolb (National Endowment for the Humanities)
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The Scioto Marsh and Black Muck: A Cultural and Ecological History

Over a century ago, the tear-shaped freshwater Scioto Marsh located in Hardin County, west central Ohio, was a swamp covering 18,000 acres—four square miles—that teemed with diverse flora and fauna. Beginning in the 1880s the swamp was drained and the organic black muck of the flat bottomland was converted into agricultural fields for growing vegetables, most particularly onions but also potatoes that were planted in precise rows over a half mile long. This massive alteration of an ancient wetland to farm fields and the resulting cultural and social impacts are central to this book, but by the 1930s the rich soil showed signs of major erosion and exploitation. This environmental irresponsibility was exacerbated by a highly publicized labor strike during the long, hot summer of 1934. The workers and landowners were both affected and the advent of World War Two ended an era in the history of Ohio.

Thomas A. Rumer, a native of nearby Kenton, Ohio, works as a freelance writer and is a public historian for the Carmel Clay Historical Association. He holds B.S. and M.A. degrees in history and English from Ball State University and a Masters of Library Science from Indiana University, and has published numerous articles on local history and written a half-dozen books, the latest of which is *Unearthing the Land*. As a knowledgeable historian and skilled writer, he is well qualified to prepare this historical account. Certainly there have been other publications that document the marsh, notably Carl Drumm's 94-page *A Complete History of the Scioto Marsh* (Kenton, Ohio: The Kenton Republican Co., 1940) and a county

history, Minnie Kohler's *A Twentieth Century History of Hardin County, Ohio* (1883). However, Rumer has undertaken fresh research, examining nine runs of microfilmed local newspapers, consulting diaries and other written records, using key informants such as Walter Miller, and utilizing 62 oral histories – the “backbone” of this narrative (p. ix). He has created a significant ethnography about the place and the people that came to work there for better and for worse, for richer and for poorer. In this sense he tells a story not unlike the “classic” *Sand County Almanac, and Sketches Here and There* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1949) by Aldo Leopold (1886-1948) or Edward Abbey (1927-1989) the author of *Abbey's Road* (New York: Dutton, 1979) and *Desert Solitaire: A Season in the Wilderness* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968).

Rumer's introductory remarks remind us that “productivity historically has been preferred over preservation” (p. ix) and he points out that the local population did not exercise wise stewardship over the ecosystem of the marsh. He also states that “as a former agricultural bonanza, the marsh has affected the lives of generation of people, just as the people have affected the marsh” (p. 5), “devitalizing” the native flora and fauna as he puts it. Ten chapters and an epilogue are the core of the volume and three maps and 40 illustrations supplement five of the chapters. There is no separate list of these illustrations, but there are four pages of notes on sources and a six-page double-column index of topics and proper nouns.

The individual chapter titles are brief but striking—first five are “The Marsh,” “Diversity,” “Pioneers and Progress,” “Arrivals,” and “The Town.” The ecology of the former marsh is delineated as is the drainage accom-

plished from 1859 to the 1920s, which included channeling the Scioto River. Characterizing regional geology and the marsh itself, Rumer relates stories about five-foot deep rich black organic muck, and tells of wind blowing the dried muck and creating a pervasive “black dust,” and he documents muck burning and techniques for extinguishing muck fires, as well as muck snowstorms. Wind and water erosion and oxidation reduced the muck to an average depth of one foot by the 1930s, hence, “what took eons to produce has largely evaporated in a century of agricultural use” (p. 21). The laborers who migrated to the marsh were often from Kentucky coal country and included families such as Magoffin, Floyd, and Johnson. The biodiversity of the marsh was diminished greatly by draining the marsh, but Rumer documents some of the original biota—salamanders, wood bison, passenger pigeons, muskrats, and rattlesnakes—and cedar logs dating to the formation of the Wabash moraine during Wisconsin glaciation. Today, only remnants of the marsh remain for the visitor to peruse.

Rumer discusses the first pioneer, Samuel Tidd from Pennsylvania; Native American history including Chief Roundhead and the Tecumseh confederation; the Ohio Company and George Croghan; and Celeron and Fort De Troit. The first map of the region dates to 1805 and the initial land survey of the “horrible miry swamp” was done in 1819. The Scioto Marsh Drainage Company was formed in 1850 and the initial drainage ditches constructed from 1859 to 1861; interrupted by the American Civil War, the next major effort was in 1881. The construction of a railway, the Chicago and Atlantic (which became part of the Erie Railroad in 1888), and the massive drainage project using a steam-powered ditching machine continued despite “malarial fever” and the Cottonwood ditch, 23 feet wide and six miles in length was completed. The author discusses the Scioto Land Company and Scioto Marsh Improving Company that were involved in large-scale farming, especially potatoes for the new, developing potato chip industry. Floods such as the Easter Sunday deluge in 1913, and heavy snows are related, and the creation in 1915 of the Upper Scioto Drainage and Conservation District, the first of its kind in the state, is documented.

The founding the town of McGuffey in 1884 and its subsequent chronological history is the subject of a chapter. The initial building as a sawmill and later a Methodist Church that served many families from Kentucky who migrated to the region. The first physicians (Jones and Evans) and dentist (Thomas) are also mentioned as is the McGuffey Rockets baseball team (with photo). We are

informed that “good onion seed was worth its weight in gold” (p. 64) and that onions became the major crop through the World War One era when hemp was also raised for rope fiber. Saturday baths, the town marshal, beer joints, and an infamous March 9, 1923 armed robbery feature in the town’s history to the 1930s.

In an exceedingly interesting chapter entitled “Onions” (pp. 125-168, 17 illustrations), Rumer considers aspects of land preparation, planting, cultivation (“weeding” as weeding was called locally), harvesting, and shipping onions by railroad to markets as far as New York City. The difficult conditions of hand labor farming are conveyed—heat exhaustion, poison ivy, onion juice applied to cuts as a “field dressing,” and the impact of early and late frosts. Distinctions between farm managers and tenants’ housing, and the use of “Cle-tracs” (Cleveland Tractor Company) tractors with home-modified expanded track so as not to sink into the muck were used in land preparation, but wheelhoed hand cultivators such as the “Planet Junior” brand, were used to keep the weeds under control. Onion yields were up to 1,200 bushels per acre and wooden onion storage sheds individually held 4,000 to 20,000 bushels and maintained a temperature of 40 degrees F. Fire in storage shed could, and did, bring economic disaster, as could drought; for example, in the drought year of 1925 when only 255,000 bushels were harvested while two years later the yield was 1,750,000 bushels. The shift from horse and wagon to trucks for local transport is noted, but was mitigated by the Depression when cash was tight and onions were used for barter, a far cry from 1929 when the income of Hardin County from onion farming was \$1.0 million. The author also discusses some of the darker elements of the control of onion farming, such as federal grand jury indictments of onion growers in 1916, the creation of the National Onion Association, and the beginnings of a labor and management crisis.

With the Depression came a precipitous decline in hourly wages for laborers (10 to 12.5 cents per hour) and a lack of full-time employment. “Chapter 7: Strike” (pp. 169-224, 12 figures) reveals the stresses that developed between laborers and landowners and buyers, and the formation of the Agricultural Workers Farm Labor Union [Local Number] 19724 on June 18, 1934. A strike began two days later against larger growers, with landowners hiring special armed deputies (some with submachine guns) and the state sending a unit of the Ohio National Guard to McGuffey. This unit was fresh from having dealt with the Auto-Lite factory strike in Toledo. Rumer does not mention the Ohio National Guard and Kent State

University incident of May 4, 1970. Portions of the labor vs. owners story are reminiscent of “Grapes of Wrath” with strikers vs. nonstrikers, and families split over the issue, writs of injunction, outside agitation and violence (sticks, stone, and firearms), rising hostilities in July, a 23-day heatwave, and the mayor’s home damaged by a “bomb.” The term “communist” was applied to any protester, and the 700 strikers at the beginning dwindled in number to a handful. A number of rowers signed labor agreements with the union local and the wage became \$0.35 per hour. The abduction and beating of strike leader Okey O’Dell and the separate trials of the perpetrators and of O’Dell himself on another charge (pointing a firearm) are related. Here, Rumer relies on local newspaper accounts and a key informant (Walter Miller) and informs the reader that “although onions would be raised for a few more years, the strike, most agree, had capped the era of onions on the Scioto Marsh” (p. 213). Some growers turned from onion to potato farming because of newly available mechanized equipment, other growers felt the marsh muck was deteriorating and moved away. The author also reviews the importance of the postal telegraph office in selling onions. During World War Two the defense industries (such military tank manufacture in Lima, Ohio) drew laborers away and ultimately corn and soybeans became more important crops replacing onions and potatoes, ending an era in the history of the marsh. Celery, asparagus, and carrots were introduced as new crops, and peppermint was grown for the war effort (one acre of peppermint yielded 50 lb. of peppermint oil).

The final three chapters, “Weeds, Wind, Water,” “The River,” and “The Lake,” detail ecological topics such as types of weeds, mechanization, fertilizers and herbicides, wind erosion and the value of windrows of trees, the oxidation of the muck, floods (1915 and 1937) and dust storms (1935-1936). The degradation of the muck led to soil scientists reclassifying the soil into two new types (Alger and McGuffey muck) and the silting of the Scioto River. The gradual decline of the aquatic ecosystem from poor to very poor is related and the sociopolitical positions of farmers and environmentalists are documented. The loss of wetlands, the effects of heavy rains, and quicksand below the thinning topsoil became ecological concerns, while well water turning sulfurous and the problem of potable water became a viable political issue. In 1920 the population of Hardin County was 29,000 and by 1998 there were 31,111 inhabitants—evidence of an enduring rural status. In the “Epilogue: Time and Stewardship,” Rumer returns to a discussion of Okey O’Dell (who died in 1964) and his former wife, Elizabeth O’Dell, who

were belatedly honored for their efforts on behalf of organized labor during the 1934 strike at a Labor Day parade in Hardin County in 1997. Lastly, the author writes that “not much has changed on the marsh, no notable transfers of land ownership, no changes in crops grown” (p. 275).

In sum, the land and the people endured but were modified through a century and score of years due to environmental exploitation and economic good and bad times. Tom Rumer describes with a keen vision and in a highly readable, amiable manner the land and people of this truly unique American county. Indeed, he possesses a writer’s skills and the ability to inform the reader of diverse opinions—such as the story of the highly-publicized labor strike of 1934—and he informs us of the facts and fictions of local history, about land use and environmental responsibility—there are cautionary tales woven into his narrative that provide material for thoughtful reflection on the part of the reader. The narrative is supplemented with interesting and informative images and maps. He shows us that microfilmed newspaper accounts, oral history, and key informant methods are viable ways to elucidate local history. In spite of the local or regional flavor, there are important discussions of intensive hand labor farming, the history of a local labor movement, the stewardship of an ecosystem, and the acknowledgment that the land and its inhabitants are mutually symbiotic.

Indeed, *Unearthing the Land* has a flavor similar to the earlier writings of Leopold and Abbey on the environment and the effects of human impacts on fragile ecosystems. The discussion of the marsh, its ecology and cultural history, and intensive farming and labor strife are clearly documented. Your reviewer can testify personally as to the importance of Cletrac tractors and Planet Junior hand cultivators because he knows and worked with these implements as he grew up in a rural area of northwestern Pennsylvania. As a public historian, Tom Rumer has documented the local regional experience and provided an enjoyable narrative for students, the general public, and for scholars who wish to understand the history and dynamics of a local area. Labor, social, and cultural historians, rural sociologists, political scientists, and anthropologists will find this narrative useful. Hopefully, Tom Rumer will undertake other writing projects and share with us the delight of rural experiences and the issues of environmental stewardship.

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