

Kem Luther is a professor of computer science, a poet, a philosopher, and a genealogist. All of these attributes are brought to bear in *Cottonwood Roots*, an elegant work whose form and spirit defy easy description in a short review: The ostensible form is a travelogue, as Luther makes his way over nine days in early spring from his boyhood home in Broken Bow in western Nebraska to the tiny, nearly abandoned town of Crittenden, near Buffalo, New York.

But *Cottonwood Roots* is really a series of meditations from behind the wheel of an automobile on space, time, and familial and national memory. And although Luther ranges widely in his musings--from the public meaning of courthouse architecture, to computer models for determining the probability of kinship ties in large populations, to the fast-food French fry server as emblematic of modern civilization--they are neither random nor self-indulgent. Luther has undertaken a pilgrimage, "purposeful traveling," "a time when a larger purpose is deliberately allowed to suspend small demands" (p. 3).

Luther's pilgrimage is a journey back in time and from west to east across half a continent in search of his ancestors: his grandfather, Arthur, who, barely survived the typhoid that claimed his young wife on a lonely Nebraska homestead in the early 1890s; his great-grandfather, Henry, who brought his family to Nebraska from Illinois in 1871; and most elusive of all, his great-great-grandfather, Ebenezer, who spent a lifetime pursuing a farm of his own from western New York state, to western Pennsylvania, to Illinois. At each stop on his pilgrimage, Luther digs through the county histories, atlases, tax rolls, and censuses stored in courthouses and local libraries. But he is after something more than the facts in a public record written for any purpose but his. Fundamentally, Luther wants to know what made generations of his family move, and move again, and what the urge to uproot says about the historical memories of families like his own and of a nation-state shaped by the experience of families like the Luthers..

*Cottonwood Roots*, then, is ultimately a reading of American history, particularly of what Luther calls the "Transitional" and "Modern" periods--the years of the early republic and of the Civil War to the present. His interpretation, in its compressed presentation, is open to many qualifications as well as to the charge of reductionism, but it is coherent, provocative, and worth pondering. Luther ties the emergence of modern America to a radical reordering among "three parallel institutions"--religious, political, and educational--"around which [American] society is constructed" (p.102). In this reordering, religious institutions lost primacy of place with enormous consequences for how and why Americans advanced west to settle a continent.

The cottonwood, a tree from the West of his boyhood, a land of unpredictable rainfall, is Luther's metaphor for this history. The tree never matures, but "kills itself ... by its constant growth." Yet it is highly adaptable, for in an arid land it can sink deep roots to ground water. In moving west, Americans also "compensated for the decline of water with a spectacular growth." Now that expansion has long ago ended, "[w]e will... die the death of the cottonwood if we cannot find a way to bring the water back, to cherish it, and not to chase it" (pp. 114-15). For Luther, this means in part recapturing something of the evangelical spirit of the generation of his great-great-grandfather, Ebenezer, a spirit swept away in the blood bath of the Civil War from which modern America emerged.

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