"But I digress..."
A few words from our guest editor

Welcome to a special Heritage issue devoted to agriculture. I sit on the board of the Illinois State Historical Society and in that capacity I guest edit an issue of this magazine each and every year. I’ve been at this so long I remember asking Gov. Shadrach Bond to write a membership plea for my first guest issue. Just kidding! In any event, every spring Society Executive Director William Furry and I bandy about a fitting theme for an upcoming special issue, whether it be on an event, movement, person, or what have you. This time around I suggested corn. The executive director nixed that proposal as being too specific, and, perhaps, not worthy of an entire issue. Now, being an Illinoisan born and bred, I naturally took great offense to this perceived slight. Why, I thundered (to myself, mind you), we could devote an entire year of Illinois Heritage to King Corn and not come close to exhausting this inexhaustible topic!

I digress. Anyhow, I agreed to broaden the topic to agriculture in general. As librarian of the McLean County Museum of History for the past thirteen years, I’ve learned to appreciate the role, for good and ill, agriculture has played in making and remaking this state (by the way, we’re opening a new state-of-the-art farming exhibit on March 25, 2017). McLean County is an agricultural powerhouse, often the yearly leader among Illinois’ 102 counties in the number of harvested bushels of corn and soybeans (though truth be told, it helps to be the largest county in the state, area-wise). The county seat of Bloomington has benefited tremendously from the wealth of the surrounding countryside, an urban-rural relationship played out on a monumental scale with the rise of Chicago as “Nature’s Metropolis,” to borrow the title of William Cronin’s 1991 classic work in environmental history.

Agricultural history is more than the history of farming. The emergence of the American meatpacking industry as a global power, to cite a representative example, was dependent on the availability of an ever-greater number of farm-bred and farm-fattened cattle and swine. Correspondingly, packing demanded access to capital, advances in mass production techniques, organizational acumen, and a sophisticated network of suppliers, among many things. It’s been argued by Cronin and others that meatpacking served as a herald for the coming Industrial Age. The story of agriculture is inseparably intertwined with an innumerable number of similar stories, such as those involving the milling and processing of grain; canal and rail transportation; the vertical storage of “sackless” grain in elevators; the manufacture of clay drainage tile; the development of hybrid seed; the emergence of a futures market, and on and on. Traveling along McLean County’s township roads as I often do on research jaunts I can’t help but think we should stop referring to Illinois as the Prairie State and instead call it the Genetically Modified Monoculture State.

And here I go on another digression! At any rate, there’s a lot of neat stuff packed into this issue. Our contributors have covered a great deal of ground (or is it acreage?), well-trod or otherwise, touching upon the state’s rich agricultural history. If this issue proves a success, who knows? Maybe next year you’ll be reading in these pages all about corn and nothing but corn.

Bill Kemp